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Adherence and management of working time in the public sector: A conceptual review of the Limpopo department of agriculture and rural development

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Abstract

Efficient time management remains central to sustaining public sector performance, directly influencing accountability, effectiveness, and the legitimacy of government operations. In an environment of limited resources, heightened public scrutiny, and increasing service delivery demands, time discipline is a critical determinant of institutional efficiency. This study aimed to investigate the prevalence of time management challenges within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) and to explore the structural and behavioral factors that contribute to these inefficiencies. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study utilized secondary data sources, including departmental performance reports, national audit outcomes, relevant policy frameworks, and scholarly literature in public administration. The analysis revealed recurring patterns of employee absenteeism, habitual late arrivals, early departures, prolonged lunch breaks, and inconsistent application of attendance policies. Such behaviors were found to stem not only from individual non-compliance but also from systemic shortcomings, including inadequate leadership, insufficient performance monitoring mechanisms, and entrenched weak organizational cultures. The findings, interpreted through New Public Management (NPM) and Organizational Discipline Theory, indicate that these time-related inefficiencies are embedded within structural and governance limitations. The study concludes that addressing these challenges requires a combination of targeted leadership development, institutionalization of biometric time-tracking systems, enhanced supervisory accountability, and integration of attendance metrics into performance evaluation frameworks. It further recommends a comprehensive human resource management approach that aligns operational efficiency with workforce discipline. Future research should build on these findings by empirically assessing the effectiveness of proposed interventions across other provincial departments, enabling evidence-based reforms that strengthen time discipline and overall public sector performance.

Keywords: Time Management; Public Sector Discipline; Employee Attendance; Institutional Efficiency; Organizational Performance

1. Introduction

Public sector institutions play a critical role as the administrative backbone of democratic governance, responsible for delivering essential services in ways that are efficient, ethical, and transparent. Major policy frameworks like the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 (Republic of South Africa, 2012) clearly state the need to create a capable and accountable state. The NDP places a strong emphasis on the professionalization of the public sector, highlighting the necessity of strong accountability frameworks, capable leadership, and performance-based management techniques. Although extensive governance reforms have received a lot of attention, efficient time management is a crucial but frequently disregarded aspect of organizational performance. This entails making certain that public employees make effective use of their designated working hours and that they are in line with the strategic goals of their organizations.

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Time discipline is still a problem in many provincial government departments, even with the clear policy focus. The Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) has been the subject of numerous oversight reports and internal audit findings that show a lack of adherence to official working hours (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Frequent problems include early departures from duty stations, prolonged lunch breaks, undocumented and unregulated leave, and habitual tardiness. These actions lead to lower public trust, higher operating costs, and inefficiencies in the provision of services. According to Matlala and Mofokeng (2023), these kinds of actions are indicative of larger organizational cultures characterized by inadequate oversight and poor handling of consequences. A permissive attitude toward time mismanagement is further cemented by supervisors' frequent lack of authority or willingness to enforce discipline (Sibanda and Ndlovu, 2022). Beyond internal organizational dysfunction, there are consequences when consistent time discipline is not maintained. It undermines attempts to create a professional and results-driven public service by weakening institutional capacity and jeopardizing public accountability. Systemic issues like weak human resource management, lax enforcement of regulations, and opposition to technological advancements intended to track attendance exacerbate the issue (Langa and Seabi, 2023; Mahlangu and Khuzwayo, 2024). Furthermore, it may be difficult to apply corrective measures without creating conflict or demotivating employees due to informal workplace norms and cultural tolerances. This paper examines the impact of time mismanagement on institutional performance and public accountability, using LDARD as a case study representative of broader provincial challenges. The study utilizes secondary data drawn from academic literature, government audit reports, and policy documents to address three interrelated research questions:

- What working time challenges are commonly identified in South African provincial departments?
- What systemic and behavioral factors contribute to non-compliance with working time expectations?
- What practical measures can public institutions adopt to foster time discipline and enhance overall performance?

This analysis seeks to expand knowledge of time discipline as a fundamental component of efficient public sector management by examining these issues using both conceptual frameworks and empirical insights. The study adds to scholarly discussions and makes useful suggestions that could help administrators and policymakers who want to improve service delivery and governance in South Africa's provincial public service.

2. Literature review

This section reviews scholarly and policy-based literature related to time management in the public sector, with a focus on how time discipline influences institutional performance. The review is structured around five interrelated themes: time discipline, time theft, leave management, supervisory practices, and digital monitoring.

2.1. Time Discipline and Institutional Performance

The systematic and regular use of working hours in accordance with organizational objectives is referred to as time discipline. Time management is closely linked to public trust, employee productivity, and organizational effectiveness in the public sector. Departments that encourage punctuality and clear time-use protocols tend to report higher levels of staff morale, faster task execution, and more dependable service delivery outcomes, according to empirical studies by Maziriri, Madina, and Lose (2022) and Dhlamini and Radebe (2023). On the other hand, poor time management leads to service backlogs, missed performance goals, and damage to one's reputation. Such inefficiencies are especially harmful in environments with limited resources because they increase public discontent and put a strain on institutional capacity. Time management is ingrained in organizational culture and governance procedures and is not just a behavioral issue. Public institutions with a strong accountability culture are more likely to incorporate time management frameworks into their performance management systems, according to Ndlovu and Mokoena (2024), which improves institutional responsiveness. It has also been demonstrated that technological interventions, like workflow management systems and digital attendance tracking, enhance time discipline by encouraging transparency and real-time monitoring (Khanyile and Ngubane, 2023). However, leadership commitment and the degree to which staff members view time discipline as an organizational value rather than an enforced control mechanism are critical to the success of such interventions. The lack of time discipline has broader governance implications, particularly in the public service sectors where operational inefficiencies directly affect citizen welfare. As Mthembu and Sithole (2025) highlight, persistent delays in service delivery, often rooted in poor time management practices, contribute to declining public confidence in government institutions. Therefore, fostering a culture of time discipline is critical not only for improving institutional performance but also for restoring public trust and safeguarding the legitimacy of public administration.

2.2. Time Theft and Workplace Culture

Employees who use official working hours for personal purposes, such as extended lunch breaks, social visits, lengthy personal phone calls, unapproved errands, and early departures, are engaging in time theft. Time theft is a widespread but challenging issue in public institutions because, in contrast to overt absenteeism, it is frequently covert and routine. According to Van der Walt and Jonck (2020), time theft is a sign of more serious organizational cultural problems that accept or even subtly encourage indiscipline rather than being just an isolated behavioral transgression. Such behaviors are encouraged in many public service settings by the lack of rigorous time-use monitoring systems and the loose application of accountability procedures. Tshabalala and Nyathi (2022) highlight that time theft is significantly more prevalent in organizations where performance management systems are poorly structured, and sanctions for time-related misconduct are inconsistently applied. The inconsistency in applying disciplinary measures fosters a perception among employees that time misuse carries minimal risk of consequence, thereby normalizing the behavior. Furthermore, Baloyi and Selepe (2024) observe that when senior staff are either complicit in time theft or deliberately overlook such practices among their subordinates, it reinforces a permissive workplace culture. This hierarchical permissiveness makes time theft a normative practice, embedded in everyday organizational routines rather than being treated as a deviant anomaly. Time theft affects more than just lost productivity. It weakens operational effectiveness, undermines organizational discipline, and leads to service delivery failures. Time theft damages public institutions' professional ethos and creates a culture of mediocrity that erodes public confidence, as noted by Mhlongo and Nkosi (2025). As a result, combating time theft calls for more than just following the rules; it calls for a cultural shift in which leadership and staff alike embrace time integrity as a shared organizational value.

2.3. Leave Policy and Administrative Controls

Despite being an essential part of workforce management, leave administration is still a frequently inefficient area in public sector organizations. Inconsistencies in leave recording and approval procedures, such as unrecorded absences, backdated leave approvals, and disparities between manual leave registers and electronic payroll systems, are regularly brought to light in reports from the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) (2022). These discrepancies complicate operational planning and budget forecasting by compromising data integrity and distorting workforce availability statistics. The consequences also affect the ability to provide services, since departments frequently find it difficult to properly allocate human resources and determine staffing levels. Khumalo and Mkhize (2021) point out that in many provincial departments, particularly in rural and decentralized offices, informal leave practices frequently bypass established approval protocols. Employees often negotiate time off directly with immediate supervisors, with little to no formal documentation, creating gaps in administrative oversight. Such practices are exacerbated in environments where human resource management systems are outdated or underutilized, resulting in fragmented record-keeping and limited managerial visibility over staff attendance patterns. Furthermore, a permissive culture where following formal procedures is viewed as optional is fostered by lax enforcement of leave policies. According to Sibanda and Molefe (2023), inconsistent and opaque leave administration weakens organizational control systems and gives workers the confidence to take advantage of structural weaknesses. Because poorly managed leave liabilities raise personnel costs and make it more difficult to comply with audit standards, this breakdown of administrative discipline has an impact on productivity as well as financial risks. A two-pronged strategy is needed to address inefficiencies in leave administration: strengthening procedural controls with automated leave management systems and encouraging an accountable culture where policy compliance is expected. Dlamini and Phakathi (2024) emphasize that in order to guarantee that systemic reforms are assimilated at all organizational levels, leadership-driven enforcement must be combined with technological interventions.

2.4. Supervisory Practice and Leadership Gaps

In public institutions, supervisors are essential in establishing workplace culture and enforcing time management. Maintaining operational efficiency depends on their capacity to keep an eye on attendance, deal with time abuse, and uphold organizational standards. Nonetheless, research shows that supervisory procedures in many public sector settings are rife with leadership deficiencies that impede efficient time management. The authority of supervisory staff to enforce attendance and punctuality among subordinates is undermined by their frequent failure to set an example of punctuality and time discipline. This is noted by Sibanda and Ndlovu (2022). This discrepancy not only lessens the supervisor's power but also gives workers the impression that rules pertaining to time are flexible. Mahlangu and Khuzwayo (2024) attribute these supervisory shortcomings to a broader leadership vacuum within the public service. Middle managers often lack adequate training in disciplinary protocols, conflict resolution, and performance monitoring. Without structured guidance and institutional support, supervisors may feel ill-equipped to confront time-related infractions, particularly in contexts where organizational norms are already permissive. This leadership deficiency is further compounded by ambiguous policy frameworks that fail to clearly delineate supervisory responsibilities in enforcing time discipline. The intricacies brought about by union dynamics compound these

difficulties. According to Ramose and Molefe (2020), supervisors usually refrain from taking corrective action out of concern that it will spark a dispute or draw criticism from organized labour representatives. Supervisory interventions regarding attendance issues are frequently viewed as antagonistic in highly unionized environments, which makes supervisors reluctant to use confrontational enforcement tactics. As a result, supervisory roles are diminished to administrative formalities rather than active leadership positions, and a culture of non-confrontation takes hold.

A multifaceted strategy is needed to close these gaps, including the implementation of conflict-sensitive enforcement tactics, supervisory authority clarification, and leadership development programs. Supervisory practices will remain a weak link in the organizational time discipline chain in the absence of such interventions.

2.5. Technology and Digital Monitoring

Numerous technological advancements have been promoted as useful instruments for improving time management in public sector organizations, such as digital timesheets, biometric systems, and real-time attendance dashboards. By lowering the likelihood of time theft and enhancing overall organizational accountability, these technologies provide a methodical and transparent way to track employee attendance. Staff punctuality and adherence to official working hours significantly improved after biometric attendance systems were implemented in a number of municipal departments, according to Mthethwa and Mokoena (2023). These enhancements were especially noticeable in situations where the implementation of technology was coupled with thorough employee training and uniform attendance regulations. Despite these successes, the anticipated benefits of digital monitoring tools are not universally realized across public sector entities. Langa and Seabin (2023) report that in departments such as the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD), digital time management systems are often underutilized. Factors contributing to this underutilization include employee resistance to change, inadequate IT infrastructure, and a lack of sustained managerial support. Employees frequently perceive these technologies as intrusive or as instruments of control, especially when their introduction is not accompanied by clear communication regarding their purpose and benefits. Moreover, if technological solutions are implemented without accompanying institutional changes, they run the risk of being band-aid solutions that ignore the underlying managerial and cultural flaws. Digital monitoring tools must be implemented as part of a larger institutional reform framework that includes stakeholder engagement procedures, capacity-building programs, and the creation of transparent accountability mechanisms, according to Dube and Mahlatsi (2024). Technology cannot solve long-standing time management issues in public institutions on its own without these supplementary steps. Consequently, even though digital monitoring tools offer a promising way to enhance time discipline, their effectiveness depends on comprehensive organizational strategies that take into account both the technical and human aspects that affect time management techniques.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: organizational Discipline Theory and the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm. These frameworks provide both behavioral and structural lenses through which the persistence of time mismanagement in public institutions, such as the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD), can be understood. By integrating these theories, the study captures the complex interplay between organizational culture, leadership behavior, and performance-driven reforms in shaping time discipline outcomes.

3.1. organizational Discipline Theory

Formal regulations, uniform enforcement, and leadership visibility are crucial in influencing institutional behavior and employee conduct, according to organizational discipline theory. Disciplined organizations, according to Cameron and Green (2020), function with explicit expectations, methodical supervision, and swift remedial action when deviations arise. This theory emphasizes the development of a culture where responsible behavior is rewarded and encouraged through intentional managerial action, going beyond the idea that discipline is just individual compliance. A permissive environment arises when leaders fail to set an example of accountability and punctuality, or when disciplinary rules are applied inconsistently. Such environments further erode organizational performance by making behaviors like time theft, absenteeism, and informal leave-taking tacitly acceptable (Sibanda and Ndlovu, 2022). organizational Discipline Theory is particularly relevant for large, bureaucratic public institutions like LDARD, which often have complex supervisory hierarchies. In these environments, uneven enforcement of rules is common due to managerial capacity constraints, resistance to accountability, or union dynamics that discourage strict disciplinary measures (Mahlangu and Khuzwayo, 2024). The theory underscores the importance of visible and credible leadership that consistently applies rules to uphold organizational norms, thereby shaping a work culture where time discipline is valued.

3.2. New Public Management (NPM)

Performance, accountability, and efficiency are prioritized in public sector administration by the New Public Management paradigm, which offers a reform-oriented approach. NPM promotes the use of private-sector management strategies, such as output measurement, results-based management, and employee performance contracts, as stated by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017). According to NPM, time discipline is a managerial problem that can be resolved by utilizing data analytics to guide decision-making, integrating technological tools like biometric attendance systems, and connecting time usage to performance reviews. NPM makes the assumption that employees' behavior will be in line with organizational objectives when they work within a framework of explicit performance expectations, frequent feedback, and incentives that are in line with those goals (Mthethwa and Mokoena, 2023). However, successful implementation requires strong leadership and managerial capacity to design and sustain these systems. Without committed managerial oversight and continuous reinforcement, reforms risk being superficial, failing to change ingrained behavioral patterns (Langa and Seabin, 2023).

3.3. Integrating the Frameworks

An extensive analytical framework for this study is provided by the integration of NPM and Organizational Discipline Theory. The behavioral norms and enforcement dynamics that influence daily organizational life are highlighted by organizational discipline theory, especially the part that leadership plays in establishing expectations and serving as an example of behaviors. In order to improve efficiency and accountability, NPM supplements this by emphasizing structural reforms like the implementation of performance management tools and monitoring technologies.

Using this dual lens to conceptualize time discipline allows for a more nuanced understanding of how organizations such as LDARD encounter and address time mismanagement issues. It reveals that addressing time discipline requires not only behavioral change fostered through consistent leadership and cultural reform but also systemic interventions that institutionalize accountability and incentivize performance. Together, these perspectives underscore the need for integrated organizational reforms that balance people-centered leadership with effective managerial tools to improve public sector performance.

4. Methodological approach

In order to critically examine institutional patterns without the need for primary data collection, this study uses a conceptual and desktop review methodology. The methodology, which has its roots in interpretive analysis and qualitative inquiry, enables the synthesis of current knowledge and the identification of important themes pertaining to time discipline in the public sector.

4.1. The study draws on a range of secondary data sources, including

- Official audit reports, particularly those produced by the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA, 2022), which provide empirical insights into compliance failures, administrative weaknesses, and time-related irregularities in provincial departments.
- Peer-reviewed academic literature, which offers theoretical and empirical perspectives on time management, workplace discipline, and organizational performance within public administration contexts.
- Public policy documents such as the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, the Public Service Act (1994), and the Public Service Regulations (2016), which outline the formal expectations and legislative frameworks governing time use in the public sector.
- Media coverage and official government statements, which offer contextual and contemporary narratives around time mismanagement and disciplinary trends within specific departments, including the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD).

Through the lenses of New Public Management (NPM) and Organizational Discipline Theory, this methodological approach allows for a thematic and interpretive analysis of documented evidence. The study is exempt from ethical clearance requirements because it does not involve human subjects and instead focuses on established patterns and their implications. The method also makes it easier to develop a well-supported argument about the behavioural and systemic aspects of time discipline in public institutions.

5. Findings

This section summarizes the most urgent institutional issues compromising time discipline in provincial departments, with an emphasis on the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD), using a synthesis of secondary sources, such as audit findings, scholarly analyses, and government reports. Weak administrative controls, inconsistent leadership styles, and an ingrained organizational culture that normalizes time-related violations all contribute to the findings, which show a larger systemic tolerance for time misuse. The data from LDARD suggests that time discipline is a collective institutional issue, despite the fact that it is frequently presented as an individual duty. The difficulties outlined in this section point to a complex issue where time abuse is not only common but also ingrained in leadership dynamics, workplace customs, and routines. The findings are categorised into five core themes: lateness and informal departures, manipulated registers and informal leave, extended breaks and personal errands during work hours, supervisory non-compliance, and cultural double standards between office locations.

5.1. Lateness and Informal Departures

One of the most persistent and visible challenges undermining operational efficiency in the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) is habitual lateness combined with the informal practice of early departures. Matlala and Mofokeng (2023) highlight that in several district offices, employees routinely arrive well past the official starting times, sometimes as late as an hour after the scheduled time. This chronic lateness often goes unchecked due to the absence of formal attendance monitoring systems such as biometric scanners or digital clock-in devices, which would otherwise provide accurate, verifiable records. The lack of such technological controls allows these infractions to become embedded as normal workplace behavior, contributing to a culture of tolerance toward time misuse. The unofficial observance of "sports days," which mostly take place on Wednesdays in different LDARD offices, exacerbates this problem even more. Employees routinely leave their workstations during official hours to engage in leisure activities without formal authorization or supervision, as reported by Dlamini and Molekwa (2022). Although unofficial, these practices have grown more widespread as a result of inconsistent enforcement of attendance policies and lax supervisory controls. An organizational culture where attendance and punctuality are governed more by social norms than by policy or procedural frameworks results from the resulting informal norms taking precedence over formal institutional directives.

The consequences of this laxity are far-reaching. Productivity suffers significantly, as late arrivals and early departures disrupt the flow of daily operations and reduce the effective working hours available for service delivery. Inter-departmental coordination also faces challenges; meetings and collaborative initiatives are frequently delayed or postponed because key personnel are not present on time or leave prematurely (Phakathi and Dlamini, 2024). This disruption is particularly acute in field operations, where extension officers and other field staff depend on strict adherence to schedules to conduct agricultural inspections, engage with community stakeholders, and monitor project implementation. Delays in starting these activities reduce the overall impact and effectiveness of the department's interventions in rural communities. The wider institutional ramifications are equally worrisome. Regular tardiness and unannounced departures damage the department's reputation and the public's faith in its ability to provide necessary services effectively. Employee motivation and morale suffer when they believe that time management is negotiable and that noncompliance is not penalized. This fosters an atmosphere that encourages more indiscipline and inefficiency (Matlala and Mofokeng, 2023). This breakdown of time management skills is a sign of more serious systemic flaws that call for extensive reform initiatives, such as enhanced oversight, improved leadership, and an accountable culture.

Restoring operational effectiveness and improving service delivery results require LDARD to address informal departures and chronic tardiness. The introduction of reliable attendance monitoring systems, coupled with consistent enforcement and leadership modelling, can play a pivotal role in reversing these trends. Strengthening organisational norms around punctuality will contribute to more effective internal coordination and rebuild stakeholder confidence in the department's professionalism.

5.2. Manipulated Registers and Informal Leave

Attendance registers, traditionally a fundamental administrative tool for monitoring employee presence, have become a significant site of systemic manipulation within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD). Mokoena and Mabaso (2023) document widespread irregularities in the maintenance and use of these registers, including unsigned or pre-signed attendance sheets, falsified arrival and departure times, and instances where employees are recorded as present despite prolonged absences. These manipulations are often facilitated by peer collusion, with colleagues signing in on behalf of absent employees. This collusive behavior perpetuates a cycle of unaccountability and undermines the integrity of time discipline within the institution. The ramifications of falsifying attendance records are extensive. It directly jeopardizes the accuracy of human resource data, resulting in inaccurate

reporting on the availability and utilization of the workforce. Effective planning and resource allocation are hampered as a result of departmental management's erroneous perception of staff presence. Additionally, unrecorded absences make payroll administration more difficult, increase the department's risk of financial misreporting, and raise audit questions. Discrepancies between reported attendance and actual workdays create vulnerabilities in budget management and compliance, according to the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA, 2022), who has regularly highlighted such irregularities in its annual reports. A critical enabler of this problem is LDARD's continued reliance on manual attendance registers, particularly in district offices that suffer from limited IT infrastructure and connectivity challenges. While many other government departments have transitioned to digital attendance systems, LDARD's partial and inconsistent adoption of such technologies leaves gaps that facilitate the manipulation of paper-based registers.

Digital tracking tools, like biometric systems and integrated electronic timesheets, are crucial for real-time attendance monitoring, according to Selepe and Mthombeni (2024). By directly connecting attendance data with payroll and leave management systems, these tools not only lessen the likelihood of falsification but also enhance managerial oversight and accountability. Informal leave-taking practices make LDARD's time management issues worse by encouraging register manipulation. Workers frequently circumvent formal leave application procedures by verbally negotiating vacation time with supervisors. This unofficial method creates discrepancies in leave records and makes it more difficult to track accrued leave balances, even though it might be administratively quicker. According to Khumalo and Mkhize (2021), these unofficial leave policies foster a culture in which taking time off is viewed as a privilege that can be negotiated rather than as a legally mandated right. This lack of stringent leave administration controls exposes the department to liabilities associated with unrecorded leave and increases the risk of leave abuse, thereby undermining human resource governance. The manipulation of attendance registers and the informality surrounding leave administration represent systemic weaknesses that significantly undermine LDARD's capacity to enforce time discipline. Addressing these issues demands both technological upgrades, such as the widespread adoption of biometric and digital attendance systems, and the institutionalisation of strict leave management protocols. Together, these measures will help strengthen data integrity, improve accountability, and restore confidence in the department's time management practices.

5.3. Extended Breaks and Errands During Office Hours

Extended lunch breaks and the use of official working hours for personal errands represent deeply entrenched inefficiencies within the operational culture of the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD). Baloyi and Selepe (2024) document numerous instances where staff members routinely leave their workstations for personal activities such as shopping, banking, school pick-ups, and social visits during office hours. These behaviors tend to become especially pronounced around paydays and during periods leading up to public holidays, when workplace attendance becomes increasingly irregular and sporadic. This pattern reflects a broader tolerance for time misuse that undermines organisational productivity and service delivery. Supervisors usually ignore such violations, according to Tshabalala and Nyathi (2022), even when the disruptions clearly impair workflow and make it more difficult for the department to promptly satisfy client demands. The clear boundaries that official policies aim to establish are undermined when employees are given the impression that working hours are flexible and negotiable due to the lack of prompt corrective action. These unofficial customs eventually become formalized, thereby normalizing long breaks and running personal errands as acceptable parts of the workday. Instead of following formal policy guidelines, this change in norms redefines official work hours based on convenience. Such behaviors have significant operational repercussions. The department's capacity to carry out its mandate is directly impacted by the frequent occurrence of decreased productivity and missed deadlines. For instance, personal errands may prevent extension officers from visiting farming communities and offering technical assistance, which could lead to service delivery gaps that undermine agricultural beneficiaries and rural development initiatives (Langa and Seabi, 2023). This undermines public confidence in the department's ability to provide necessary services in addition to compromising the effectiveness of particular programs.

Beyond its effects on operations, the normalization of long breaks and unofficial errands undermines LDARD's professional culture. A culture where organizational discipline is subordinated to personal convenience arises when institutional commitments are routinely subordinated to personal priorities. Reforms intended to enhance time management and general performance are challenging to implement in such a culture, which undercuts attempts to promote professionalism and accountability (Baloyi and Selepe, 2024). A diversified strategy that goes beyond simple procedural enforcement is needed to meet this challenge. Initiating a cultural shift within the department is just as important as clearly defining and communicating policies regarding personal errands and break durations. Employees and leadership alike should embrace time integrity as a fundamental organizational value. In order to continuously monitor and enforce these standards, supervisors must be given the authority and be held responsible. In order to foster

an atmosphere where responsible time management is the rule rather than the exception, leadership should also support positive reinforcement techniques that acknowledge and reward adherence to time discipline. Improving LDARD's service delivery and institutional efficiency requires addressing the problem of long breaks and personal errands during working hours. This calls for both improved procedures for enforcing policies and persistent initiatives to change workplace culture so that individual actions are in line with the department's organizational objectives.

5.4. Supervisory Non-Compliance

Perhaps the most concerning and impactful finding in the examination of time discipline challenges within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) is the evident non-compliance of supervisory personnel with established time management policies. Supervisors, who are formally entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring employee attendance and enforcing discipline, are frequently observed to model the very behaviors they are mandated to correct. Sibanda and Ndlovu (2022) document numerous cases where supervisory staff habitually arrive late, leave early, or neglect attendance registers entirely. This lack of personal adherence to time discipline profoundly undermines the credibility and effectiveness of any disciplinary actions taken against subordinate staff, eroding the overall enforcement of time management protocols. Mahlangu and Khuzwayo (2024) attribute this supervisory failure to a larger leadership void that exists in the department. Middle managers frequently work in an atmosphere that lacks strong performance monitoring systems, inconsistent senior leadership support, and little direction on disciplinary procedures. Because of the ensuing leadership gap, supervisors are ill-equipped and lack the authority necessary to properly enforce time-related policies. Supervisors find it difficult to maintain authority and accountability in the absence of clear instructions and constant support from upper management, which impairs their ability to positively influence employee behavior. The intricacies brought about by union dynamics in the public sector exacerbate these structural issues. According to Ramose and Molefe (2020), supervisors in unionized workplaces usually hesitate to address time-related misconduct out of concern that doing so could intensify disputes or incite retaliation from organized labour representatives. A passive supervisory approach results from this fear, and enforcement mostly takes on a symbolic rather than a substantive role. The institutionalization of accountability and punctuality may be further undermined if supervisors, leery of possible conflicts, choose to ignore time discipline violations or administer disciplinary actions inconsistently.

Supervisory non-compliance has repercussions that go beyond specific behavioral problems; they have a domino effect on LDARD's institutional culture. Supervisors unintentionally give the impression to staff that time discipline regulations are optional and non-essential when they don't follow them themselves. This implicit support creates a culture of indifference in which wasting time is accepted as normal and even encouraged (Matlala and Mofokeng, 2023). This lax culture solidifies over time, posing structural challenges to reform initiatives meant to increase productivity and service quality. Therefore, focused leadership development programs that aim to increase middle managers' ability and confidence to apply discipline consistently and equitably are necessary to address supervisory non-compliance. Such programmes should equip supervisors with practical skills in performance monitoring, conflict resolution, and ethical leadership; while ensuring they receive clear support and accountability mechanisms from senior management (Mahlangu and Khuzwayo, 2024). Furthermore, creating constructive engagement channels with labour unions can help balance enforcement with employee rights, mitigating fears of backlash while upholding organisational standards. Ultimately, bridging the leadership gap at the supervisory level is essential to restoring credibility, reinforcing time discipline, and cultivating an organisational culture grounded in accountability and professionalism.

5.5. Cultural Double Standards Between Offices

A significant but often underappreciated challenge affecting time discipline within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) is the existence of cultural double standards between the head office and satellite or district offices. Govender (2022) highlights that employees working in district offices frequently perceive themselves as being subject to stricter attendance controls and more intense administrative scrutiny compared to their colleagues at the head office. This perception is not merely anecdotal but rooted in tangible differences related to resource allocation, managerial oversight, and the uneven enforcement of time discipline policies. One notable disparity concerns the methods of attendance monitoring. District offices often rely on manual attendance registers that require physical signing by employees, a process susceptible to errors, manipulation, and delays. In contrast, head office employees tend to operate in environments where attendance monitoring is less formalised or inconsistently applied, sometimes due to more flexible work arrangements or the availability of digital tools that have not been fully leveraged (Mhlongo and Nkosi, 2025). This perceived leniency at the head office fuels feelings of resentment and unfairness among district staff, who believe that they bear the brunt of enforcement efforts that are not uniformly implemented across the department. Employee morale and organizational cohesiveness are significantly impacted by such discrepancies. Employee commitment to organizational goals is weakened when they believe that rules are applied selectively, which they frequently interpret as institutional favoritism or bias (Govender, 2022). Employee disengagement and passive

resistance to disciplinary reforms may result from this dynamic, as staff members hardly ever follow the rules or try to get around them. Furthermore, the legitimacy of managerial directives and confidence in leadership are undermined by inconsistent enforcement. Employees may start to see time management as a discretionary or negotiable practice that differs based on office location or rank, undermining the organization's overall accountability culture (Matlala and Mofokeng, 2023).

A thorough and coordinated reform effort is needed to address these cultural double standards. Eliminating perceptions of unfairness requires standardizing attendance monitoring systems across all offices. This entails the consistent use of digital time management tools, like biometric attendance systems, which offer impartial, impenetrable records that are available to management at all levels (Mthethwa and Mokoena, 2023). In addition to integrating technology, time discipline rules must be consistently enforced, irrespective of an employee's rank or location. Fairness is communicated and the idea that time discipline is a non-negotiable expectation across the institution is reinforced by this consistency (Baloyi and Selepe, 2024). Apart from standardizing policies and technology, leadership is essential in setting an example of fairness and open communication. Supervisors and managers must demonstrate impartiality in enforcing rules and actively engage with staff at all levels to address grievances related to disciplinary procedures (Mahlangu and Khuzwayo, 2024). Cultivating a culture of procedural fairness not only rebuilds trust but also encourages voluntary compliance and commitment to organisational goals. Ultimately, the elimination of cultural double standards in time discipline within LDARD is essential for fostering a unified workforce capable of delivering consistent, efficient public services.

6. Discussion of findings

This section applies Organizational Discipline Theory and New Public Management (NPM) to interpret the empirical findings presented in Section 5. The results show that the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (LDARD) time discipline issues are caused by deeply ingrained cultural norms, poor leadership, and antiquated administrative systems rather than just procedural inefficiencies. While NPM offers insights into how public sector institutions can adopt private-sector efficiency models to address these systemic failures, Organizational Discipline Theory provides a framework for understanding how behavioral drift results from the breakdown of disciplinary structures.

6.1. Organisational Discipline Theory: The Collapse of Enforcement Structures

According to organizational discipline theory, rules, enforcement procedures, and behavioral expectations must all be clearly aligned for there to be effective discipline within an organization (Puffer and McCarthy, 2018). Establishing and upholding common standards of appropriate behavior via consistent rule enforcement, dependable leadership, and open accountability frameworks is the goal of discipline, which goes beyond simple punishment. The results show that LDARD's disciplinary structures are systematically deteriorating. The failure of both official enforcement mechanisms and informal social controls is reflected in practices like habitual tardiness, unofficial departures, manipulated registers, and undocumented leave. The authority and credibility of supervisory personnel, who are essential to frontline enforcement, are undermined because they frequently exhibit the very behaviors they are supposed to stop. Organizational Discipline Theory states that disciplinary systems degenerate into "symbolic formalism," where regulations are essentially meaningless in reality, when leaders themselves fail to enforce standards (Bordia and Restubog, 2021).

A permissive organizational culture that accepts time misuse exacerbates this disciplinary breakdown. Employees eventually come to understand that time discipline is negotiable as a result of these behaviors becoming routine. According to the theory, once this normative drift has taken place, it will be difficult to reverse the trend without both tightening procedures and changing the organization's culture to view discipline as a shared value rather than a top-down imposition (Richter and Smith, 2020).

6.2. The Role of Leadership in Rebuilding Disciplinary Authority

A central tenet of Organisational Discipline Theory is that leadership plays a pivotal role in maintaining behavioral order through active enforcement and role modelling (Kaptein, 2019). The results show that any efforts to enforce time discipline are undermined by the credibility gap caused by LDARD's leadership void, especially at the supervisory level. Supervisors frequently lack the institutional support, training, and resources necessary to implement corrective measures, which results in passive management where disciplinary violations are disregarded or accepted as the norm.

Additionally, a breakdown in the balance between managerial authority and employee rights is reflected in supervisors' reluctance to address time misuse because they fear conflict with organized labour. According to organizational

discipline theory, discipline must be applied within a framework of open dispute resolution procedures and procedural justice. Without these frameworks, supervisors in LDARD are more reluctant and reactive than proactive in enforcing behavioral standards. Rebuilding disciplinary authority requires restoring leadership credibility through structured leadership development programmes, clarifying supervisory roles in discipline enforcement, and ensuring that disciplinary protocols are both transparent and consistently applied.

6.3. New Public Management (NPM): Efficiency and Accountability in Public Service Operations

New Public Management (NPM) provides a framework for institutional reform by promoting efficiency, accountability, and performance-driven operations within the public sector, while Organizational Discipline Theory explains the internal behavioral dynamics of LDARD. In order to modernize public administration, NPM principles emphasize the use of private-sector management techniques, such as performance evaluation, decentralized management, and customer-focused service delivery (Hood and Dixon, 2015). NPM criticisms of traditional public administration models, which are frequently typified by inflexible bureaucracies, poor performance incentives, and a lack of managerial autonomy, are consistent with the results of LDARD. The persistence of time discipline challenges, such as manipulated registers, informal leave, and extended breaks, reflects a bureaucratic inertia that prioritises procedural formalities over actual performance outcomes. NPM advocates for a shift towards measurable performance indicators and outcome-based management. For LDARD, this implies the need to develop clear performance metrics linked to time discipline, such as punctuality rates, task completion timelines, and service delivery responsiveness. By aligning individual performance assessments with time management indicators, LDARD can incentivise compliance and embed time discipline into its operational fabric.

6.4. Technological Interventions and NPM's Emphasis on Innovation

The application of technological innovation to improve accountability and efficiency is one of the fundamental tenets of NPM. The results show that although LDARD has access to digital time management tools like attendance dashboards and biometric systems, cultural resistance, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven managerial support limit their usefulness. The introduction of technology alone is not enough from an NPM standpoint. According to Dunleavy and Margetts (2018), these tools need to be incorporated into a thorough performance management framework that connects technological monitoring with in-the-moment managerial interventions, employee feedback loops, and open reporting structures. In order to reduce resistance and promote buy-in, NPM also highlights the significance of change management procedures that actively involve staff members in the planning and execution of technological reforms. Adopting an NPM-driven strategy would entail LDARD using technology to improve service delivery efficiency rather than as a punitive control mechanism. This necessitates a change from compliance-based monitoring to performance-driven reporting, in which managers are given actionable data via technology tools to guide workforce planning and service delivery optimization.

6.5. Organisational Justice, NPM, and Cultural Double Standards

The findings also expose significant disparities in policy enforcement between LDARD's head offices and district offices, leading to perceptions of organisational injustice. Organisational Discipline Theory suggests that perceived unfairness in rule application undermines employee morale and erodes the legitimacy of disciplinary structures. Similarly, NPM stresses the importance of equitable and transparent management practices as prerequisites for building a high-performance culture. Enforcing policies with double standards not only increases employee resentment but also creates a disengaged culture where compliance is viewed as negotiable depending on one's office location or position within the company. Standardized performance indicators guarantee consistent expectations throughout the organization, while NPM principles support decentralized accountability mechanisms where performance oversight is transferred to the operational unit level (Christensen and Laegreid, 2017). For LDARD, this means creating time-discipline standards that are uniformly implemented throughout all offices. To make sure that every employee is aware of these standards and their justification, transparent communication techniques ought to be used. LDARD can start to restore trust and encourage group dedication to institutional objectives by cultivating a sense of procedural justice and equity.

6.6. Synthesis: Bridging organizational Discipline and NPM for Holistic Reform

Behavioral indiscipline, lax leadership enforcement, antiquated administrative systems, and a lack of a performance-driven culture are the main causes of LDARD's time discipline issues. Restoring leadership credibility, defining behavioral expectations, and reestablishing internal control systems are all crucial, according to organizational discipline theory. On the other hand, NPM offers a strategic framework for institutional reform via managerial autonomy, performance evaluation, and technological innovation. Therefore, a successful reform plan for LDARD needs to reconcile these two theoretical stances. Performance incentives, capacity-building programs, and open accountability frameworks must be implemented alongside procedural tightening measures like digitalized attendance systems and

more stringent supervisory procedures. Redefining time discipline as an organizational value linked to excellence in service delivery, as opposed to just a compliance requirement, should be the main goal of cultural reorientation programs.

6.7. Implications for organizational Reform

The combined application of Organisational Discipline Theory and New Public Management (NPM) provides a valuable framework for informing reform initiatives within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD). Both theories stress the importance of effective leadership, accountability, and cultural change as prerequisites for sustainable improvements in time discipline and overall institutional performance.

First and foremost, leadership plays a critical role in modelling discipline. The ability and power to consistently enforce time-related policies must be possessed by supervisory staff. Supervisors can serve as believable role models with the support of structured leadership development programs that prioritize managerial autonomy and responsibility, as supported by NPM principles (Mahlangu and Khuzwayo, 2024). The organizational culture of discipline is strengthened and tolerance for time misuse is decreased when leaders exhibit timeliness and equity in the application of rules (Sibanda and Ndlovu, 2022).

Second, performance management systems and time discipline ought to be closely related. Clear behavioral expectations are established and concrete incentives for compliance are provided by integrating time-related metrics into individual and team assessments (Baloyi and Selepe, 2024). Regular performance reviews and focused coaching are examples of feedback mechanisms that can highlight areas for improvement and reinforce positive behaviors, creating a results-oriented culture that supports NPM's focus on efficiency and accountability (Maziriri, Madinga, and Lose, 2022).

Thirdly, a thorough accountability framework needs to incorporate technological innovation. The effectiveness of digital monitoring tools and biometric attendance systems in improving punctuality and decreasing time theft depends on how well they are incorporated with management procedures (Mthethwa and Mokoena, 2023; Langa and Seabi, 2023). In order to ensure that digital monitoring complements human oversight rather than takes its place, data from these systems should be connected to service delivery outcomes and used to guide prompt managerial interventions.

Fourth, the restoration of organizational legitimacy depends on fair policy enforcement in all departments and offices. Morale and opposition to change are weakened by perceptions of double standards, which occur when certain offices or employees are subjected to more stringent scrutiny than others (Govender, 2022). Applying disciplinary procedures consistently promotes fairness, trust, and a dedication to the institution's objectives (Khumalo and Mkhize, 2021).

Lastly, in order to reestablish time discipline as a fundamental organizational value, cultural reorientation initiatives are required. According to NPM, these programs ought to concentrate on establishing a customer-oriented culture and highlighting the link between better service delivery and time management (Dhlamini and Radebe, 2023). LDARD can foster a common understanding of time discipline as essential to excellence in public service through workshops, communication campaigns, and recognition programs. In conclusion, in order to establish a disciplined, effective, and accountable public institution that can fulfil its developmental mandate, reforms must concurrently address behavioral, structural, technological, and cultural aspects.

7. Recommendations

Drawing on the thematic analysis of secondary data and the insights provided by Organisational Discipline Theory and New Public Management, this study offers several practical recommendations designed to strengthen time discipline within provincial public institutions such as the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD):

7.1. Adopt Biometric Attendance Systems

Biometric attendance technologies must be prioritized if employee time tracking is to become more accurate. To improve data reliability and lower the possibility of manual manipulation or falsification of attendance records, these systems ought to be completely integrated with the current HRM platforms (Mthethwa and Mokoena, 2023). Real-time monitoring promotes transparency during internal and external audits and enables managers to quickly identify patterns of tardiness or absenteeism. It also makes it easier to create thorough reports that can guide performance evaluations and remedial measures, which is in line with NPM's data-driven management and accountability principles (Langa and Seabi, 2023).

7.2. Conduct Weekly Register Audits

Establishing weekly attendance register audits is essential for maintaining data integrity and ensuring compliance. For routine checks that confirm signatures, cross-reference biometric data, and identify anomalies like pre-signed or unsigned registers, departmental managers should set up explicit protocols (Mokoena and Mabaso, 2023). By letting people know that attendance records are being examined, these routine oversight procedures not only aid in the early detection of violations but also promote an accountable culture. Following audits, prompt remedial action can strengthen organizational discipline and discourage future non-compliance (Baloyi and Selepe, 2024).

7.3. Develop Clear Time Management Policies

To gain support and lessen resistance, it is essential to develop comprehensive time management policies through a participatory process involving labour unions and employee representatives (Matlala and Mofokeng, 2023). Expected working hours, appropriate behavior, sanctions for infractions, and formal grievance procedures should all be spelled out in detail in these policies. Transparency in policy content lessens ambiguity, which is frequently abused in informal work cultures, and aids in the establishment of shared behavioral norms (Sibanda and Ndlovu, 2022).

7.4. Enhance Supervisory Training

To effectively and equitably enforce time discipline, supervisors and middle managers require focused capacity-building programs. Practical skills for keeping track of attendance, managing disciplinary issues, and tactfully resolving conflicts should be covered in training (Mahlangu and Khuzwayo, 2024). It is crucial to emphasize leadership by example because managers who exhibit accountability and punctuality on a regular basis set behavioral norms that influence their teams.

7.5. Establish Reward and Recognition Systems

Employee adherence to time discipline can be encouraged by providing positive incentives in addition to enforcement. Departments ought to put in place incentive programs that formally acknowledge regular attendance and punctuality, such as non-monetary benefits, public recognition, or certificates of commendation (Maziriri, Madinga, and Lose, 2022). NPM's emphasis on employee motivation and performance management is in line with these incentives, which also boost morale, show organizational appreciation, and reinforce desired behaviors.

When taken as a whole, these suggestions seek to improve institutional effectiveness and public service delivery by addressing the behavioral as well as systemic causes of time mismanagement.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that time discipline challenges within the Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (LDARD) are symptomatic of broader systemic organisational weaknesses. These challenges are not isolated incidents of individual misconduct but rather reflect deeply embedded cultural norms, leadership gaps, and fragile administrative controls that collectively undermine operational efficiency. Persistent issues such as habitual lateness, informal departures, manipulated attendance registers, and unregulated leave practices have become routinised within LDARD's organisational culture, signaling a collapse of disciplinary authority and a tolerance for inefficiency.

The use of organizational discipline theory has shown how time misuse has become commonplace across different operational units due to the breakdown of enforcement mechanisms and uneven supervisory procedures. Supervisors, who play a crucial role in upholding behavioral standards, frequently lack the ability, institutional backing, or motivation to successfully enforce time-related policies. In addition to undermining the legitimacy of official regulations, this leadership void fosters a culture of tolerance in which lack of discipline is neither accepted nor addressed.

Conversely, New Public Management (NPM) principles offer a pragmatic framework for addressing these inefficiencies by advocating for performance-driven management, technological innovation, and enhanced accountability mechanisms. However, the findings caution against over-reliance on technological interventions in the absence of complementary cultural and leadership reforms. Technological tools, such as biometric systems, are only as effective as the organisational commitment to utilise them within a structured and performance-oriented framework.

Restoring time discipline within LDARD thus requires a holistic and coordinated reform strategy. This involves a multipronged approach that combines procedural tightening, robust technological integration, leadership capacity-building, and cultural re-orientation. Importantly, these reforms must be underpinned by transparent communication, equitable policy enforcement across all offices, and motivational incentives that align individual behaviors with

institutional goals of efficiency, accountability, and public service excellence. Without addressing the interplay between structural inefficiencies and behavioral dynamics, any attempt at improving time discipline is likely to be superficial and unsustainable.

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