

# PRELIMINARY STUDY ON BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT (BPM) PRACTICES: A CASE STUDY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISE

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**Abstract:** *In South Africa, State-owned enterprises (SOEs) are either owned or partially owned by the government and often act as catalysts for economic growth. SOEs are established to provide essential public services to the public and such services include water, electricity and transportation utilities. On the contrary, South African SOEs are often dysfunctional and victims of state capture resulting to poor service delivery. As a mitigation measure against corruption, many SOEs adopt Business Process Management (BPM). Across the globe, Over the years, SOEs are seen to invest substantial amounts of money on BPM and South African SOEs are no exception. BPM offers the SOEs a guide for structuring, managing, and controlling their business processes. However, literature on how BPM is practiced in South African SOEs is sparse. Hence, there is a need to describe how BPM is practiced in South African SOEs. This study used the grounded theory literature review method and only reports on open coding as this research is in progress. The findings showed twelve different ways in which BPM practiced in the SOE. It was found that in the SOE, BPM was practiced to optimize work, understand work and manage compliance. These practices were mostly mentioned and appeared to the most dominant ones. The theory developed in this study contributes to the understanding of how BPM is practiced in SOEs.*

**Keywords:** *Business Process Management, South Africa, State-Owned Enterprise, Business Process Management Practices*

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## Introduction

Business Process Management (BPM) is an approach that oversees organisational tasks and how such tasks are executed and performed (Houy, Fettke and Loos, 2016). BPM is defined differently by various scholars, reflecting its multifaceted nature. Oruthotaarachchi and Wijayanayake (2021) define BPM as a strategy that focuses on analysing, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating business processes in organisations. While practitioners define BPM as a management discipline that drives operational efficiency and effectiveness within the organisation (Reiter et al., 2010; vom Brocker & Sinnl, 2011). Despite its numerous definitions by various scholars, it was interesting to note that numerous authors have consistently defined BPM as an initiative that assists organisations to streamline processes and achieve strategic objectives (Ubaid & Dweiri, 2020). This paper adopts how BPM is commonly adopted and states that BPM is a management discipline that helps to streamline organisational operations and thus making the operations more efficient and effective.

In South Africa, there is a number of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and were established to stimulate industrial growth and diversify the economy by creating jobs, provide essential services such as water, electricity, transportation and communications. In order to deliver goods and service delivery, SOEs have adopted BPM to assist to achieve organisational goals. Thus, SOEs are investing substantial amount of money on BPM. The SOEs are adopting BPM because it promises reduced costs, streamlined business processes and improved service delivery.

Even though BPM is adopted in SOEs, it remains unclear as to how it is practiced, particularly in South Africa. Moreover, there is also limited literature that describes how BPM is practiced in South African SOEs (Van der Aalst et al., 2016). Thus, the objective of this study is to describe the BPM practices in South African State-Owned Enterprises. However, this study makes use of one SOE operating in South Africa and this is a preliminary study of that one particular SOE.

To contribute to the knowledge gap, this study's research question is as follows:

- i. How is BPM practiced in South African State-Owned Enterprise?

The grounded theory (GT) method of literature review was used to answer the question of how is BPM practiced in South African State-Owned Enterprise? This GT method was used because it is best in unexplored areas of research or where there is limited literature on the phenomenon as it is the case in this study.

## Background To The Study

### Business Process Management

Business Process Management (BPM) has long been a vital topic of discussion which gained significant traction in both academia and practice. Over the years, BPM has evolved into a well-established practice worldwide, renowned for its ability to optimize and manage organisational processes. Numerous studies have identified several benefits of BPM, including enhanced transparency, improved risk management, and reduced bureaucracy (Papadopoulos et al., 2018). Additionally, BPM has been shown to increase productivity, improve customer service, provide better process control, and enhance customer satisfaction (Zairi, 1997). Such benefits are known and well-documented in both the private and public sector organisations.

Since BPM has been discussed for over three decades, a variety of topics such as process planning, process controlling, process optimisation, process performance analysis, process mining, change management and quality management have been done (Koopman & Seymour, 2020; Stiehl et al., 2019). Other studies focused on BPM failures in public sector organisations (Syde, 2019). Studies by Chun et al., (2019) and Urqhart, (2016) found that BPM failures are often associated with lack of BPM understanding.

BPM has made substantial improvements over the years. As a result, organisations that adopt BPM have since increased performance, improved the efficiency of their business processes, and achieved the desired goals (Van der Aalst, 2016). Other studies reveal that organisations seek to achieve a higher profit margin and obtain better results (Hanafi et al., 2020). After going through these studies, it was found that organisations including the SOEs are unclear as to how the adopted BPM initiatives are practiced.

### **South African State-Owned Enterprises**

State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are entities established to engage in both commercial and non-commercial activities. Their primary mandate is to provide goods and services to the public. However, SOEs often face numerous challenges, including poor governance and political commitment, inadequate financial policies and frameworks, insufficient accountability, and excessive political interference (Salamntu & Makoza, 2023). Despite these challenges, SOEs have played a pivotal role in rebuilding South Africa's economy over the past decades (Serongoane & Ukwandu, 2021).

In recent years, SOEs have adopted Business Process Management (BPM) initiatives to streamline their operations, aiming to deliver more effective goods and services. While the adoption of BPM by South African SOEs is acknowledged, the specific practices of BPM within these enterprises are not well-documented in the literature. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for a detailed examination of BPM practices in South African SOEs. Consequently, this study seeks to describe how BPM is practiced in SOEs, with a particular focus on South Africa.

### **Research Approach**

The grounded theory (GT) method of literature review was used to answer the research question. The GT is known for developing theory in unexplored area and in this study BPM practices in South African SOE are described. The inquiry draws from epistemological assumptions, describes the BPM practices in South African SOEs, and follows an interpretivism paradigm. GT method is a qualitative research methodology that uses a bottom-up approach. GT is derived from data and allows theories to emerge directly from the data. It helps organisations and researchers to understand a phenomenon with limited literature (Urguhart, 2016; Charmaz, 2006). GT was chosen as it is used when little is known about the phenomenon (Chun et al., 2019) as it is the case in this study.

There are three approaches to conducting grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After carefully analysing the three approaches, this study followed the constructivist GTM (Charmaz, 2006), aligning with the interpretive paradigm (Liu et al., 2009). This is a preliminary study of a single case study of the South African SOE. Additionally, this study only presents open coding, as the research is still in progress. A single case study from one of the South African SOEs was selected and analysed. The case study name was denoted as C1. C1 was selected because the researcher is aware that

C1 has adopted BPM and there is no distinct understanding as to how BPM is practiced. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to draw deeper insights from the participants in the field. The names of the participants were removed throughout the study to ensure anonymity. However, the role played by the participants was kept to show that they were experts in their fields, and a representative code was used to identify each individual uniquely.

Table 1 represents the thirteen participants that were interviewed in C1. The participants were purposely sampled to achieve appropriateness and adequacy in qualitative research as they were deemed more likely to contribute to a broader view of BPM, particularly in these roles.

**Table 1: Research participant's roles, representative code and experience within C1**

Position	Representative Code	Experience
Chief Information Officer	CO1	30 years
Programme Director	PD1, PD2	27, 15 years
Project Manager	PM1, PM2	16, 35 years
Senior Engineer	SE1, SE2, SE3	15, 14, 9 years
Senior Analyst	SA1, SA2	9, 10 years
Process Analyst	PA1, PA2	7, 7 years
Project Coordinator	PC1	4 years

The interview protocol ensured that participants were informed of the study's purpose and allowed for flexibility where specific questions were adjusted so that the participants were able to provide a correct response to the questions. All interviews were recorded in Microsoft Office Teams and transcribed in Microsoft Word. All interview transcripts were loaded into an Excel spreadsheet for open coding purposes. During the interviews, all participants were treated with respect at all times. Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview if they were uncomfortable with the questions. Moreover, at the start of the interview, each participant had to complete and sign an informed consent form. Lastly, the participants were not compensated financially for participating in the interview and the name of the SOE and the participants interviewed were presented in pseudonyms for confidentiality.

### Research Findings

Given that this study adopted a grounded theory method, it did not use a predefined framework, instead, the theory developed from the data. This study aimed to describe how BPM is practiced in South African SOEs. From the data, twelve main themes emerged in the data. Twelve themes and thirty-three sub-themes emerged related to BPM practices in SOEs. All of which will be discussed in turn.

#### Bringing Collaboration

BPM allows departments within the organisation to coordinate the flow of information and better link their processes. This creates a flexible collaboration to adapt to changing conditions and remain competitive (Rosenkranz et al., 2009). Three sub-themes emerged from the bringing

collaboration theme: increasing collaboration, sharing information and working together. These subthemes will be discussed in turn.

**Increasing Collaboration.** Using BPM increases collaboration among individuals and departments (Rosenkranz et al., 2009). The participants interviewed believed that BPM assists with collaboration and allows people to interact with each other. ‘... for the most part, there was much cooperation, there was much learning that people did in their own time’ (SE1).

**Sharing Information.** BPM allows individuals within the organisation to share information. ‘...there was a lot of information sharing between individuals’ (SE1).

**Working together.** BPM causes people to develop a good working relationship. People could work together, and everyone’s hands were on deck to achieve organisational objectives. Even though people had differences with their different skill sets, everyone was able to produce the end product ‘... it is working together...’ (PM2).

### **Enforcing Standardisation**

Organisations increasingly seek to meet strategic objectives by standardising business processes (McLachlan et al., 2020). Four sub-themes emerged from the enforcing standardisation theme: standardising processes, following processes unconsciously, having one communication channel and implementing a centralised process architecture.

**Standardising processes.** Standardisation ensures the processes are consistent with expectations (Olson et al., 2005). The participants mentioned that BPM brings about process standardisation. Standardisation means that the processes are documented and managed more formally. Also, BPM builds standardisation in terms of how people manage processes. ‘...building more standardisation regarding how people can manage processes’(SA2). Processes are documented in a standardised way, which brings about a shared understanding of a particular process ‘...documenting granular level business processes and in a way that is standardised where you know different people can read the same set of processes and get the same understanding’ (SA2). BPM introduces a standard framework that is used by analysts when documenting processes. This leads to analysts using the same modelling language; ultimately, the documents produced are standard. Standardised processes allow services to be offered the same way across different business units or support structures. Standardisation was mentioned to speed up service delivery processes in many spheres, and SOEs are no exception. ‘... having a standard, the service offering is the same, meaning the process needs to be the same’ (SA2).

**Following processes unconsciously.** In organisations, people are forced to follow processes (Olson et al., 2005). One of the participants mentioned that processes are followed unconsciously in the SOE. ‘...following processes in an unconscious manner’ (PD1).

**Having one channel of communication.** The standard operating procedure channelled the same communication. ‘...BPM was effective because there was now one level of truth, and I remember, when you took them through, no, we already know that. So, there was one channel. There was one truth that was coming from – there was one truth that they knew and understood because in the different phase before I got to that space, they had already provided this truth, and it was a different truth from different people, but they decided to make it one truth. So, SOP is one of the truths of BPM, right? And for me ... That truth of BPM was effective in that sense



where it was able to ensure that there was one truth that they referred to, or they understood to be' (SE1).

Implementing a centralised process architecture. The participants mentioned that an architecture system was purchased to integrate and store processes. Additionally, the process architecture assisted with process mapping and ensuring that documents are organised logically in the centralised process architecture. '...we are doing architecture, enterprise architecture' (CO1).

### **Managing Processes**

BPM is not solely about systems, but it looks at a comprehensive system of managing organisational operations through managing the processes (Sadiq et al., 2015). One sub-theme emerged from the managing processes.

Managing Processes. To some participants, managing processes relates to the comprehensive management of processes that the SOE executes to provide customer value (Sadiq et al., 2015). Additionally, managing processes entailed managing the end-to-end business processes from different facets of the organisation. '... it is just an end-to-end management of those different facets of business processes' (PD1). The participants mentioned that processes are managed to improve and retire ones that are no longer relevant. Some participants further argued that BPM assists in managing stakeholder expectations. Below is what some of the participants had to say.

### **Managing Compliance**

BPM is a driver for regulatory compliance (Máruster et al., 2009). Three sub-themes emerged from the managing compliance theme: enforcing compliance and using processes and technology to enforce compliance.

Enforcing compliance. The participants mentioned that BPM in their SOE is used as a mechanism to stop fraudulent activities and has become one of the core competencies in the organisation. Not only has it become a core competency, but it is a tool used to introduce effective governance. Internal and external audits enforce BPM, and it is also included in the performance scorecard. '...becoming part of performance scorecard' (PA1). Additionally, even though presentations around BPM are done, there is a need to enforce compliance and highlight what it can do, as it is seen as a challenge in the SOE. '...enforcing people to follow processes' (PD1).

Using processes to enforce compliance. Compliance is enforced on processes, and employees must follow and adhere to processes. '... adhering to the processes' (SE3).

Using technology to enforce compliance. The participant mentioned that BPM is used to enforce system compliance, and technology is used as an end product. '...building systems in accordance with the processes' (PD1).

### **Redesigning Processes**

Redesigning of processes occurs when there is a requirement to adopt to changing environments in order to remain competitive (Abbasi et al., 2013). Two sub-themes emerged from the redesigning processes theme: aligning processes to each other and discovering processes, which will be discussed in turn.

Aligning processes to each other. One participant mentioned that processes are aligned to each other. ‘...aligning of processes to each other’(PC1).

Discovering processes. The participants mentioned that a team of analysts had to discover processes from different business spheres. This requires knowledge about the “as-is” and, ultimately, the “to-be” processes. ‘... to get those in place, they require many process analysts to come into play to understand the as-is and the to-be’(SA2).

### **Understanding Work**

Five sub-themes emerged from the understanding work theme: adopting BPM principles, analysing processes, understanding processes, documenting and informing work.

Adopting BPM principles. The participants mentioned a widespread adoption of BPM principles, including unique departments and the entire organisation. ‘...so I think they have adopted the principles of BPM’ (SE2).

Analysing processes. BPM is used to analyse processes to identify opportunities for improvement and make alterations as and when circumstances change. Processes are also analysed to fulfil BPM objectives and automate processes. BPM allows you to analyse your processes.’(PA2). Analysing processes includes continually reviewing processes by asking questions ‘... so you need to ask if this were envisaged outcomes and if we are getting those outcomes’ (PM2).

Understanding processes. The participant mentioned that BPM brings a shared understanding and a broad understanding of how BPM works, how it should be executed, and what the drivers are. Additionally, another participant mentioned that understanding the processes is essential in that it assists the organisation to understand the business processes and how processes can intertwine with their everyday work. ‘...Understanding the activities within the organisation’ (PD1).

Documenting processes. Business processes are documented in various information systems (Van der Aalst et al., 2016). Not only are business processes documented, but the standard operating procedures are, too. The research findings show that the C1 documents its processes. “...And on the BPM side, yes, we do have a document on BPM, and we also have, if I may just say, documentation around business processes. However, you will know we have implemented Oracle at different levels of the organisation. So the processes are documented” (PD2).

Informing work. BPM was mentioned to guide what needs to be delivered. ‘...Integrating processes to inform way of work’(SE3).

### **Having Insufficient Controls**

Four sub-themes emerged from insufficient controls: BPM is not practiced optimally, lacks robust processes and controls, uses processes for unintended purposes, and designs processes with loopholes.

BPM is not practiced optimally. The participant mentioned that BPM was not practiced optimally for the SOE to put adequate controls, leading to processes not achieving their goals. The research findings show that business processes lack control because BPM is not practised optimally. Participants in C1 mentioned that BPM is not practiced optimally. ‘...so we do not

apply BPM optimally for us to be able to ensure that the necessary controls are put in place'(SE1).

Lacking robust processes and controls. The lack of robust processes in the organisation results in fraud and corruption. This was one of the least mentioned themes, and one participant has the following to say: '...is fraud and corruption is because we do not have robust processes'(SE1).

Processes used for unintended purposes. Findings show that people can use processes for unintended purposes, not necessarily initially intended for in the beginning. '...if the processes are not properly deployed, then they can be used for other reasons that are necessary, that are negative and which were not necessarily intended for in the beginning'(SE1).

Designing processes with loopholes. Processes are designed with loopholes, and people take advantage of them. '...the loopholes within these processes enabled the employees executing these processes to be used for other reasons that were not necessarily the reasons they were deployed for, or implemented for in the beginning'(SE1).

### **Aligning Processes to Strategy**

Two sub-themes emerged from aligning processes to strategy themes: managing strategic intent and meeting strategic objectives.

Managing strategic intent. Strategic intent serves as the backbone of the organisational strategy and represents envisioned achievements and the purpose that drives its business activities. The participant said that managing a strategic intent is more like setting up strategic objectives in terms of what needs to be achieved to get the organisation matured to a point where it is regarded as an industry leader in BPM. In the SOE, management sets the scene by ensuring that BPM is linked to the organisation's strategic objectives. "...so I think the leadership and the management is just to set the scene, link this to the strategic objective of the organisation..." (SE2). Another participant concurred and said BPM needs to fit well into the organisational strategy (CO1).

Meeting strategic objectives. An effective and efficient process contributes to the strategic objectives. The participants mentioned that BPM is executed to achieve objectives, and without BPM, the participants mentioned that the organisations would not meet customer commitment (Van der Aalst, 2016).. '...For us, BPM was not a stand-alone, but a means to achieving strategic objectives' (PM2).

### **Innovating**

One sub-theme emerged from the innovating theme, namely enabling innovation and will be discussed in turn.

Enabling innovation. The participant mentioned that business processes are an enabler for innovation. '...Business processes are an enabler for innovation' (PD1).

### **Automating Work**

Two sub-themes emerged from the automating work theme: automating manual processes and modelling processes for automation.



Automating manual processes. The participant mentioned that the process activities are now executed automatically. ‘...Automating manual processes such as a billing process’(PA1). For instance, a manual billing process was said to be automated. Also, the mapped processes are considered in the implementation of new ERP systems. ‘...there is also automation at a later stage to ensure that the activities that are not necessarily required to be done by a human can be put onto a simple robot’ (PD1).

Modelling process for automation. Modelling processes for automation is taking the processes and putting them into online platforms or systems. This helps improve organisational efficiency and automate business processes (Hammer, 2010). The participants mentioned that BPM is used to automate manual processes ‘...automating manual processes, so that also contributes to efficiency and effectiveness’ (PA2).

### **Monitoring Performance**

Monitoring plays a critical role in organisational development. Two sub-themes emerged from the monitoring performance theme: measuring performance and meeting customer needs.

Measuring performance. BPM is used to measure performance. ‘...measuring outcomes of the process’ (PD1).

Enabling and meeting customer needs. BPM is used to enable and manage customer needs. ‘...Meeting customer needs’(PD1). The participant mentioned that even with cumbersome processes, the execution of such processes still yields quicker results when compared to the same process executed in other entities. ‘...However, you look at other entities and how their processes work. You will find ours is cumbersome but yields the results much quicker than any other person’ (PM1).

### **Optimising Work**

Optimising work involves improvement initiatives that may be once-off but display a more continuous nature. BPM emphasises managing the entire chain of activities and decisions that add value to the organisation and its customers (Brzychezy, 2017). Four sub-themes emerged from the optimising work theme: continuously improving work, identifying duplicated work, identifying processes needing improvement and improving process outcomes.

Continuously improving. Lack of continuous improvement leads to degradation. A good process becomes destructive if not continuously improved to meet the customer's ever-changing needs (Lamghari, 2019). Hence, it is essential to improve the processes continuously. The participants mentioned that BPM is used to improve how work is executed to ensure that processes are effective and efficient. Moreover, the organisation works more optimistically, attracting efficiency and effectiveness. ‘...doing more with less not being wasteful in how you do things with time, resources and people’ (PD2). BPM allows processes to be improved continuously.

Identifying duplicated work. BPM assists in discovering duplicated work, which may come in the form of processes (Sadiq et al., 2015). The participant mentioned that BPM assists in the identification of process duplicates in that it eliminates different people from executing the same task ‘...Identification of process duplicates’ (PA1).

Identifying processes needing improvement. BPM is known to identify processes that need to be improved (Fischer, 2018). The procurement process was identified to require some improvements and was streamlined. "...we can procure in 21 days; it is very streamlined. This means that the entire procurement process itself is very lengthy. It is very cumbersome, but we can shorten it, and the C1 has improved dramatically in streamlining the processes' (PM1). BPM is required in organisations to detect process bottlenecks (Fischer, 2018). It was also mentioned that the SOE identified finance processes needing improvements through BPM. In this regard, the invoice process initially had some bottlenecks, such as an invoice staying too long in the system before it could be paid. Agreed timeframes were then set to make the process effective and efficient. "... it has also enabled us to find out the bottlenecks as to where the invoice was staying longer, and we defined agreed timelines as to how long an invoice could take in a particular place. So we know whether the project is to manage and delay the invoice, whether I saw its finance delaying in payment or what is happening, or whether the invoice has been referred back'(PM2).

Improving process outcome. Improving process outcomes involves optimising tasks and activities to achieve desired outcomes. The participants mentioned this theme the most throughout the interviews. The participants mentioned that improved process outcomes can be achieved by adding continuous improvement to the management performance matrix. "Adding continuous improvement as part of management scorecard". [J011] BPM ensures that services are delivered to the clients and third parties on time and that the business processes talk to service delivery. "...providing our service on time to clients and third parties' (PA1). Process outcomes are optimised by leveraging and streamlining processes, removing time-wasting activities, removing bottlenecks, improving organisational efficiency, managing processes to function and doing more with less. "...removing of time-wasting activities'(PA1) and 'doing more with less, not being wasteful in how you do things with time, resources and people (PD2).

## Discussion

This discussion of the research findings was used to answer the research question, "How is BPM practiced in South African state-owned enterprises?" The most dominant theme in how BPM is practiced in SOEs was optimising work with 93 text references, understanding work with 43 text references, managing compliance with 30 text references and enforcing standardisation with 21 text references, respectively. Optimising has been consistently mentioned by the participants. The least mentioned BPM practices in SOE were innovating with three text references, redesigning processes with five text references, aligning processes to strategy and monitoring performance with nine text references, respectively. To eliminate potential biases in the grouping of the practices, interviews were consulted during the later part of the analysis process. Some of the practices mentioned in the literature were aligned with the practices experienced by the participants in C1. Innovation and understanding work as BPM practices were the other themes unique to C1.

## Conclusion

This paper described twelve BPM practices in South African SOEs. Before BPM adoption, it was mentioned that the SOE had many duplicate processes, negatively impacting efficiency, productivity, and the organisation's overall performance. It was found that BPM is mainly used to optimise work. This study provides an initial contribution to BPM practices in SOEs. Also, from this study, the leadership in SOEs can have an in-depth understanding of how BPM is practiced. This study was based on one SOE and made a small step towards understanding how BPM is practiced in South African SOEs, which has not been done before. No comparison has

yet been made to check how other South African SOEs practice BPM. Only open coding was done as the researcher is currently working on the open coding stage in her research. The participants provided rich insights. Also, exciting themes have emerged, which other researchers might find insightful. Further interviews with other SOEs will be conducted in the future for a richer and more comprehensive contribution.

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