Zimbabwe

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

PSC LIBRARIES – Knowledge management in the public sector

RESEARCH WEDNESDAY: 11 NOVEMBER 2026

Knowledge Management in the Public Sector

Introduction

The Public Service Commission (PSC) works every day with knowledge: rules, precedents, the reasons behind past decisions, and the experience of the officers who applied them. The central question of this paper is: **how well does a public institution keep, share and use what it knows, and what does it cost when it does not?**

This paper is both a piece of research and an initiative. As research, it reviews what published studies, official documents and reports say about knowledge management in the public sector. As an initiative, it invites every department to see itself as a keeper of knowledge that colleagues, clients and future officers depend on.

Knowledge management is the deliberate coordination of people, processes, technology and governance so that knowledge is identified, created, shared, applied and retained in pursuit of institutional objectives (ISO, 2018; Kassa and Ning, 2023). It is often confused with two narrower activities: digitising records and buying technology. Digitisation changes the medium that knowledge is carried on. Knowledge management decides whether that knowledge is found, understood, reused and preserved.

In a public institution it is practical, not abstract. It shows in a handover note that explains why a decision was taken, a mentoring arrangement that pairs a long-serving officer with a new one, a library and records system that staff actually uses, and a lessons-learned review after a major exercise. Its absence shows in the opposite habits. Officers retire and their reasoning leaves with them. A new team repeats work that an earlier team completed. Departments hold information that others need but never see. This is **institutional amnesia**, the paradox of governments losing their memory in an age of expanding information capacity (Pollitt, 2000).

The paper first explains the main types of knowledge and the effects of managing, or not managing, it. It then gives the background, reviews the literature, sets out the method, discusses what the sources show and ends with recommendations.

Types of Knowledge

Knowledge is different from data and from information, and the difference matters in practice. Ackoff (1989) describes **data** as symbols that record observations, **information** as data processed to answer a question, and **knowledge** as the application of data and information that lets a person know how something works (see also Rowley, 2007). Davenport and Prusak (1998) describe organisational knowledge as a fluid mix of experience, values, context and expert insight, embedded in documents, routines and practices. A payroll figure is data. A circular explaining how it is calculated is information. An experienced officer understands of why the rule was designed that way, and what happened when it last changed, is knowledge.

Tacit Knowledge

Polanyi (1966, p. 4) summed up tacit knowledge in one sentence: we can know more than we can tell. **Tacit knowledge** is personal, practical knowledge gained through experience, such as judgement, intuition and a feel for a situation (Polanyi, 1958). A senior officer who senses that a proposal will meet resistance in a particular Ministry, or a registry clerk who knows where a file is likely to be, is using tacit knowledge. It is held in people, so it leaves the institution when they retire, transfer or resign.

Explicit Knowledge

Explicit knowledge has been written down, recorded or formalised, so it can be stored, copied and shared. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) describe it as knowledge expressed in words, numbers, manuals, procedures and specifications. Circulars, regulations, annual reports, service commitments and library collections are explicit knowledge. It is easy to transmit, but it is only part of what an organisation knows.

	Tacit knowledge	Explicit knowledge
Where it is held	In people's minds, experience and practice	In documents, records, databases and systems
How it is acquired	Through experience, observation and apprenticeship	Through reading, study and formal instruction
How it is shared	Conversation, mentoring, working together	Publishing, filing, circulating, uploading
Main risk	Lost when staff leave	Stored but never found or used
PSC example	An officer's understanding of why a past reform stalled	The circular or report that announced the reform

How Knowledge Is Created

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) argue that organisations create knowledge by moving it between tacit and explicit forms in four steps: **socialisation** (sharing experience, as in mentoring), **externalisation** (putting insight into words and documents), **combination** (bringing documented knowledge together) and **internalisation** (learning by doing until documented guidance becomes practice). The lesson is that explicit knowledge alone is not enough. An institution that stores every document but never captures what experienced officers know preserves the record and loses the reasoning.

The Impact of Managing, and Not Managing, Knowledge

An institution that manages its knowledge serves more quickly and more consistently than one that does not. The table sets the two situations side by side, drawing on the studies reviewed later in this paper.

Area	Where knowledge is managed	Where it is not
Service delivery	Officers find precedents and procedures quickly. South African municipal evidence links KM practices to improved services (Musonza and Muchaonyerwa, 2019).	Queries are answered from memory or from scratch, so clients wait longer or receive uneven answers.
Transparency and accountability	Reasons for decisions are recorded and can be explained. KM is associated with greater transparency and trust (Mabhena, Pretorius and Mamorobela, 2025).	Decisions cannot be explained once the officer has left, and candour in written records can decline (Allott, 2025).
Consistency of advice	Staff draws on a shared stock of guidance.	Different officers give different answers to the same question.

Area	Where knowledge is managed	Where it is not
Turnover and succession	Knowledge is handed over before officers move, and mentoring turns experience into shared capability (Dewah, 2015).	Knowledge is lost with each retirement, transfer or resignation (Dewah, 2016).
Reform and continuity	Lessons from earlier exercises inform the next.	Teams start again from the beginning and redo earlier work (Allott, 2025).
Collaboration across units	Units can see what others hold and do, which supports joint problem-solving (Kassa and Ning, 2023).	Duplicated effort and inconsistent priorities across silos (Pepple, Makama and Okeke, 2022).

For the Commission the stakes are specific. Its Service Commitments promise clients accurate and consistent advice and timely responses to correspondence. Both promises depend on knowledge that is shared, current and easy to find, whoever happens to be at the desk.

Background

The Commission is the constitutional body established under Section 202 of the Constitution and regulated by the Public Service Act [Chapter 16:04] (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013, 2016). It appoints grades and disciplines members of the Civil Service, fixes establishment and organisational structures across the twenty-one line ministries, and advises Government on Civil Service administration (Government of Zimbabwe, 2024). It both makes and implements human resource policy for the whole Civil Service. Because its decisions cascade across every ministry, a failure of institutional memory in the Commission spreads across the system.

An Illustration: Job Evaluation Reform, 2003 to 2026

The Paterson job evaluation system was adopted in 2003 and remained the Commission's operating framework for two decades (Public Service Commission, 2021; Nzima, 2026). Over that period it degraded. Posts were placed on 'through grades' that bypassed the system's own logic, redundant posts persisted alongside genuine ones, progression stalled for technical specialists, and duties were duplicated across ministries in the way the framework was meant to prevent (Nzima, 2026). The sources reviewed document what had gone wrong, but say little about when the degradation began or why remedy took so long.

A comprehensive re-evaluation began in February 2023 across the twenty-one ministries, and Cabinet approved the resulting report in September 2024. It found advancement by grade and not by duties, functional duplication of roles within and across ministries, chief director and director posts with identical duties, more managerial than non-managerial posts and dead-end jobs for specialists (Government of Zimbabwe, 2024; Murwira, 2024). The exercise was completed in 2025 and produced new grades and titles, a new pay framework and rationalised structures, now being implemented under the National Development Strategy 2 (The Herald, 2026). The remodeled system adds a job rating manual, a 'Person to Holder Principle' that protects individuals against structural downgrades, and annual internal and biennial external audits (Nzima, 2026).

These new safeguards can be read as an acknowledgement of what was missing the first time: monitoring, and a documented account of why the system was designed as it was. On that reading, the two exercises describe a two-decade cycle in which a reform was adopted, its reasoning faded, it decayed without a record and was then rebuilt from first principles. The loss was gradual, not dramatic: later officers had to rediscover what earlier ones knew. That is the pattern the institutional amnesia literature describes (Corbett *et al.*, 2018; Stark, 2019). These observations come from public sources only, and internal records may tell a fuller story. They illustrate how knowledge about a reform can be hard to recover, and are not a finding about any department or officer.

Why Now

Effective governance depends on how well institutions manage what they already know. Vision 2030 names knowledge as a driver of Zimbabwe's transformation to an upper-middle-income society and calls for institutions whose decisions rest on

evidence (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018). The public service reforms now being implemented will help future officers only if what is learned in them is captured, stored and shared. This paper starts that conversation.

Literature Review

The literature on public sector knowledge management is growing but uneven. This review moves from the global picture to institutional amnesia, then to digital transformation and the evidence-policy link, and finally to Africa and the wider Southern African Development Community (SADC), before drawing out the themes of service delivery, transparency, benefits and barriers.

The Global Picture

Massaro, Dumay and Garlatti (2015) reviewed 180 papers from ten knowledge management journals and called public sector KM a research area of growing importance. They also found the field fragmented and concentrated in high-income countries. A decade later, a systematic review of 33 Web of Science studies reports three recurring outcomes of KM in government: improved organisational performance, greater citizen satisfaction and stronger collaborative innovation, with a marked shift after 2020 towards digital and evidence-based approaches (Kassa and Ning, 2023).

Institutional Memory and Institutional Amnesia

Pollitt (2000) introduced the idea of institutional amnesia. Corbett *et al.* (2018) distinguish a static view, in which memory is singular and held in files and procedures, from a dynamic view in which memories reside with people and are spread across the actors in government. Later work treats institutional memory as storytelling (Corbett *et al.*, 2020). Stark (2019), drawing on about one hundred interviews with ministers, policy officials and public sector leaders in four countries, identifies four mechanisms that produce amnesia.

Mechanism	What it means in a public institution
Organisational churn	Officers move on and take reasoning and relationships with them.
Limited absorptive capacity	The institution cannot take in, understand and use what it already holds.
Discounting of historical evidence	Decisions are driven by present priorities, and past experience is set aside.
Erosion of storytelling	The informal accounts through which colleagues pass on reasoning are lost.

Digital Transformation, Sharing and the Evidence-Policy Link

Digital tools do not substitute for knowledge management. Portuguese public administration data show that digital government yields better competence and service quality only where practices for finding, acquiring and sharing knowledge already exist (Alvarenga *et al.*, 2020). Greek public sector evidence shows tools that did not match process needs accounted for much of the underperformance (Xanthopoulou, Kessopoulou and Tsiotras, 2023). Reviews of artificial intelligence in knowledge management find that its success depends on leadership commitment, adaptable governance and context-sensitive design, and that data quality, bias and opacity are risks (Jarrahi *et al.*, 2023; Gelashvili-Luik, Vihma and Pappel, 2025).

Sharing is repeatedly identified as the weakest process. It depends on incentives and trust that hierarchical bureaucracies rarely supply, and on personal relationships, so it does not survive staff turnover (Pepple, Makama and Okeke, 2022). A systematic review of evidence use in policy found weak links between researchers and decision-makers to be the most frequently reported constraint, and blamed one-way models in which findings are published without institutional mechanisms for uptake (Suazo-Galdames, Saracostti and Chaple-Gil, 2025).

South Africa

Musonza and Muchaonyerwa (2019) studied the Raymond Mhlaba Municipality in the Eastern Cape using a survey of 202 employees and interviews with two senior managers. They found that effective KM practices strengthened the municipality's

KM initiative and improved services including electricity, education, transport and social services, and they recommend an integrated system for sharing, retaining and acquiring knowledge.

Mabhena, Pretorius and Mamorobela (2025) assessed KM in three national departments using 103 survey responses. Most processes reached only the first capability level, and the barriers reported were weak collaboration, information silos, informal sharing, unclear strategies and limited top management commitment. They associate KM with better service delivery, transparency, efficiency and trust in government. The article is internally inconsistent in how it reports capability levels, so it is used here for broad themes only.

The Wider SADC Region, Kenya and Nigeria

Komanyane (2010) surveyed 43 departmental directors in Botswana's public sector and found that respondents practised mainly information management rather than KM, with weak communication within and between departments and no adequate KM policy. Nengomasha, Mubuyaeta and Beukes-Amiss (2017) found that a Namibian Ministry's organisational knowledge rested on tacit and explicit knowledge but was managed informally. Dewah (2015) compared three SADC public broadcasters, including the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. Mentoring was valued but implemented 'in name' only, none had a knowledge management post, and at the ZBC experienced staff left for other broadcasters, leaving gaps in critical knowledge.

In Kenya, Ondari-Okemwa and Smith (2009) argue that KM can improve governance, performance and service delivery in government agencies, but that bureaucracy, few incentives to share, limited awareness and knowledge hoarding stand in the way. In Nigeria, KM practices were present but at an early stage, constrained by sociocultural factors, rigid hierarchy and gaps in leadership commitment (Pepple, Makama and Okeke, 2022).

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean scholarship has approached the subject mainly through records and archives management. Studies record organisational memory neglected or destroyed through weak information management systems, unimplemented records policies and a statutory framework that predates electronic recordkeeping (Tsvuura and Ngulube, 2021; Mutsagondo and Ngulube, 2021). Dewah (2016) reports the first knowledge audit at the National Archives of Zimbabwe, an institution that had suffered knowledge loss through employee mobility. What this work has not produced is an account of how knowledge is created, shared and used in policy-making itself, as distinct from how records are kept.

Themes Across the Literature

- **Service delivery.** Studies from South Africa and Kenya link KM to better services, though most measure perceptions or practices rather than service outcomes (Musonza and Muchaonyerwa, 2019; Ondari-Okemwa and Smith, 2009).
- **Transparency and accountability.** KM is associated with greater transparency and trust, mainly through recorded, accessible and shareable knowledge (Mabhena, Pretorius and Mamorobela, 2025).
- **Benefits.** Better performance, citizen satisfaction, collaboration and reduced knowledge loss recur across studies (Kassa and Ning, 2023; Dewah, 2016).
- **Barriers.** The same obstacles appear in every setting: weak policy and leadership commitment, silos, few incentives, hierarchy, knowledge hoarding, weak records and limited ICT (Komanyane, 2010; Pepple, Makama and Okeke, 2022; Tsvuura and Ngulube, 2021).

Taken together, the studies show that the problems seen in the Public Service are not unique to Zimbabwe. They also show that evidence on how knowledge is managed within policy-making in an African public administration remains thin, which is a reason for the Commission to pay attention to its own practice.

Methodology

This paper is a qualitative, desk-based documentary study. No questionnaires or interviews were administered, and no internal Commission records were examined. Evidence was gathered in November 2026 from published and publicly available sources.

Sources. Four kinds of source were used:

- Peer-reviewed articles, books and a standard, drawn from journal and publisher platforms (including Heliyon, Frontiers, Governance, Mousaion, the South African Journal of Information Management and the South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science) and from African Journals Online.
- Official documents: the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Public Service Act, Vision 2030, the PSC Strategic Plan 2021 to 2025 and the post-Cabinet briefing on the job evaluation report.
- News reports on the job evaluation reform, from The Herald, and a presentation on the reformed grading system.
- A practitioner article on institutional memory in the United Kingdom civil service.

Search and selection. Searches combined terms such as *knowledge management*, *public sector*, *institutional memory*, *institutional amnesia*, *knowledge sharing*, *service delivery*, *transparency* and *job evaluation*, with the names of South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Sources were kept if they dealt with public institutions, came from a credible publisher or official body, and were readable in full or in a detailed abstract. Recent empirical studies and systematic reviews were preferred, alongside foundational theory.

Analysis. Each source was read and grouped under recurring themes: the knowledge processes, mechanisms of loss, service delivery, transparency, benefits and barriers. The themes were compared across countries and set against what public sources say about the Commission.

Limitations. The study has no primary data, so its conclusions are indicative, not conclusive. Several studies have small samples or measure perceptions, not outcomes. Some sources were available only as abstracts or summaries. The account of the job evaluation reform relies on public statements and may differ from internal records.

Findings and Discussion

The sources point to five findings.

1. **Knowledge management is linked to better performance and service, but the evidence is mostly about practice and perception.** Systematic review and regional studies connect KM to performance, citizen satisfaction and services, yet few measure service outcomes directly (Kassa and Ning, 2023; Musonza and Muchaonyerwa, 2019; Ondari-Okemwa and Smith, 2009).
2. **Technology without knowledge management produces disorder, not knowledge.** Digitisation helps only where practices for finding, sharing and using knowledge already exist (Alvarenga *et al.*, 2020; Xanthopoulou, Kessopoulou and Tsiotras, 2023).
3. **Sharing is the weakest process and does not survive turnover.** It rests on personal relationships and incentives (Pepple, Makama and Okeke, 2022), and staff mobility drained knowledge at the ZBC and the National Archives of Zimbabwe (Dewah, 2015, 2016).
4. **Institutional amnesia has identifiable causes.** Churn, limited absorptive capacity, discounting of history and eroded storytelling call for different remedies (Stark, 2019).
5. **The cost is visible in the Commission's own recent work.** The job evaluation reform shows a framework that degraded over two decades and then had to be rebuilt (Nzima, 2026; Government of Zimbabwe, 2024). Duplicated roles and identical duties at different levels are what units produce when they cannot see what one another do.

These findings suggest that institutional amnesia is a problem of systems, not of individuals. Officers who retire or transfer are doing what employees do. The weakness lies in the absence of routines, roles and policies that turn their experience into something the institution keeps.

The Commission is not starting from nothing. Its libraries, publications and website are an explicit knowledge infrastructure, and the reformed grading system now brings audits and a rating manual. What the sources suggest is missing, here as in most of the institutions studied, is the link between that infrastructure and the tacit knowledge held by officers, and a Commission-wide approach that makes the link routine. The evidence also has limits. It cannot show which of the four amnesia

mechanisms operate in the Commission today. Answering that requires an internal assessment, which is why the recommendations below begin with a diagnosis.

Recommendations

The information gathered for this paper indicates that the Commission should adopt a knowledge management framework, so that institutional amnesia is addressed as a matter of routine and not left to the goodwill of individual officers. The detailed design, sequencing and tools of such a framework are for the Commission to settle with its departments. The sources suggest it should cover the following areas.

1. **Policy, roles and resourcing.** A short KM policy, accountable roles in each department, and resources and measures to match. International standard ISO 30401 treats these as the requirements of a knowledge management system (ISO, 2018). None of the three SADC broadcasters studied had a knowledge management post (Dewah, 2015).
2. **Diagnose before prescribing.** A knowledge audit that shows what each department knows, where it sits and which amnesia mechanisms are at work, along the lines of the audit reported at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (Dewah, 2016; Stark, 2019).
3. **Capture reasoning, not only decisions.** Where significant decisions or reforms are completed, a brief record of the options considered, the reasons for the choice and the lessons learned, deposited with the PSC Libraries. The rating manual and audit reports of the job evaluation reform are natural first candidates.
4. **Succession, handover and storytelling.** Structured handovers and exit conversations, mentoring that is put into practice, and communities of practice through which experienced officers pass on the reasoning behind past decisions (Dewah, 2015; Stark, 2019).
5. **Sharing across departments and with evidence producers.** Platforms and brokerage that let units see what others hold and do, and that carry research to the point of decision (Pepple, Makama and Okeke, 2022; Suazo-Galdames, Saracostti and Chaple-Gil, 2025).
6. **Sound records and repositories.** Using the libraries, records and website as the Commission's institutional memory, with current content and attention to electronic records (Tsvuura and Ngulube, 2021; Mutsagondo and Ngulube, 2021).
7. **Technology after process and governance.** Digital tools and artificial intelligence should follow clear processes and governance, not substitute for them (Alvarenga *et al.*, 2020; Gelashvili-Luik, Vihma and Pappel, 2025).
8. **Regular review.** Periodic assessment of how well knowledge is managed, in the way the reformed grading system now provides for annual and biennial audits.

Advocacy Message: Key Takeaways for PSC Employees

- **Knowledge belongs to the Commission, not only to individuals.** What you know about your work is an institutional asset.
- **Write down the reasoning.** A decision recorded without its reasons is easily repeated or reversed by the next officer.
- **Share what you know before you move.** Mentor, hand over and document.
- **Use what the Commission already knows.** Consult the libraries, circulars and website before starting afresh.
- **Contribute.** Submit your department's reports, research and lessons for the PSC Libraries and the website.

Discussion Questions

- Which knowledge in our department would be hardest to replace if the officers who hold it left tomorrow?
- How do we currently record the reasons behind our decisions, and where are those records kept?
- What would it take for departments to share lessons learned with one another routinely?

Conclusion

Knowledge in a public institution is created, held and lost at the level of people, processes and records. The literature from South Africa, the wider SADC region, Nigeria, Kenya and Europe shows the same barriers and the same benefits, and the Commission's own job evaluation reform shows what is at stake when the reasoning behind a framework fades. Managing knowledge deliberately, by capturing what is explicit and drawing out what is tacit, supports consistent advice, transparency and better service delivery. The responsibility for this rests with the whole Commission.

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