



The development of an employee value proposition framework for the South African water board sector



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Orientation: The South African water board sector plays an essential role in providing water and basic sanitary needs to the country. Yet the sector faces drastic talent shortages required to deliver its service mandate.

Research purpose: The primary purpose of this study was to develop an employee value proposition (EVP) framework for the South African water board sector.

Motivation for the study: Research on EVPs within the public sector is scarce. Employee value propositions are essential to attract, engage and retain scarce skills.

Research approach, design and method: A qualitative research approach was followed. Semistructured interviews were used to collect the data from talent management stakeholders from nine water boards ($n = 9$). A constructive grounded theory method was applied to analyse the data.

Main findings: The findings showed that EVPs received limited priority within the water board sector. The water board sector offered various financial awards, benefits, training and development opportunities to employees. In addition, the participants perceived a positive institutional culture and employment brand. The water boards thus already had fundamental building blocks available to integrate into a compelling EVP.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings of this research emphasise the importance of management commitment towards creating a compelling EVP that will attract and retain those talented individuals who are of value to the strategy implementation of the South African water boards sector.

Contributions/value-add: This research presents an original EVP framework that can be used as a guideline to manage workplace talent more effectively to achieve strategic government objectives.

Keywords: employee value proposition; training and development; talent attraction; talent retention; water board sector.

Introduction

Talent management in the South African public sector continues to be an area of great concern (Lee, 2020; Mabope, 2018). Koketso and Rust (2012) summarised the talent management dilemma in the South African public sector as being:

[F]aced with a serious challenge of service delivery. Research points to a plethora of problems in the public service that lead to failure to deliver services to the local population. One of the problems emanating from research is poor talent management strategies that fail to retain key public service talent. (p. 1)

Follow-up studies support this assertion by revealing that public sector talent management practices receive low priority and lack of leadership commitment; they are haphazard, scattered and reactive, marked by inferior workforce planning and talent retention strategies (Lee, 2020; Lesenyeh, 2017; Mshengu, 2015; Shabane, 2017). The Public Service Commission (2021) acknowledged that poor people management skills and practices, budgetary constraints, a lack of training and development and the inability to attract and retain scarce skills limit public sector institutions from effectively delivering their various service mandates. Consequently, the need exists to implement effective talent management practices to attract, engage and retain those talented individuals who can be of value to public sector service performance (Onwugbolu & Mutambara, 2021).

The main objective of this research was to develop an employee value proposition (EVP) (hereafter referred to as EVP) framework for the South African water board sector to support the attraction and retention of key talent. The following main question guides our research:

What can be regarded as a framework for formulating and implementing an Employee Value Proposition to successfully attract, engage and retain current and future employees with critical scarce skills in the statutory water board sector in South Africa?

More specifically, this research addresses the following specific research questions:

- To what extent do water boards adopt and implement an EVP?
- What are the attributes of a compelling EVP for the water board sector?
- How can an EVP support the employment brand of the water board sector?

Apart from the challenges created by an ageing infrastructure and a lack of adequate funding for maintenance (Wall & Rust, 2017), the water services sector in South Africa appears to have ineffective talent management procedures. More than a decade ago, Karar and Pietersen (2009) found that South Africa lacked the human ability to absorb the breakthroughs in science and technology required to deal with the complex linkages between the hydrological cycle and societal requirements. In 2008, an estimated 1000 engineers, 300 technicians and 15000 artisans were required to reduce the national skills shortage (Karar & Pietersen, 2009, p. 6). Since then, this situation has not improved. The government sector's engineering abilities have reached a new low with barely 1800 engineers across government and over 1000 engineering positions unfilled (Landelahni Business Leaders Amrop SA, 2012). Similarly, Frankson (2016) states that South Africa has a persistent deficit of municipal engineers. According to the Municipal Benchmarking Initiative Report, South Africa lacked 10% of the required number of engineers to adequately run its municipal water networks (Frankson, 2016).

Meyer (2009) warned that the water sector's continued scarce skills shortfall poses a threat to meeting water and sanitation delivery and compliance targets (service delivery) and implementing sustainable water resource management. Even though skills and capacity are essential for the government's National Water Resource Strategy implementation, any efforts to alleviate the skills gap appear to have had little impact (Wall & Rust, 2017). Therefore, the skills scarcity is likely to worsen (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019).

Despite the prominence given to the strategic importance of EVPs and talent value propositions (hereafter referred to as TVPs' see Paadi, Barkhuizen, & Swanepoel, 2019; Saurombe, 2017), most statutory water boards appear to lack an EVP framework to guide the effective talent management of employees (Molobye, 2021). This study intends to fill the knowledge and empirical gap about the utility of an EVP in the water board sector and its implementation.

This article is structured as follows. Firstly, a literature review is presented on the concept of EVPs, their attributes and their

role in fostering an attractive workplace. Thereafter, the research design adopted for the study is described, followed by a presentation of the findings. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion of the findings, their limitations and recommendations for future research and practice.

Literature review

Defining an employee value proposition

The literature review reveals that the concept 'EVP' still escapes a standard definition. Authors often have a preconceived idea of what the construct should encompass, which leads to conflicting conceptualisations and poor talent management practice (Wiblen & McDonnell, 2020). The following is a summary from the existing literature (varying in complexity and depth) indicating that the term EVP could be used to describe:

- the rewards and benefits that an employee receives in return for their performance in the workplace (Dhamija, 2015)
- what prospective or existing employees value and will persuade them to join or remain with the business (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014)
- the degree or extent of restitution and gains that staff members enjoy in return for their effort at their workplace (Castaneda, 2014)
- what an organisation has to offer, what prospective or existing employees would value and which would help to persuade them to join or remain with the business (Armstrong, 2012)
- the sum of all the rewards offered by the organisation, both monetary and nonmonetary, in exchange for membership in the organisation and employee effort and performance (Ledford, 2013)
- an orderly system through which talent, internal brand, engagement, work, leadership, recognition, rewards and behaviours are interweaved together with other components to attract, retain and engage employees (Zinger, 2013)
- the unique array of reward features, benefits and advantages of employment that the organisation has to offer to employees and applicants, which are reflected in an organisation's EVP that is compiled by systematically equating and incorporating the aspects that initially draw and maintain the current workforce, emphasising the uniqueness of each organisation's EVP and the opportunity to differentiate the organisation from its competitors (Ferreira, 2016)
- the value a company offers to employees in return for the value they bring to the organisation is the benefits and rewards provided to employees in return for their commitment and the skills and capabilities they bring to the organisation (Bates, 2019)
- the extent to which an organisation can associate itself with an employee and the 'give and get' that result from the employment contract (Pawar, 2018).

Based on recurring ideas and themes in the above descriptions, the current researchers propose the following working definition of EVP for the present study:

A differentiating, integrated and valued set of monetary and nonmonetary rewards, benefits and experiences that an organisation offers to attract, engage and retain existing and prospective employees in return for their effort and performance in the workplace.

According to De La Haye (2019), the objectives of an EVP include:

- attracting more applications from the best candidates
- persuading those candidates to join a particular employer rather than take an offer from a competitor
- retaining such talent for more extended time periods and reduce staff turnover
- reducing recruitment costs.

It is worth mentioning that EVPs are often confused with the concept of TVP. According to Reilly and Williams (2012), EVP is an articulation or reflection of what is offered to the workforce. Stephenson (2010) views a TVP as a combination of social capital (i.e. knowledge transfer) and human capital (i.e. skills, talents and experience) required to enhance talent performance. As a result, a TVP focuses on employees' specific, vital and scarce skill sets. In addition, the TVP strengthens an EVP by successfully engaging and maintaining a high-performing, world-class staff base to deliver excellent customer services (Conklyn & Robles, 2010).

Abbott (2019) concludes that an EVP is rooted in the reality of an organisation's daily work activities to successfully attract and retain people with the future skills essential for strategy implementation. Finally, Arasanmi and Krishna (2019) found that the EVP is an essential catalyst for organisational commitment and organisational citizenship amongst employees. One can therefore conclude that an EVP has multilevel benefits for organisations.

Attributes of an employee value proposition

According to Mosley (2014), an EVP reflects employees' attributes necessary to link themselves with a company. Therefore, the workplace qualities that talented employees value should be included in an organisation's EVP to encourage them to join or stay with that organisation (Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). Conversely, inadequate or improper EVP traits will result in organisations failing to separate themselves from their competition; therefore, it is critical to identify those EVP attributes (Abbott, 2019).

Saurombe (2017) found that organisational and employment brand components are essential in promoting a compelling TVP for the public sector. Organisational brand components included work and surrounding environment, reputation and image, organisational culture and identity and strategic vision. Employment brand components include compensation and benefits, leadership and managerial support, occupational health and safety, performance management and development, job security and work-life balance.

A follow-up study by Mokgojwa (2019) confirmed that public sector organisations face significant talent culture and occupational talent risks because of inadequate implementation or the absence of organisational and employment brand characteristics. Paadi et al. (2019) found that public sector graduate interns regard functional, financial and psychological workplace aspects as essential to attract them to an employer of choice. *Functional* aspects included training and development, mentorship guidance, leave and insurance. *Financial* aspects included a stipend, travel allowance and pay for overtime work. The psychological components included interpersonal relationships with mentors and wellness. All combined, properly assembled EVPs are multifaceted and include tangible and nontangible elements.

An exhaustive analysis of the available literature revealed that at least four criteria underpin an EVP: compensation, benefits, corporate culture and career development (see Abbott, 2019; De La Haye, 2019; Dinnen & Alder, 2013; Tribulkina, 2018). These traits are also known as *attractiveness dimensions* (Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, & Schoonderbeek, 2013), *key drivers* (Lawler, 2017), *basic aspects* (Bates, 2019) or *EVP building blocks* (Abbott, 2019). Below is a brief discussion of each of these components in the context of an EVP.

Compensation

Compensation remains one of the most important factors for attracting and retaining talented employees (Al Rina & Atan, 2020). Patnaik and Padhi (2012) view compensation as a systematic process that provides monetary value to employees in exchange for work performed. A study by Van Der Merwe (2012) showed that remuneration is critical in aligning the EVP with the organisation's strategy. Styško-Kunkowska and Kwinta (2020) found that prospective employees would choose a weak employment brand with an attractive salary rather than a compelling employer brand with a poor salary. Schlecter, Hung and Bussin (2014) revealed that high remuneration and variable pay were significant job attraction factors. According to Reddy (2021), a well-assembled compensation system complemented by an effective reward system is a critical determinant for retaining talented employees. Luna-Arocas and Lara (2020) found that pay satisfaction contributes to employees' loyalty.

Benefits

Employee benefits aim to provide holistic well-being and security for the workforce and their employees by including aspects such as health and welfare, income protection, financial preparedness, retirement and time off, including leaves of absence (World at Work Total Rewards Association, 2020). Schlechter, Thompson and Bussin (2015) showed that nonfinancial rewards such as work-life balance, learning and career advancement contributed significantly to employees' perceived job attractiveness. Mabaso (2015) discovered that leave (i.e. vacation, sick and study leave), medical aid and provident or pension funds are essential to attracting and retaining a public higher education

institution. Similarly, Makhuzeni and Barkhuizen (2015) found that benefits such as sick leave, study leave and paid public holidays contributed to teachers' willingness to remain within their jobs. More importantly, Nthebe, Barkhuizen and Schutte (2016) showed that a total rewards system, including benefits, reduces leadership burnout and enhances service performance. Yamamoto (2011) found that introducing many employee benefits practices (i.e. housing, medical care, childcare support, monetary aid for celebrations and condolences, leisure) and improved job satisfaction improved the retention of employees.

Talent development

Talent development and opportunities for career development are frequently cited as important considerations for prospective employees to seek employment at an organisation (Mohammed, 2018; Mohammed, Hafeez-Baig, & Gururajan, 2019). According to Hedge and Rineer (2017), career pathway systems can assist organisations in developing employees strategically by equipping them with the employability skills required to retain them. Amushila and Bussin (2021) found that a lack of career development opportunities is one of the main reasons employees leave their jobs in a public higher education institution. Lesenyeho, Barkhuizen and Schutte (2018) revealed that intellectual stimulation and opportunities to apply acquired skills are key talent attrition factors for early-career public sector academics. In particular, the competence development of Generation Y employees enhances their organisational commitment and their intention to remain in their jobs (Naim & Lenka, 2018). A recent study by Moloby (2021) amongst South African water boards highlighted the need for talent stakeholders and decision-makers to apply talent metrics, analytics and return on investment methodologies to obtain the maximum benefits from talent management initiatives such as talent development interventions that are implemented.

Corporate culture

The relationship between organisational culture and employee brand value is well established (Keino, Gachunga, & Ogollah, 2017). According to Barbados (2020), a compelling EVP involves a holistic approach between employer branding, organisational attractiveness and company culture. Masale, Barkhuizen and Schutte (2021, p. 3) define organisational talent culture as a 'workplace underpinned by the values that talented employees can relate to, enabling them to flourish and make a valuable contribution through optimal performance to achieve strategic institutional objectives'. According to Štřiteská and Sein (2021), successful public sector institutions are characterised by a culture of effectively implemented measurement and management systems, strong performance-driven leadership, constructive performance management reviews, discussions and feedback and reward systems. A study by Kontoghiorghes (2016) showed that high-performance cultures that are strategically aligned have a significant impact on talent attraction and retention. Kontoghiorghes (2016) further emphasised that a culture driven by change, quality and technology and

supported by core values such as respect and integrity will likely result in higher talent attraction and retention.

Although there will be similarities between the attributes in the EVPs of different organisations, Zoe (2018) insists that every organisation's EVP should be characterised by a unique combination of attributes and a uniquely conceptualised version or presentation of each attribute. Therefore, every organisation should develop and implement its EVP with attributes reflecting its distinctive circumstances and articulating its attractiveness to existing and prospective employees. The four key attributes mentioned above are regarded as generic because it is assumed that many organisations could, to a greater or lesser extent, use them as points of departure in the development of an EVP.

The role of employee value proposition in employer branding

Employer branding is focused on building the employer's brand name in the job market (Parmar, 2014). Harris and Short (2014) observe that whilst organisations have long used marketing and branding practices to engender customer loyalty, they are increasingly expanding this activity to differentiate organisations and make them attractive from an employee perspective. Therefore, the employer brand experience also represents a relationship with existing and prospective employees (Morgan, 2017). The extent to which both management and employees are 'living' the organisation's brand directly impacts how prospective employees perceive the organisation's attractiveness as a prospective employer (Collings, Scullion, & Caligiuri, 2019). According to Elving et al. (2013), target audiences are more likely to join prospective employers when they positively experience their corporate and employment brand. Likewise, Wolfswinkel and Enslin (2020) found that corporate brands can dominate talent attraction and retention as potential talented employees are lured to be purpose-driven and commercially successful brands.

The development of an employer brand is driven by each organisation's unique and distinctive strategy and the type of talent required (Lawler, 2017). Consequently, there is no common classification of employer brand attributes (Kuchero & Zavyalova, 2012). However, Yates and Sejen (2011) and Bach and Edwards (2013) argue that an organisation's employer brand must be aligned with its corporate brand to attract and retain talent. An employer brand supports the organisation's strategy by attracting and retaining the key employees required to implement the business strategy (Lawler, 2017).

Therefore, the EVP should form the *basis* for an organisation's employer brand (Bates, 2019). Yates and Sejen (2011) maintain that an organisation's EVP should *underpin* its employer brand and that an employer brand should be *positioned* on a preceding EVP. Tribulkina (2018) also claims that two essential elements create a strong employer brand: EVP and employment experience. Therefore, offering a unique, differentiating,

credible, enticing and engaging employment experience to current and potential employees is also a decisive success factor in successful employer branding (Parmar, 2014).

Research design

Research approach and philosophy

In this study, the researchers selected a qualitative research method as it is well suited to comprehending a phenomenon with little information accessible (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Qualitative research is based on constructivist theory in that reality is a multilayer, interactive, shared social experience that individuals interpret (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2006). People build structures to make sense of their surroundings, and these structures are organised as views, perceptions and belief systems. Therefore, constructivism is a philosophical school or paradigm that underpins the targeted research in this study. The constructivist paradigm is defined by Bryman and Bell (2014) as the belief that neither reality nor knowledge exist objectively or externally to the researcher but rather are subjective. Individual and social viewpoints, perceptions, experiences and interactions are used to develop reality and knowledge inductively and continually. As a result, reality constantly changes, and different subjective realities coexist.

A constructivist grounded theory research design was applied in this study. According to Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theorists have a broad research design definition which is not viewed as a single, predefined blueprint that directs the execution of a study from beginning to end. The researcher does not entirely predetermine it at the beginning of a study. Instead, researchers are urged to start with a rudimentary and indefinite research design, which is subsequently improved and polished as the study advances (Charmaz, 2014). Bryant and Chamaz (2019) caution that a researcher's openness and flexibility and the execution of imaginative interpretivism and constructivist approaches to theory creation could be hampered by tight adherence to a predefined and inflexible design.

Against this background, it is assumed that there is no single, universally accepted and rigid reality or body of knowledge when implementing talent management and EVPs in water boards. The researchers further argue that the subjective reality and knowledge of senior managers responsible for talent management and EVPs in water boards (who will eventually be used as research participants) will differ significantly. Such differences are based on the varying and fluctuating individual perspectives, interpretations, experiences and interactions of the managers concerned.

Research setting

According to Given (2008), a research setting is a physical, social, cultural or historical context, place or environment in which a researcher conducts a study. The current study's research setting included the nine statutory water boards' administrative and operational environments in South Africa.

Sample

The sample for this study included individuals representative of nine water boards in South Africa. The participants were purposively selected based on their experience in human resource management and talent management. As shown in Table 1, female participants made up most of the research participants (five out of the nine). The average age of the nine participants was 54.5 years. Although their job descriptions differ, all participants were responsible for human resources and talent management at a senior level in their respective water boards' organisational hierarchies. Using such key informants is a critical requirement when a relatively small sample is used in a study following a constructivist grounded theory design. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Data analyses and coding

Data coding is the key process in grounded theory, and data is collected and analysed almost concurrently (Halaweh, 2012). Corbin and Strauss (2015) describe coding as classifying and categorising data segments into codes, categories and relationships. Evans (2013) observes that the process and methods for coding have created a high level of debate amongst grounded theory users. Each core model of grounded theory incorporates and advocates its coding techniques. Classical grounded theory's coding process uses two coding levels (substantive and theoretical). In contrast, three types of coding are proposed in Straussian grounded theory (open, axial and selective) and constructivist grounded theory (initial, focused and theoretical). The present study also followed the above approach.

Entreé and establishing research roles

The principal researcher received authorisation from the nine South African statutory water boards' top managers in human resources and talent management. The research participants were given an official letter describing the study's goal. In addition, the study participants completed an informed consent statement stating their desire to take part in the research. North-West University granted ethical approval before the start of the research. The researchers followed all study ethics guidelines for qualitative research, such as data collecting confidentiality and transparency.

Ensuring the quality and rigour of the research

According to Cohen, Manion and Morisson (2018), the standard criteria for assessing the quality and rigour of qualitative research include the following: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The term 'credibility' refers to the study participants' perception of the study's findings as true or believable. *Transferability* is achieved if the findings of a qualitative study are transferable to other similar settings. *Dependability* refers to whether the process of selecting, justifying and applying research strategies, procedures and methods is clearly explained, and its effectiveness is evaluated by the researcher and confirmed

TABLE 1: Biographical overview of the research participants.

Water board	Gender	Age	Position or job title	Years in current position	Years in HR/ TM environment	Highest tertiary qualifications obtained
P1	Female	50	Executive manager: corporate services (to whom the HR Department reports)	2	26	PG dip HRM
P2	Female	58	Executive: HR	18	18	Master's
P3	Male	65	Manager: HR	18	18	Bachelor's
P4	Female	41	Manager: human capital	15 months	10	Honours
P5	Male	60	General manager: corporate services (to whom the HR Department reports)	8	20	Master's
P6	Female	53	Manager: HR	3	14	Master's
P7	Female	50	TM consultant	3	15	Master's
P8	Male	53	Executive: HR	19	27	Postgraduate diploma
P9	Male	61	Senior HR manager	10	20	Master's

HR, human resources; TM, talent management; HRM, human resources management; PG dip, postgraduate diploma.

by an auditor. Finally, a study enjoys *confirmability* when its findings are based on the analysis of the collected data and grounded in the data and inferences based on the data (see Bryman & Bell, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018; Yilmaz, 2013).

Findings

The key findings of the research are presented in the section that follows. The findings demonstrate a focused coding grid, supported by direct quotes from the participants. Three main themes emerged from the data, which are supported by subthemes.

Theme one: Prevailing employee value proposition

This theme focused on whether an EVP has been developed for the respective water boards. Most respondents indicated that they had not developed an EVP from the participant responses. However, the minority of the participants indicated that they are either planning to develop an EVP or currently developing an EVP or have developed an EVP. The findings are reported in Table 2.

Some examples of verbatim responses supporting the constructed subcategories:

'No, we do not have an EVP guide. However, we have a staff attraction and retention policy that provides a framework for attracting and retaining talent within the organisation.' (P8, male, 53 years old, human resources executive, 27 years work experience, postgraduate diploma).

'This is work in progress, as a retention policy is in approval stages and will give rise to the relevant strategy and plans. The organisation has not formally developed an EVP. The organisation is currently under a turnaround strategic period, and an EVP is planned to be developed in the growth phase of the turnaround plan.' (P5, male, 60 years old, general manager, 20 years work experience in human resource management [HRM], master's)

TABLE 2: Focused coding for employee value proposition.

Constructed category: Prevailing employee value proposition	Research participant or water board								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Constructed subcategories									
Have not developed an EVP	-	-	x	x	-	x	-	x	x
Planning to develop an EVP	-	-	-	-	x	-	-	-	-
In process of developing an EVP	x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Have developed an EVP	-	x	-	-	-	-	x	-	-

EVP, employee value proposition.

Theme 2: Practices relating to the attributes of an employee value proposition

This theme indicates the practices that should form part of a compelling EVP within the water boards. Four subthemes were identified: compensation practices, benefits, career development opportunities, work satisfaction and positive corporate culture. The findings are reported below.

Subtheme 1: Compensation practices

The findings in Table 3 show that the water boards apply various compensation practices (i.e. financial reward practices). All the water board companies pay competitive, market-related and flexible salaries and contribute to medical aid and retirement, provident and pension funds. The water board companies furthermore pay performance bonuses and overtime. Other financial rewards included membership fees of professional bodies paid by employers and a group insurance scheme for death and disability financial benefits.

Some examples of verbatim responses supporting the constructed subcategories:

'Above market-related salaries; scarce skills allowance; performance bonus, medical aid, retirement fund and group life as well as housing allowance, 13th cheque.' (P5, male, 60 years old, general manager, 20 years work experience in HRM, master's)

'Basic salary, annual and performance bonuses, housing allowance, travel allowance, medical aid subsidy, long service rewards, group insurance, retirement benefits.' (P1, female, 50 years old, executive manager, 26 years work experience in HRM, PG diploma)

'Accommodation to operations employees; transport for employees and their dependents; performance bonus; housing allowance; high employer contribution towards provident fund; generous medical aid employer contribution.' (P9, male, 61 years old, senior HR manager, 20 years work experience in HRM, master's)

'Salary, annual and performance bonuses, vehicle allowance, cell phone allowance, medical aid subsidy, bursary and study loan scheme, death and disability benefits, retirement benefits and post-retirement medical aid, housing at some remote plants and transport to some remote plants, funeral scheme.' (P3, female, 65 years old, manager, 18 years work experience in HRM, bachelor's)

Subtheme 2: Benefits (nonfinancial rewards)

The findings in Table 4 show that the water board companies consider various benefits to attract and retain employees. The benefits that were primarily applied across the water boards

TABLE 3: Focused coding for prevailing compensation practices.

Constructed category: Prevailing compensation practices (financial reward)	Research participant or water board								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Constructed subcategories									
Relocation subsidy or allowance when accepting employment	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Competitive, market-related and flexible salaries	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
In-employment medical aid contributions paid by employer	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Post-employment (retirement) medical benefits funded by employer	-	x	x	-	-	x	-	-	-
Membership of a retirement or provident fund	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pension or provident fund contributions paid by employer	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Performance bonuses	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Overtime payment	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Standby or shift allowances	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Housing allowances	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cell phone allowances	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Car allowances	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	-
Travel allowances	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
13th cheque payments	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Bursaries or study loans to employees	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Student loans to the children of employees	x	-	x	-	-	-	-	-	-
Membership fees of professional bodies paid by employer	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Subsidised canteen services	x	-	x	-	-	-	x	-	-
Long service financial rewards	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	-	-
Pension-backed lending facility for housing purposes	-	x	x	x	-	-	x	x	-
Leave encashment	x	x	x	x	-	-	x	x	-
Transfer subsidy or allowance when existing employees are transferred to another location within the operational area of the organisation	x	x	x	-	x	x	-	-	x
Funeral scheme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Group insurance scheme in terms of death and disability financial benefits	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Scarce skills allowance	-	x	-	-	x	-	x	-	-
Subsidised transport service for employees without car or travel allowance	-	-	x	x	x	x	-	x	x
Subsidised housing or accommodation facilities	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x
Corporate clothing allowance	-	-	x	-	-	-	x	x	x

included: leave options (i.e. annual, sick, compassionate, special, study, long service, maternity and paternity leave), networking opportunities (i.e. conferences, seminars, workshops), opportunities to register with professional bodies, employee assistance and health promotion programmes.

Some examples of verbatim responses supporting the constructed subcategories:

'Employee wellness programme, long service leave, long service awards.' (P6, male, 53 years old, general manager, 14 years work experience in HRM, master's)

'Leave benefits (annual, sick, compassionate, special, study, maternity and paternity leave); long service leave; long service recognition awards.' (P3, female, 65 years old, manager, 18 years work experience in HRM, bachelor's)

TABLE 4: Focused coding for prevailing benefit practices.

Constructed category: Prevailing benefit practices (nonfinancial reward)	Research participant/water board								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Constructed subcategories									
Leave provisions (annual, sick, compassionate, special, study, long service, maternity and paternity leave)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Opportunities to attend career related conferences, symposiums or workshops; present papers at local and international conferences, seminars or workshops and publish research in accredited journals	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Opportunities to register with statutory professional bodies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Flexible working hours	-	-	x	-	-	-	-	x	-
Opportunities for secondments, job rotation and reassignment	x	-	x	-	x	-	x	x	-
Year-end peer and organisational recognition (for example, excellence awards and ceremonies recognising and acknowledging individual employees and teams for their outstanding contributions, behaviour or long service)	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	-	-
Year-end peer and organisational recognition for those employees who successfully completed trade or academic-related qualifications during a particular year (e.g. a career development gala event where certificates are presented)	x	-	x	-	-	-	x	x	-
Provision for social clubs or activities	x	-	-	-	x	-	-	-	-
Access to gymnasia, sports or recreation facilities	x	-	x	x	-	-	x	-	-
Access to on-site clinics or medical facilities	x	-	-	-	x	-	x	x	-
Initiatives to actively promote work-life balance	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-
Employee assistance and wellness programmes providing counselling and support to employees regarding issues related to financial challenges, family problems, depression, stress, legal advice, trauma, etc.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Voluntary and free health screening opportunities (hypertension, diabetes, HIV, TB, etc.)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Further health promotion through workshops, information sessions, events, road shows, etc. aligned with the local and international health calendar of events (World AIDS Day, Mental Health Month, etc.)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-

In support, participants 2 and 5 also highlighted leave benefits.

'Leave (annual, sick, compassionate, special, study), employee wellness programme (psychosocial and physical counselling). It is worth mentioning that these benefits accrue to all employees at all levels.' (P2, female, 50 years old, executive manager, 18 years work experience in HRM, master's)

'Benefits include: generous leave; an integrated health and wellness programme that supports and promotes a healthy lifestyle and work-life balance (including an on-site clinic, as well as sporting and recreational facilities); peer-to-peer recognition and excellence awards; opportunity to attend conferences [or] symposiums and present papers, opportunities to register with a professional body linked to the employee's specialisation – yearly membership paid by the organisation.' (P7, female, 50 years old, consultant, 15 years work experience in HRM, master's)

Subtheme 3: Career development practices

Table 5 shows that all the water board companies are implementing organisational training and development programmes, including workplace plans and annual training

TABLE 5: Focused coding for career development practices.

Constructed category: Prevailing career development practices	Research participant/water board								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Constructed subcategories									
Conducting of periodic skills audits	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	x
Implementing of an overall organisational training and development plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Implementing of a workplace skills plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Implementing of an annual training plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Implementing of a formal and overall talent management plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	-	-	x	-	-
Implementing of individual or personal career path development plans, strategies, policies or programmes for employees	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Implementing of a succession plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Implementing of a performance management plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	x	x
Offering a bursary, study loan or study assistance scheme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Implementing of a plan, strategy, policy or programme specifically aimed at the retention of employees with critical scarce skills	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Implementing of an internship plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Implementing of a graduate development plan, strategy, policy or programme	-	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Implementing of an apprenticeship or artisan development plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-
Collaborating with external training institutions or providers to present Workplace Integrated Learning opportunities for students	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Providing access to continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities by means of attending workshops, seminars, conferences, refresher courses, etc.	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	-
Implementing of an adult (basic) education and training plan, strategy, policy or programme	-	x	-	-	-	x	x	-	-
Implementing of a management or leadership development plan, strategy, policy or programme	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-
Operating a forum or platform for young professionals to cultivate professional development, leadership, etc. amongst the organisation's younger employees	x	x	-	x	-	-	x	-	x
Offering bursaries to deserving external students (not employees) to further their studies at the tertiary level with regard to qualifications relevant to the water services sector	x	-	x	-	-	x	x	x	-
Participation in career shows, expos, exhibitions, projects, etc. to encourage school learners to consider studying towards qualifications that will enable employment in the water services sector	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-
Implementing of a plan, strategy, policy or programme to monitor and manage employee absenteeism	x	x	-	x	-	x	x	x	x

plans, strategies and policies. The training programmes are primarily focused on the employability skills required to attract and retain employees. Other development opportunities

also focused on investing in early career staff through bursaries, learnerships, graduate internship programmes and work-integrated learning. Finally, the respective water board companies also participate in the career empowerment of communities by participating in career projects that encourage school learners to study towards qualifications that enable employment in the water services sector.

Some examples of verbatim responses supporting the constructed subcategories:

'We do have a staff attraction and retention policy which provides a framework for attracting and retaining talent within the organisation.' (P8, male, 53 years old, HR executive, 27 years work experience, postgraduate diploma)

'There is a comprehensive training and development policy, and needs are prioritised based on succession plans and critical skills retention. The organisation makes use of the personal development plans wherein the employee and supervisor discuss training and skills needs as well as career development aspirations.' (P5, Male, 60 years old, General manager, 20 years work experience in human resource management, Masters degree)

'All employees in the organisation are trained on their current positions and provided with development opportunities to be equipped with requisite skills to succeed in higher graded posts that become vacant in the organisation. Skilled people are recruited, and retention strategies and programs to improve necessary skills are implemented. Also, internship programmes and apprenticeship programmes are also put in place to provide the required skills for the organisation. Succession plans are developed for all critical posts in the organisation to ensure that skills pools are created at various levels. Employees are offered bursaries or study loans to further their studies at tertiary level. Bursaries that are allocated are informed by the organisation's succession plan.' (P3, female, 65 years old, manager, 18 years work experience in HRM, bachelor's)

'A personal development plan completed yearly allows employees the opportunity to plan their growth and development aligned to their specific needs whilst also adding and creating value for the organisation through ROI; opportunities to study further are fully funded; opportunities for mobility are created through our technical career path progression, which is aimed at core roles within the operations portfolio; accelerated leadership development programmes are presented through identified and specific leadership interventions that support the organisation's succession management process to drive talent mobility for those critical roles.' (P7, female, 50 years old, consultant, 15 years work experience in HRM, master's)

Subtheme 4: Factors contributing towards a positive corporate culture

Table 6 reports on the factors contributing to a positive corporate culture. The factors identified by the research participants which contribute most towards a positive corporate culture in the water board sector are related to transparency when it comes to management and board decisions. Other aspects included that opportunities for open and two-way communication between executive

TABLE 6: Factors contributing towards a positive corporate culture.

Constructed category: Prevailing factors contributing towards a positive corporate culture	Research participant or water board								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Constructed subcategories									
Employees must personally identify with and embrace shared work ethics, values and constructive attitudes	x	x	-	x	-	-	x	x	-
Appropriate management and leadership styles are necessary to promote a positive and constructive corporate culture	x	x	-	x	x	-	-	x	-
Opportunities for open and two-way communication between executive management and employees must be created and sustained	x	x	-	x	x	-	x	x	-
Opportunities for open and two-way communication between the board of directors and employees must be created and sustained	x	x	-	x	-	-	-	-	-
Deliberate and continuous efforts to enhance employee engagement are necessary	x	x	-	-	x	-	x	x	x
Managers and employees must work and plan together in order to enhance operational efficiency and joint problem-solving	x	x	-	-	x	-	x	x	x
Employees must experience a sense of belonging	x	x	-	-	-	x	x	x	x
Transparency when it comes to management and board decisions and practices is required	x	x	-	x	x	-	x	x	x

management and employees must be created and sustained; managers and employees working and planning together to enhance operational efficiency and joint problem-solving; deliberate and continuous efforts to enhance employee engagement are necessary; and a sense of belonging. The participants also highlighted the importance of being able to identify personally with and embrace shared work ethics, values and constructive attitudes. Further emphasis was placed on appropriate management and leadership styles to promote a positive and constructive corporate culture.

Some examples of verbatim responses supporting the constructed subcategories:

'Management style and board commitment (meeting with employees annually at least).' (P4, female, 41 years old, manager, 10 years work experience in HRM, honours degree)

'There must be open communication and that is encouraged, as well as numerous platforms of engagement between management and employees.' (P5, male, 60 years old, general manager, 20 years work experience in HRM, master's)

Participant 2 mentioned:

'A two-way relationship creates a healthy corporate culture. This means managers and employees should inculcate the culture of planning together and working with one another (joint problem-solving) for the good of the organisation.' (P2, female, 50 years old, executive manager, 18 years work experience in HRM, master's)

'A sense of belonging is required, which will retain employees, and if found by employees, they will see the water board as a good organisation to work for.' (P6, male, 53 years old, general manager, 14 years work experience in HRM, master's)

TABLE 7: Reputation as an employer in the talent marketplace.

Constructed category: Reputation as an employer in the talent market place	Research participant or water board								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Constructed subcategories									
The water board has a positive reputation as an employer in the talent market place	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	-
The water board does not have a positive reputation as an employer in the talent market place	-	-	-	-	-	x	-	-	x

'It is all about a shared belief system, values and attitude, and this is a differentiator from one organisation to another. A company can create a strong culture and employees who believe in its products, customers, systems and processes through its deeply held assumptions and beliefs. By subscribing to its philosophy, the organisation becomes part of the employees' own identity.' (P7, female, 50 years old, consultant, 15 years work experience in HRM, master's)

Theme 3: Reputation as an employer in the talent marketplace

The findings of the waterboard's reputation as an employer in the talent marketplace are reported in Table 7. The third and final theme evolves around the water boards' reputation as an employer of choice. The researchers were interested in how the water board company's image is being observed and whether individuals will consider the water board as a prospective employer based on its brand perspective.

From the comments provided by the research participants, the following could also be established as reasons why some of the research participants think their water boards have positive reputations as employers:

'[Water Board A] ... as brand stands out high because of how we treat employees, integrity and corporate governance being held in high esteem.' (P1, female, 50 years old, executive manager, 26 years work experience in HRM, PG diploma)

'The water board has a good reputation for consistent delivery on its core mandate and is regarded by experts in the sector as leading in the water space; it has a long history and wealth of skills.' (P5, male, 60 years old, general manager, 20 years work experience in HRM, master's)

'This year we were awarded an unqualified audit opinion by AGSA. We are known for our expertise in bulk water supply and effluent disposal. Our brand is also enhanced by us acquiring broadcast slots on various radio stations to update the public about our business activities in our area of supply, as well as regular stakeholder engagements, etc.' (P8, male, 53 years old, HR executive, 27 years work experience, postgraduate diploma).

'... [A]s a brand provides the following that attracts those scarce critical skills including those elements mentioned in your earlier questions. These are: caring for our employees and ensuring that they feel valued, appreciated and trusted; honesty and fairness in the way we treat our employees; organisational culture that espouses a healthy and productive environment; performance – employees productively contribute in meeting organisational objectives; mentoring and coaching to create an environment

and organisation that is consistently learning and developing to meet the challenges of the globalised world; ethics and integrity is being practised ... is doing and has been practising these principles for a long time and these inform our values and belief as an organisation.' (P7, female, 50 years old, consultant, 15 years work experience in HRM, master's)

Discussion

The main objective of this research was to develop a framework that could guide the implementation of an EVP within the South African water boards. More specifically, the study explores whether the water boards have developed and implemented an EVP, the determinants of such an EVP and the role of EVPs in enhancing the organisation's employment brand.

According to the findings of this study, the vast majority of water boards lack an EVP. These findings support the global shortage of well-defined and visible EVPs. Employee value propositions are also necessary for talent plan implementation (see Abbott, 2019) and attracting and retaining the vital skills required for long-term water board service delivery (see Frankson, 2016; Wall & Rust, 2017). Some respondents cited the existence of talent attraction and retention policies and tactics that could help create a compelling EVP at work (see De La Haye, 2019).

Compensation was seen as an essential aspect of the EVP by the participants. Based on the participants' reactions, the water boards had a well-assembled compensation system with various incentive techniques to attract and retain key personnel (see Reddy, 2021). Competitive and market-related pay, 13th cheques and performance bonuses were amongst the prevalent practices cited. Regardless of brand strength (Stysko-Kunkowska & Kwinta, 2020), high salary levels and other variable pay possibilities are vital to attracting people (Schlechter et al., 2014). According to Van Der Merwe (2012), remuneration is essential in decision-making when putting up a compelling EVP.

The studies revealed that the water boards provide a variety of advantages to the participants. Various types of leave (annual, sick, compassionate, special, study, long service, maternity and paternity leave) and opportunities to attend multiple career-related networking opportunities and assistance in registering with various professional associations were consistently applied across all of the water boards. Our findings support previous research that shows employees value paid time off as a factor in deciding whether or not to work for a company (see Mabaso, 2015; Makhuzeni & Barkhuizen, 2015). In addition, various personal counselling services (i.e. financial and legal support, mental health, family difficulties), physical health assistance (i.e. testing for hypertension, diabetes) and roadshows to promote general well-being were also highlighted in this study. Personal benefits are critical in promoting employees' well-being and job satisfaction who

are compelled to undertake service work (see Nthebe et al., 2016; Yamamoto, 2011).

Finding career-related possibilities is critical as skilled people value rapid progression and advancement in their careers Schlechter et al. (2015). The findings revealed that the water boards have organisational training and development strategies in place and the ability for staff to enrol in various professional development programs. According to the participants, the training programs aim to provide them with the skills they need for current and future professions. Additionally, the water boards invest in staff training at various stages of their employment, such as internships and technical career path growth, to assure important position succession. Hedge and Rineer (2017) believe that targeted training is crucial for ensuring that staff have the skills needed to contribute to the water boards. According to the findings, participants consider training interventions as a return on investment for water boards as they receive the benefits of high-performing personnel whilst also attracting and retaining them (see Molobye, 2021; Naim & Lenka, 2018).

The participants stated that the water boards have a favourable workplace talent culture that they can associate themselves with. This is a significant conclusion because individuals thrive in organisations where they can relate to the values and, as a result, perform better (Masale et al., 2021). A strong (high-performance) culture is generated by individuals' deep-seated assumptions and beliefs favouring their goods, customers, systems and procedures. According to Kontoghiorghes (2016), high-performing organisations with a robust value system are more effective at attracting and retaining people. In addition, the participants emphasised the necessity of leadership in creating an enabling talent culture that connects people via open communication to work together to achieve the water boards' strategic goals. These findings support Střiteská and Sein (2021), who stressed the relevance of a leadership talent mentality in facilitating government institutions' strategic direction and dynamic operations.

The majority of participants indicated that the water board has a positive reputation as desirable employment. According to the participants, water boards attract talent by ensuring that workers are valued, respected, appreciated and trusted. Additionally, participants stated that a healthy and caring water board culture allows staff to be productive and accomplish the company's operational goals. Collings et al. (2019) argue that employees are drawn to a prospective employer who lives up to its brand, in this case, being a caring organisation with a reputation for ethics, integrity and solid governance. In accordance with Parmar (2014), the water board has a positive employer brand identity. Other participants praised the water board's experience and brand recognition for providing high-quality service. According to Wolfswinkel and Enslin (2020), the brand effectiveness of water boards influences the company's ability to attract and

retain personnel to a great extent. Furthermore, as Barbados (2020) points out, the interplay between employer branding, organisational attractiveness and company culture contributes to the organisation's EVP. Similarly, as Bates (2019) points out, the EVP should serve as the foundation for the water board's employment brand.

A framework for the implementation of an employee value proposition for water boards

The researchers propose the following framework to guide the implementation of an EVP framework for water boards, based on the above findings and debate.

The diagrammatical presentation in Figure 1 shows that the proposed EVP framework's interconnected essential components and operating dynamics can follow. A water board's branding strategy and talent management strategy should originate its business strategy (see Abbott, 2019). The business strategy is a deliberate, planned and systematic process of enhancing the reputation of an entity (see

Kontoghiorghes, 2016). The talent management strategy involves the conscious and intentional implementation of integrated human resource strategies to attract, engage and retain employees (see Armstrong & Taylor, 2014). These strategies must enhance and support the successful execution of the water board's business strategy (Lawler, 2017).

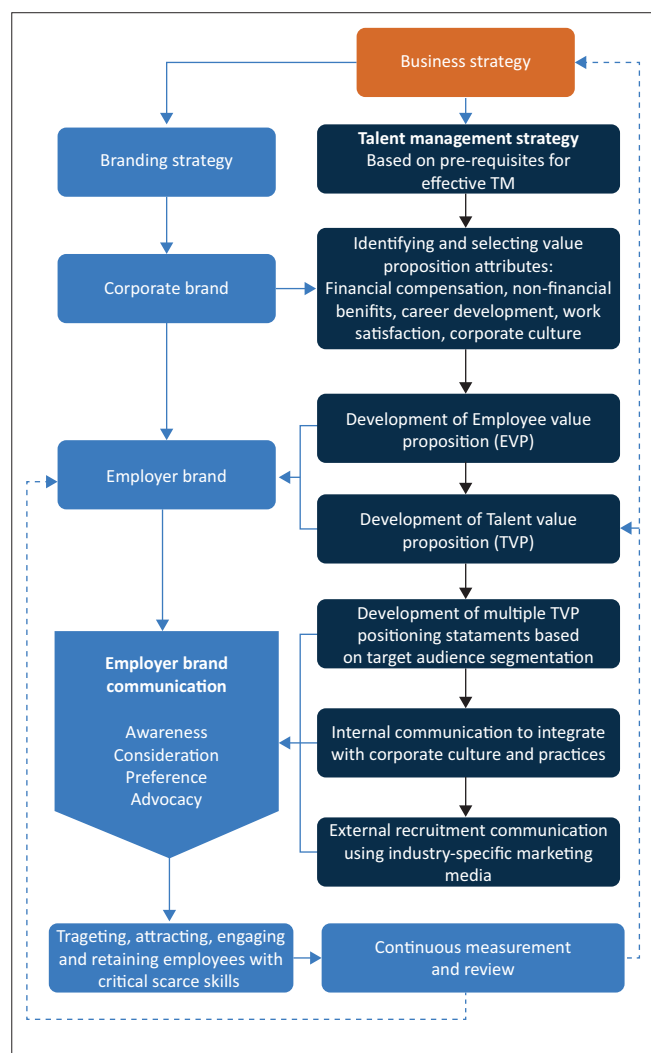
As shown in the diagrammatical illustration, a water board's corporate brand (focusing on communicating differentiating associations and perceptions about an organisation's reputation as a whole) must evolve from its overall brand strategy. Such a corporate brand is also aligned with the water board's strategic intent. The marketing and communication of favourable associations with and positive perceptions about the water board should likewise enhance and support its successful business strategy (see Elving et al., 2013; Lawler, 2017; Morgan, 2017).

A water board's developed corporate brand must serve as a point of departure in communicating the selected value proposition qualities, as it could be a crucial factor in attracting and keeping people (financial compensation, nonfinancial benefits, career development and corporate culture). These characteristics are first used in constructing a water board's EVP, which focuses on solving generic employment needs (theoretical core concept) and then developing its TVP, which focuses exclusively on addressing critical scarcity employment needs (see Saurombe, 2017; Stephenson, 2010). The employer brand of a water board (which focuses on gaining awareness and reputation as a preferred employer on the employment market) must evolve from its corporate brand (theoretical core concept). Furthermore, the identified and selected value proposition features of both the water board's EVP should establish such an employer brand (see Bates, 2019; Collings et al., 2019).

Employer brand marketing based on a TVP's ultimate goal is to successfully identify, attract, engage and retain individuals with necessary scarce talents. Therefore, a water board must also regularly measure and review its employer brand message's results. The water board's intended TVP and declared employer brand might be amended or adapted if unsatisfactory outcomes. Continuous measurement and review also include determining how much the articulated TVP and employer brand contribute to enhancing and supporting the water board's business strategy execution (see Conklyn & Robles, 2010)

Practical implications

This study's findings highlighted the need for water boards investing in creating an EVP to ensure the acquisition and retention of the qualified staff needed to maintain service quality. The water boards use a wide range of strategies that are essentially the same when it comes to career development in all of its forms. However, only five of the nine water boards have implemented a formal and comprehensive personnel management plan, strategy, policy or program. Without such a comprehensive talent management strategy, policy or program, there may be a lack of integration across the various talent



TM, talent management.

FIGURE 1: An employee value proposition framework.

management processes, such as career path development, succession planning and retention tactics. The talent management stakeholders of the water boards should adopt the mindset to invest in talented people to fulfil the service mandate to the general public. The water boards' perceived service performance can enhance the brand value of an employer of choice. Finally, the statutory water board sector should consider putting more emphasis on developing EVPs to address generic employment needs. The proposed EVP framework can guide the implementation of a TVP to improve success in attracting, engaging and retaining current and future talent.

Limitations and recommendations

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, there is a scarcity of empirical studies on EVPs in general. Future research could benefit from developing a solid theoretical foundation for EVPs that serves as a framework for their practical deployment in the workplace. Secondly, the scope of this research was confined to water boards in specific locations. As a result, the findings cannot be applied to other situations. Third, HR practitioners from the various water boards made up most of the sample. As a result, the findings are limited to one occupational group's perspectives and cannot be applied to other water boards or professional groups. Future research should involve diverse talent stakeholders (i.e. employees, leaders) to have a more comprehensive perspective on the extent of EVP in water boards. Finally, this research focused on the determinants of an EVP for the water boards. In the future, researchers should also explore the antecedents and outcomes of EVPs to build a talent value pipeline that can manage the careers of talented individuals from start to finish.

Conclusion

The application of EVPs within the talent management space is still in its infancy shoes. More research is required to explore how EVPs can be developed to complement talent attraction and retention in various public sector contexts. Employee value propositions are viable enablers of sustainable success in meeting critical current and future employment needs. Therefore, water boards are encouraged to invest in the implementation of compelling EVPs to attract and retain those talents that can deliver the required services in support of the strategic objectives of water boards.

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Authors' contributions

N.A.T. visualised and compiled the article and did the data analyses. E.N.B. assisted with editorial inputs and finalised the article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) (ref. no. NWU-01300-21-A4).

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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