

South African public sector managers' perceptions of the use of strategy tools

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Abstract

Strategic planning remains the preferred approach in public sector organisations globally, yet there is a significant gap in understanding how public sector managers perceive strategy tools in non-market contexts. This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of senior and middle managers in the South African public sector regarding the usefulness and relevance of strategy tools and the influence of those perceptions on their strategising.

Adopting a Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) lens, the research employed semi-structured interviews with 13 senior and middle managers across various public sector institutions. The S-a-P framework provided the conceptual guide for the analysis, focusing on the dynamic interplay between managers (practitioners), strategy tools (practices) and the strategising process (praxis).

The study identified a reliance and active use of a hybrid set of strategy tools, notably PESTEL, SWOT, Balanced Scorecard (BSC), OKRs and mandatory public sector artifacts (DPME Framework, Strategic Plans). Crucially, the findings established a clear empirical validation of the contextual contingency, evidenced by the systematic rejection of market-centric strategy tools (e.g. Porter's Five Forces) deemed irrelevant to the public sector's public value mandate. Furthermore, the research revealed practitioner knowledgeability deficit, leading to the ceremonial use of tools, thereby impeding effective utilisation of tools and consequently strategic execution.

This study contributes to S-a-P scholarship by empirically establishing the conditions for a contextually contingent strategising praxis in a non-market setting. It advances the theory by demonstrating that the effectiveness of strategising (praxis) is severely constrained by the practitioner's lack of capability, linking the competency deficit directly to organisational outcomes and providing actionable implications for training and policy reform in the public sector.

Keywords

Strategy-as-Practice, Public Sector Strategising, Strategy Tools, Contextual Contingency, Practitioner Knowledgeability

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy [insert programme name here] at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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1. Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

According to Huang and Villadsen (2023), the public sector is the portion of the economy that the state either owns or directly controls. Over the past four decades, the public sector has been the subject of numerous reforms in many countries globally to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. These public sector reforms have been carried out under the auspices of the new public management (NPM) movement (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020). Although there were notable variations among countries, the initial NPM changes occurred in Anglo-Saxon nations, especially the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (NZ). They swiftly expanded worldwide, notably in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advanced countries (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020). Implementing these reforms involved a significant borrowing of concepts previously considered proprietary to the private sector. As a result, many of the public sector's strategic management practices have been adopted from the private sector (Chen et al., 2020).

The NPM reforms focused on managerial practices to improve public service efficiency and effectiveness, including service delivery to citizens. From the 1980s onwards, the NPM movement and managerial reforms that encouraged private-sector management techniques in public organisations helped strategic management concepts such as strategic planning gain traction in the public sector (George et al., 2021). Strategic planning and strategic management have become standard practice in large public sector organisations. Historically, strategic planning has been the dominant method used by public sector organisations across all tiers/spheres of government for developing their strategies (George, 2021). Strategic planning generally refers to the formulation of long-term aspirations, where strategic management has been described as the process that links strategic planning to its realisation. A key aspect of this process is how strategy is operationalized through management control tools such as budgets, balanced scorecards (BSC), and performance indicators (Sundström and Svärdsten, 2025). The main reasons behind these reforms were the belief that private sector-inspired management models and methods would lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector (Mauro et al., 2021).

To this day, strategic management principles exert considerable influence over various aspects of the public sector's budgetary, planning, and performance management processes across many countries globally. In South Africa, for example, the setting for this study, public sector management reforms have been institutionalized by the promulgation and adoption of laws and frameworks, including the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), National Treasury Regulations, Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) Framework for Strategic Plans (SPs) and Annual Performance Plans (APPs) providing the legal framework for all strategic management work in the public sector. These legal prescripts mandate highly compliance-oriented planning, budgeting, and performance management processes, frameworks, and guidelines, extending to providing specific strategic tools recommended for developing strategic plans, budgets, and performance reports that adhere to legislative requirements. Notably, the DPME framework necessitates results-focused planning processes within each institution, with accompanying guidelines offering illustrative examples of strategy tools applicable across various stages of the planning and budgetary cycles (DPME, 2019b, 2019a). While research provides some evidence of the value of strategic planning, it does not explain how it is practically done in public sector organisations (George, 2021). The practical application of these strategy tools and guidelines is often left to the discretion and interpretation of public sector managers.

1.2 Definition of the research problem and research aims

Notwithstanding the efforts of the DPME and National Treasury to strengthen strategic management and planning processes within the South African public sector, the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA)'s reports provide corroborating evidence of ongoing weaknesses in the public sector's strategic management, planning, and performance management. For instance, the AGSA's 2023/24 consolidated general report on national and provincial audit outcomes identified and elucidated the factors contributing to the persistent shortcomings observed in the performance reports of a significant number of public sector entities. The AGSA (2024) revealed that despite a robust legislative framework for performance management aimed at transparency and accountability, its implementation in national and provincial government is hampered by inadequate auditee IT systems and record-keeping; leadership's insufficient application and understanding of requirements, a tendency for auditees to operate and report "off-the-book," avoiding scrutiny; a lack of

standardized indicators due to intergovernmental disagreements; and inadequate support for effective oversight and accountability for unreliable reporting or underperformance (AGSA, 2024, p. 40). The Public Service Commission (2022) underscored the imperative for public entities to strategically allocate resources towards their core mandates strategically. The report concurrently recommended undertaking studies aimed at integrating planning and budgeting systems.

While the findings mentioned above and their underlying causes may suggest a deficit in accountability among responsible officials, evidence suggests a more fundamental challenge pertaining to the application and practice of strategic management processes within the public sector, particularly concerning the utilisation of strategy tools. This raises the central question of whether these planning prescripts perpetuate the status quo, facilitate (or impede) the practice of strategic management within the public sector, and foster flexibility or rigidity in the strategising endeavors of public sector managers. According to Friesl et al. (2021), too frequently, difficulties in implementing strategies are explained by bureaucracy, competition, or resource limitations. Brorström (2020), for instance, posits that the application of strategic management within the public sector is characterized by significant variations and that the practical implementation of strategic management principles remains poorly understood. Prashantham and Healey (2022) observed a notable gap in understanding the diversity of strategy practices worldwide, particularly when comparing regions such as the West and China. Their research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly illuminated the significant variations across different regional contexts, underscoring the need for further investigation into this heterogeneity (Prashantham and Healey, 2022).

Ahumada-Canale et al. (2023), in their examination of factors influencing the implementation of priority-setting instruments within hospital settings, acknowledge a limitation in the scope of their research. Specifically, they concede that their analysis predominantly drew upon data from high-income nations. This methodological constraint, as the authors themselves recognize, potentially overlooks pertinent findings from low and middle-income countries (LMICs), which are characterized by a distinct set of challenges that could significantly impact the adoption and effectiveness of such tools. Extending this argument to the public sector, it can be argued that the direct application of strategy tools and techniques to the public sector, especially in LMICs, risks overlooking the specificities

of their operational environments, including potentially simpler organizational arrangements, resource limitations, and access to relevant data, thus diminishing the effectiveness and appropriateness of such instruments. Begkos et al. (2020) highlight a notable gap in the empirical literature concerning strategic planning by middle managers, particularly within the public sector. There remains a paucity of research exploring the specific activities managers undertake in their strategy-making processes and the subsequent effectiveness of those activities in the public sector.

Over the past twenty years, the strategy as practice (SAP) perspective has emerged as a recognized and separate way of studying the micro-practices of strategic management (Seidl et al., 2024). Studies from this perspective have sought to show how the actions and influence of managers play a crucial role in how strategy work materializes in practice. Understanding these micro-practices becomes particularly salient when considering the implementation of strategic tools in diverse contexts, such as the public sector in LMICs, where the actions and influence of local managers may significantly shape the adoption and impact of tools/frameworks developed elsewhere, as highlighted by the contextual limitations noted by Ahumada-Canale et al. (2023). Public sector managers are regarded as critical in public service delivery (Huang and Villadsen, 2023; Witesman et al., 2024). However, there remains a notable gap in empirical knowledge pertaining to how these managers utilise/interact with the strategy tools/frameworks at their disposal. As such, understanding the factors influencing managers' perceptions regarding their application of strategy tools may offer crucial insights into enhancing the effectiveness of the strategic management process within the public sector. Furthermore, this study answers the call by Li and Jarzabkowski (2025, p. 5) for future research to 'bridge the old with new phenomena' in SAP research by looking at new contexts that have rarely been studied in SAP scholarship. To this appeal, Foss and Mazzelli (2025) add that managers should be brought back into the center of strategic management, together with the psychological foundations of strategy.

Against this theoretical backdrop, the study's aim was to explore the perceptions of senior and middle-level managers at public sector institutions regarding their use of strategy tools and the influence of those perceptions on their strategising work. Furthermore, this research aims to empirically examine the research questions delineated below within the specific context of South Africa.

1.3 Research questions

Based on the literature review, the research will seek to answer the following questions:

Research question One: How do public sector managers perceive the usefulness and relevance of the various strategy tools and frameworks they counter in their strategising work?

Research question Two: Which strategy tools do public sector managers use the most during their strategising work?

Research question Three: Do strategic managers in the public sector have the necessary knowledge and understanding of how to effectively utilise strategy tools?

Research question Four: What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector strategising process?

1.4 Scope of the study

Focusing on the South African public sector, the study's objective is to develop insights into what factors inform the adoption and use of strategy tools in the public sector. The study is aimed at individual public sector managers at three public sector institutions who are involved in the day-to-day work of strategy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and are familiar with strategic management concepts. The public sector institutions targeted were a schedule 3 entity, a national department, and a local government department.

1.5 Contribution of the study to academia and business

1.5.1 Contribution to academia

The study seeks to make the following contribution to academia. Firstly, the study aims to contribute to the literature on the use of strategy tools in a public sector context by highlighting the socio-psychological factors that can shape the adoption, popularity, and utility of strategy tools in that context. Secondly, insights into how public sector managers make sense of the strategy tools and the influence of their sensemaking routines on the public sector managers' strategising work may help advance the knowledge of how strategy tools are utilised in practice, contributing to a more grounded explanatory lens for understanding the micro-foundations of strategising in the public sector. Thirdly, the study

can contribute to the existing body of knowledge on strategy tools by providing empirical evidence highlighting those strategy tools that are perceived to be useful in a public sector context.

1.5.2 Contribution to business

The study has the following practical implications: firstly, it seeks to contribute to public administration practice and accountability by providing empirical evidence on the factors that inform public sector managers' use (misuse) of strategy tools and how these affect their strategising work to deliver public services. Secondly, understanding how public sector managers perceive strategy tools will lead to designing context-relevant strategy tools and deploying adequate resources for the training and education of public sector managers/officials.

1.6 Purpose statement

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the continuous improvement of strategic management practices in the public sector by strengthening public sector service delivery through a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the strategising actions of public sector managers, thereby improving strategy formulation and implementation.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the study's relevance to the public sector and its modest contribution to the rich field of S-a-P research. In Chapter 2, the most recent academic contributions and topical discussions were reviewed to establish and confirm the theoretical need for this study and develop the four main research questions in Chapter 3 that guide the study. Chapter 4 detailed the methodology followed to conduct the actual research. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the data collection and analysis stages. Chapter 6 discusses the empirical findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, looking to confirm or uncover new emerging insights. Chapter 7 concludes the study by summarising the most pertinent insights, including outlining the implications and recommendations for scholars, management and/or policymakers.

2. Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction and chapter structure

This chapter provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the study by systematically reviewing the extant literature on strategy tools, managerial perceptions and cognition, and strategic management in the public sector. The analysis is anchored in the Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) theoretical framework, which is uniquely suited to studying micro-level social interactions and the tools/artifacts that constitute strategic activity/strategising in organisations. The literature review serves two primary objectives: first, to establish the conceptual links between the core S-a-P constructs (practices, practitioners, and praxis) and the study's main research questions; and second, to develop the critical theoretical arguments that justify the need for this empirical investigation as well as the chosen research setting.

This structured literature review examines the leading views from current S-a-P scholarship to define and situate the three main constructs, thereby enabling a robust interpretation of the qualitative data presented in Chapter 5. The chapter is structured as follows:

- **Section 2.2** establishes the theoretical foundation by outlining current discourse within the Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) perspective.
- **Section 2.3** introduces the study's core constructs, utilizing the S-a-P conceptual framework of practices, practitioners, and praxis to organize and discuss the supporting literature.
- **Section 2.4** introduces the public sector strategy context and develops the critical arguments of tool incompatibility and contextual contingency to justify the research site.
- **Section 2.5** presents the theoretical conclusions and the research gap this study addresses.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the organisation of the literature review.

Table 1: Organisation of the literature review

Chapter Section	Title/Focus	Key Objective(s)	Conceptual Flow/Linkages
2.1	Introduction and Chapter Structure	State the overall purpose of the chapter (providing theoretical foundation) and present the roadmap for the subsequent sections.	Sets the stage for the entire chapter.
2.2	Theoretical Foundation: Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P)	Establish S-a-P as the overarching theoretical lens for the study. Outline the current academic discourse and core tenets of S-a-P.	Provides the foundational framework and vocabulary for the core constructs (2.3).
2.3	Core Constructs: The S-a-P Framework	Introduce and discuss the literature corresponding to the three constitutive elements of S-a-P: Practices, Practitioners, and Praxis.	Directly applies the S-a-P lens (2.2) to define and detail the study's primary variables (strategy tools, managerial perceptions, strategizing activities).
2.4	Public Sector Strategy Context and Contingency	Define the characteristics of the public sector strategy environment. Develop the critical arguments of Tool Incompatibility and Contextual Contingency to justify the public sector research site.	Links the general theoretical constructs (2.3) to the specific, problematic setting (public sector), justifying the need for the study.
2.5	Theoretical Conclusions and Research Gap	Summarize the key theoretical conclusions drawn from sections 2.2-2.4. Precisely articulate the research gap that the current study is designed to address (e.g., the intersection of manager perceptions, strategy tool usage, and public sector context).	Concludes the review and explicitly frames the contribution of the thesis based on the literature reviewed.

2.2 Strategy-as-practice perspective as the context

The S-a-P perspective offers a fundamental reorientation in strategic management research, emphasizing that strategic activity is inherently situated and socially accomplished through the ongoing interactions, negotiations, testing different ideas, and adaptations among multiple actors within specific contexts (Brorström, 2020; Friesl et al., 2021). This approach does not view strategy as simple plans or documents; it emphasizes the dynamic process of doing strategy, focusing on the strategy tools (practices) through which strategising is done (Brorström, 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Prashantham and Healey, 2022). Strategy, from this perspective, is an emergent phenomenon rooted in the everyday practices of various organisational actors (practitioners) and extends beyond the traditional focus on planned processes and top-down directives (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Prashantham and Healey, 2022).

Therefore, utilising a practice lens for this study is crucial to understanding the nuances involved in public sector managers' strategising, including micro-level social interactions, strategy tools, and institutional constraints that shape their strategising activities.

Empirical studies adopting the S-a-P lens demonstrate that strategy serves as a mechanism for organizational learning, in which continuous testing of actions, questioning of existing processes, and collective reflection foster new understandings and practices (Brorström, 2020). Accordingly, strategising involves multifaceted social interactions, including vertical influence between hierarchical levels and horizontal coordination among organizational units (Weiser et al., 2020). The emergence of strategy in this way is understood to be dynamic and embedded within organizational life and is enacted from everyday socio-cultural actions (MacKay et al., 2021).

Recent S-a-P research has also engaged in critical theoretical debates, notably critiquing the "substantialist metaphysics" and "tall" or hierarchical ontologies prevalent in traditional strategy research that treat strategies and practices as discrete, layered entities or substances (MacKay et al., 2021; Whittington, 2025). Scholars argued that this stance limits the explanation of how strategizing genuinely emerges from interconnected practices. To address this, some scholars propose a shift toward a "Strategy-in-Practices" (SiP) perspective. This perspective adopts a processual ontology, viewing practices as interconnected and immanent in shaping strategy through continuous socio-cultural actions (MacKay et al., 2021). Similarly, calls for a shift towards "flat" ontologies emphasize/reinforce practices as integrated and multi-situated phenomena, arguing that overreliance on micro-foundations (focusing solely on individual agency) risks overlooking the embeddedness of practices, social norms, and materiality essential for understanding organizational dynamics (Whittington, 2025; Marietto et al., 2025). Applying SAP within a structurationist framework, for example, reveals how informal, everyday social interactions recursively reproduce or challenge existing structures, highlighting discrepancies between formal roles and actual behaviors (Marietto et al., 2025). This study will therefore seek to understand how public sector managers actually strategise and how they interact amongst themselves and how their perceptions of the strategy tools they use influence their strategising.

Another key debate within S-a-P concerns what constitutes "strategic" activity, moving beyond a narrow focus on consequential actions such as formal planning or decision-

making (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022; Seidl et al., 2024). Scholars argue for recognizing the importance of what is “consequential” practices and actors shaping outcomes indirectly, including mundane or taken-for-granted activities that contribute through their patterns of repetition and influence (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022). The “knowledgeability” principle is highlighted as central to understanding strategy as a social practice, emphasizing the embedded practical knowledge and “know-how” that actors leverage in daily, often routine, interactions (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022). A multi-dimensional framework helps address ambiguities by proposing four views—consequentiality, labeling, role-based, and pattern perspectives—to enhance understanding of what qualifies activities as strategic (Seidl et al., 2024). The study will seek to empirically validate whether these perspectives play a role in how the strategising of public sector managers happens in a different context that is rarely studied.

Furthermore, S-a-P research highlights the dynamic interplay between conceptualizing and enacting strategies, advocating for an integrative framework that recognizes strategy as dynamically co-produced through continuous cycles of thinking and action across multiple organizational levels (Weiser et al., 2020). This contrasts with traditional dichotomous views of strategy formulation versus strategy implementation, emphasizing feedback loops where enactment influences conceptualization and vice versa (Weiser et al., 2020). This study will seek to understand how public sector managers deploy strategy tools during their strategizing.

The field of S-a-P has matured significantly, evolving through distinct phases towards an emphasis on cross-pollination and integration across diverse research streams such as sensemaking, discourse, sociomateriality, and institutionalism (Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Li & Jarzabkowski, 2025). While this diversity enriches insights, addressing disconnections through ‘crossing strategies’ like practice-driven institutionalism or multimodal approaches is crucial for coherence and cumulative advancement (Kohtamäki et al., 2022). Developing theoretical and methodological ‘bridges’ that connect strategy creation and consequences, embracing flatter ontologies, and exploring new phenomena through a social practice lens are proposed to foster a more vibrant and inclusive SAP community (Li & Jarzabkowski, 2025).

The use of strategy tools by managers illustrates how artifacts serve as practical devices for enacting strategy, highlighting the interplay among practices, tools, practitioners, and

potentially conflicting objectives across contexts (Begkos et al., 2020). The suitability of these theories and tools needs to be considered contextually. With reference to the public sector, specifically in different contexts such as Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023), there may be tools and techniques that are not in keeping with the nature of public sector organisations (government departments, public entities etc.) due to lack of resources and capacity for extensive private sector style strategy development work/activities, and with respect to the corporate applicability of some of the strategy tools etc. Owing to this mismatch, neither the inferences drawn about the use of strategy tools by private-sector organisations nor the findings from research in other contexts on their use can be logically extended to the public sector, nor to a different context.

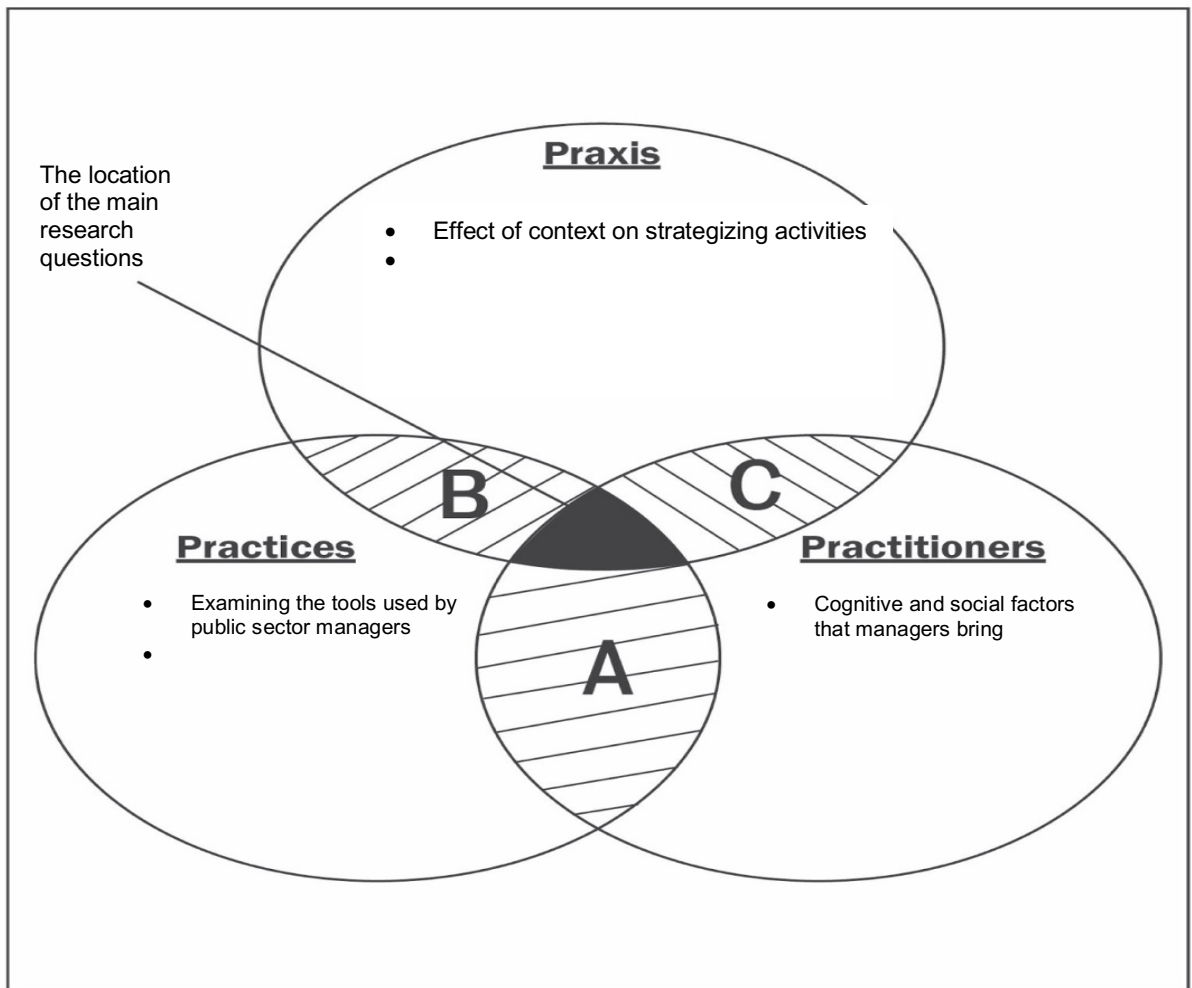
The S-a-P lens offers a rich, micro-level understanding of strategy as a dynamic, socially situated, and performative phenomenon. It is particularly relevant for studying strategy (strategizing) in complex environments such as the public sector (and in other contexts such as LMICs), where strategizing by public sector organisations for public service delivery and efficiency is often a creative, improvisational process (Kitchner and Ashworth, 2025). However, there remains an empirical deficit, as few studies of public sector organisations are informed by a strong theoretical understanding of strategizing, creating critical gaps in understanding how strategy is actually enacted in these complex, non-market contexts (Bryson et al., 2022; Friesl et al., 2021; Kitchener and Ashworth, 2025). There are calls to extend the study of micro-practices of strategic management to new contexts and fields (including different regions of the world) that have rarely been studied in S-a-P scholarship (Brorström, 2020; Prashantham and Healey, 2022) underscoring the need for a context-rich, situated analysis of strategy practices. This mirrors the calls by Li and Jarzabkowski (2025, p.5) for future research to 'bridge the old with the new phenomena' in S-a-P research by looking at new contexts that have rarely been studied.

SAP utilises a social lens to understand the nuances and explain some difficulties in enacting strategy in organisations. By focusing on the perceptions of public sector managers regarding the use of strategy tools, this study addresses the gap pertaining to variations in strategic management practices across different contexts.

2.3 The Three Core Constructs of Strategy-as-Practice

To structure the empirical investigation, the study adopts the three interlinked elements of the S-a-P framework: Practices, Practitioners, and Praxis. The study's goal is to articulate the relationship: how practitioners' (public sector managers) perceptions of strategy tools (practices) influence their strategising process (praxis).

Figure 1: S-a-P Conceptual framework



Source 1: Jarzabkowski et al.(2007. P11))

2.3.1. Strategy Tools: Definition, Types, Uses, and Impact on Strategising (Practices)

2.3.1.1 Definition of strategy tools

Practices (strategy tools) are what practitioners utilise to accomplish their strategizing praxis. Strategy tools and frameworks are fundamental components of strategic management, serving as conceptual aids, structured methods, or material artifacts intended to support strategic analysis, planning, decision-making, implementation, and control (Felício et al., 2021; Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Hannah et al., 2021; Sundström and Svärdsten, 2025). They include various textual and/or visual materials that substantially shape how strategy work is conducted. Examples include strategy frameworks, routine descriptions and handbooks, information technology, PowerPoint slides (Friesl et al., 2021).

Beyond traditional frameworks, the understanding of strategy tools has expanded to include communicative practices (Bencherki et al., 2021; Vaara & Fritsch, 2022), digital platforms (Maziashvili et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024), performance measurement and control systems (Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Felício et al., 2021; Lueg and Carvalho e Silva, 2022; Mauro et al., 2021), portfolio management tools (Roberts and Hamilton Edwards, 2023), decision-making aids (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023), internal communication media (De Keyser, 2024), external visual representations (Csaszar et al., 2024), and even the creation of new custom built tools by managers to respond to wicked problems (Burke and Wolf, 2021).

2.3.1.2 Uses and impact on strategising

Managers use these diverse strategy tools to strategise throughout the different stages of the strategic management process. Analytical and planning tools aid in situation assessment and strategy formulation (Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020;). Hannah et al. (2021) highlight the critical function of formal strategy tools, specifically analytic models, as concrete instruments that actively shape the execution of organizational strategy. These models move beyond conceptual ideas, enabling strategists to embed formal reasoning into their daily practice by enhancing clarity through the formalization of complex relationships, which facilitates the simulation and rigorous evaluation of strategic actions. The real impact of these tools is realized when they are used complementarily with

qualitative methods, ensuring decision-making is contextualized within the social processes of strategy formation, thus supporting the strategy-as-practice perspective. Moreover, the effective application of analytic models fosters strategic capabilities by improving managers' appreciation and understanding of rigorous analysis. Ultimately, by integrating these models with emerging techniques like machine learning, they drive a dynamic, iterative approach to strategizing, supporting continuous adaptation and innovation, thereby making them indispensable for achieving a more nuanced and actionable understanding of strategic phenomena.

The use of performance management as a strategic tool in public sector organisations is associated with several potential benefits, including improved effectiveness, better priority setting, reduced duplication, enhanced results orientation, facilitating implementation/ongoing refinement of strategy, and improved internal and external communication (Cepiku et al., 2024; Sundström and Svärdsten, 2025). However, the evidence supporting these benefits remains inconclusive, sometimes even demonstrating disappointing outcomes. Negative effects often arise, such as gaming and opportunistic behaviour, evaluation overload, or the purely ceremonial use of performance data. Cepiku et al. (2024) conclude that the realisation of positive benefits is highly contingent upon the extent to which public sector managers, decision-makers, and other key stakeholders actively utilise the generated performance information.

Implementation tools like management control systems and performance metrics are vital for monitoring progress and ensuring alignment (Felício et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020). Communication-focused tools and digital platforms are employed for collective sensemaking, engaging stakeholders, shaping narratives, and city branding (Bencherki et al., 2021; Vaara and Fritsch, 2022; Maziashvili et al., 2023; De Keyser, 2024). Decision-making tools support priority setting in complex contexts (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023). Portfolio management tools help balance investments against strategic goals, particularly for public value purposes in the public sector (Roberts & Hamilton Edwards, 2023). Digital tools broadly expand the array of strategic actions and enhance flexibility (Zhou et al., 2024).

Strategy tools also function as cognitive aids, facilitating problem-solving and learning through their representational design; however, standard strategy tools can also constrain thinking, whereas creating new strategy tools can enable improvisational strategising

(Csaszar et al., 2024; Burke and Wolf, 2021). Digital transformation integrates new tools but underscores the continued importance of effective strategic practice (“strategising doing”) in leveraging them (Zhou et al., 2024).

However, recent literature, particularly from a SAP perspective, emphasizes that strategy tools are not passive instruments but actively shape and mediate strategic activities (Friesl et al., 2021). Strategy tools embody instrumental, symbolic, and political functions, possessing interpretive and material affordances that influence how strategy is understood, contested, and enacted in situ (Rampa & Parmentier, 2024). Their effectiveness is highly context-dependent and contingent on how actors appropriately use and interpret them within unique organizational and material settings (Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Felício et al., 2021). Managerial perceptions, cognitive biases, and behavioral factors significantly influence tool adoption and utilization, sometimes leading to reliance on simplified outputs or resistance despite mandates (Desmidt & Meyfrootd, 2021; Lueg & Carvalho e Silva, 2022; Mauro et al., 2021). Successful strategy tool deployment also requires addressing cultural misfits, ensuring data translates into meaningful decisions, fostering co-authoring processes, and navigating underlying power dynamics and social relations (Lueg and Carvalho e Silva, 2022; Mauro et al., 2021; Rampa and Parmentier, 2024).

Strategy tools are diverse and integral aids in strategic management, but their impact is complex, mediated by how they are perceived, interpreted, and enacted within the dynamic, social, and political realities of strategising practice. The absence of qualified people to carry out strategy work combined with inadequate education and training can compromise the adoption and usage of strategy tools in public sector organisations. There is a paucity of empirical knowledge regarding the application of strategy tools under different contexts, especially in LMINCs (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023). Furthermore, the development of these strategy tools takes place in private sector settings in the advanced economic settings of HICs, and therefore, their use and usefulness in different settings remains a gap in the literature that is under-researched. This study is motivated by the need for more empirical evidence on how strategy tools are perceived in different environments and in a public-sector context.

2.3.2 Managerial (Practitioner) perceptions in strategic management

A closer focus on what managers actually do during their strategising would illuminate surprising societal phenomena. Very little is known about how strategic planning happens in practice, especially in the public sector. The managerial perception construct is critical to understanding and explaining what informs practitioners' actions at the micro-practice level of strategic management in public sector organisations. Managerial cognition and sensemaking are extensively discussed in the literature to explain managers' motives and motivations in their choices and actions, and to understand how strategy forms in organisations. The study extends beyond assessing the applicability of strategy tools for managers by integrating a sensemaking perspective to explore the cognitive underpinnings of public sector managers' perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of these strategy tools in their strategising activities and in a different setting/context.

2.3.2.1 Who are the practitioners?

Practitioners are the organisational actors who actively create, influence, and execute strategies (Begkos et al., 2020), and as middle managers, who are positioned between senior/top strategic leaders and first-level supervisors, they are responsible for bridging the gap by interpreting/translating strategic directives into practical actions whilst also communicating valuable frontline insights back to senior decision-makers (Gullmark et al., 2025). Practitioners may be managers, consultants, and policymakers (Kitchener and Ashworth, 2025), chief executive officers, director-generals, deputy-director-generals, chief directors, executives, heads, directors, deputy directors, specialists, and policymakers.

They are ultimately the individuals who do the strategy work in organisations (Brorström, 2020), and they influence/shape how strategy is constructed based on their identity (who they are), their behaviours (how they act), and the resources they utilise (Kitchener and Ashworth, 2025). When they strategise, these individuals proactively express their strategic intent by planning and conducting their routine, everyday operations in specific ways, aiming to guide their organisations towards a chosen strategic direction (Begkos et al., 2020).

Early strategy implementation research primarily concentrated on top management as the key decision-makers and planners, largely neglecting the active role of other organisational

actors (Weiser et al., 2020). Middle managers, in particular, were often viewed narrowly as passive executors of top-down directives—either straightforwardly implementing or resisting change based on incentives and individual perceptions. The prescriptive focus during this period centered on tactics such as intervention, participation, persuasion, and edicts, often guided by formal decision-making tools, to improve the effectiveness of the top-to-middle management interface. Over time, the field has matured to recognize the complexity of strategy enactment, acknowledging that successful strategy implementation relies on managing the dynamic interplay among multiple organisational actors rather than simply issuing directives from the top. This work sought to address traditional strategic management literature. It did not account for how public sector middle managers actually strategise (using strategy tools) or how this occurs in a different context, such as the public sector in South Africa.

2.3.2.2 Knowledgeability of practitioners

(Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022) highlight that practitioners' knowledge is fundamental to understanding strategy as a social practice. This concept refers to the collective, tacit, and practical knowledge that organizational actors continuously deploy during their activities. This knowledge goes beyond explicit, formal documentation, focusing instead on the shared, situated understandings actors possess about how to behave effectively within their specific social and organizational contexts. Since this knowledge is often tacit—embedded in routines, norms, and social interactions—it guides strategic responses and behaviors that are often unarticulated but essential to strategic accomplishment. Consequently, strategies are shaped by this embodied, relational, and collectively constructed know-how. A focus on knowledgeability compels researchers to look past observable activities to uncover the deeper, often implicit, shared understandings that underpin strategic decision-making and organizing (Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022)

2.3.2.3 Managerial perceptions and agency in strategizing

Friesl et al. (2021) highlight that the deliberate implementation of strategy is a highly contested, yet crucial, component of strategizing. This deliberate approach requires managers to operate with a strong assumption of managerial rationality and control, with research confirming the necessity of managerial intent, and emphasizing the pervasive role

of managerial agency throughout the entire strategizing process, as managerial interpretation ultimately shapes how strategizing is executed within organisations.

Managerial perceptions are increasingly recognized as the critical cognitive lens through which strategy is interpreted, shaped, and ultimately enacted, positioning managers as active practitioners rather than passive executors (Banks & May, 2025). This body of literature underscores that strategic responses are not purely rational outcomes but are profoundly shaped by managers' individual cognitive frameworks, emotional states, and contextual environments. The analysis of these perceptual influences is essential for understanding how organizations achieve strategic agility and resilience in complex settings.

2.3.2.3.1 Cognitive Filters, Heuristics, and Strategic Bias

A central and critical theme in the literature is the influence of cognitive heuristics—mental shortcuts used for rapid decision-making—which streamline complex judgments but can introduce systematic biases into strategic processes (G. P. Hodgkinson et al., 2023). These biases, such as overconfidence, risk misperception, or the tendency to emphasize positive recollections (De Keyser et al., 2023), serve as perceptual filters that significantly distort the interpretation of strategic issues. For instance, reliance on heuristics can lead managers to underestimate long-term climate threats or overlook systemic risks when perceptions emphasize short-term returns or align with existing routines (Bleda and Pinkse, 2023). These perceptions are rooted in bounded rationality, meaning managers rely on automatic responses that may distort learning processes and hinder adaptation. Consequently, effective strategic management necessitates that managers recognize these cognitive limitations and employ organizational "repairs"—such as inquiring and intervening practices—to mitigate biases and facilitate better knowledge transfer (Balarezo et al., 2023).

The interpretation of information is also mediated by these perceptual frameworks. Managers' expertise distance from radical technological ideas, for example, can reduce investment willingness due to perceptions of increased uncertainty. However, this hesitancy can be countered by manipulating their cognitive construal level from a high-level (abstract) to a low-level (concrete), which emphasizes feasibility and bridges the perception gap (Mount et al., 2021). Similarly, managers' backgrounds and prior experiences guide how

they interpret performance deficiencies, influencing their decision to allocate resources to strategic areas like innovation (He et al., 2021). The literature further notes that strategic effectiveness in public sector organizations often links to managerial perceptions of procedural rationality (systematic evidence-based analysis) over reliance on intuition (Al-Hashimi et al., 2022). This need to integrate both systematic analysis and intuitive thinking for on-the-fly, improvisational responses creates a dual-process paradox in strategic decision-making (Hodgkinson et al., 2023).

2.3.2.3.2 The Social and Emotional Construction of Perception

Managerial perceptions are not solely individual constructs but are socially embedded phenomena, shaped and modulated by organizational design, culture, and social interactions (I. R. Hodgkinson et al., 2023). This includes sensemaking frames—cognitive schemas that influence how managers interpret environmental cues, such as technological shifts and market trends (Penttilä et al., 2020). Managers' sense of identity embedded within a local ecosystem significantly moderates their strategic orientation and engagement levels by influencing their perceptions of other actors and collaboration opportunities (Penttilä et al., 2020). This social dynamic extends internationally, where managers' perceptions of institutional differences between countries critically determine the success of international strategic adaptation (Weber et al., 2020).

Crucially, emotions play a fundamental, mediating role in this process, influencing how managers interpret uncertainty and complex strategic environments (Kroon and Reif, 2023; Vuori and Huy, 2022). Emotions are not merely individual feelings but are often enacted and reinforced through organizational routines and practices—such as meetings and narratives—which influence the collective assessment of strategic urgency, particularly concerning external factors like climate signals (Bleda & Pinkse, 2023). During organizational change, such as post-merger integration, middle managers actively employ emotional regulation strategies (e.g., emotional hiding or contagion) as strategic tools to foster positive perceptions within their teams, thereby reducing resistance and aligning attitudes with overarching organizational goals (Kroon & Reif, 2023). In times of crisis, socially distributed emotion regulation across organizational groups reduces initial emotional reactivity, enabling top managers to engage in more considered, data-informed reappraisals and facilitating radical, adaptive strategic shifts (Vuori & Huy, 2022).

2.3.2.3.3 Practitioner Agency

S-a-P research acknowledges that human agency is deeply embedded in strategy work, meaning the practitioners (managers/actors) involved may possess interests or agendas that extend beyond or conflict with the organisation's stated aims (Brorström, 2020). Public sector managers, as first-line practitioners, stand as the focal point where abstract strategic intentions are actively interpreted, negotiated, and operationalized into daily reality (Banks and May, 2025). They are not passive recipients; they actively shape organizational outcomes through their personal perceptions, discretionary actions, and relational dynamics. The realization of strategy is therefore heavily contingent on practitioners' agency, local knowledge, and strategic engagement (Banks and May, 2025). The variability in managerial role perceptions—with some managers embracing strategic functions while others remain purely operational—underscores that strategic outcomes are highly dependent on the individual practitioner's approach and contextual constraints (Banks and May, 2025).

The use of strategic tools (e.g., plans and performance reports) significantly impacts practitioners' engagement and their perceived agency. Meyfroodt and Desmidt (2021) assert that routine interaction with these strategic artifacts builds practitioners' self-efficacy (confidence in their ability) and sense of agency. This enhanced perception of ability, which is constructed through social practices involving these tools, directly increases their confidence to contribute meaningfully to strategic discussions, fostering more active participation and a stronger strategic voice (Meyfroodt and Desmidt, 2021). The literature collectively underscores the necessity of viewing practitioners as active agents responsible for the continuous crafting and re-shaping of organizational strategies through their everyday activities, dialogues, and routines.

In summary, the effectiveness of strategy tools and frameworks is critically dependent on the complex perceptual processes of the actors/managers who use them, and there is a need for greater awareness of the cognitive dynamics prevalent in the practice side of strategy to enhance the use and effectiveness of strategy tools and improve organisational performance. Public sector managers are widely acknowledged as playing a critical role in public service delivery (Huang & Villadsen, 2023; Witesman et al., 2024), yet there is a notable gap concerning their involvement in strategic planning (Begkos et al., 2020) and in how they utilise and interact with the strategy tools at their disposal. By bringing back the

human element and focusing on managers' perceptions, this study answers the call by Foss & Mazzelli (2025) to bring managers back into the centre of strategic management together with their psychological foundations.

2.3.3 The Strategising Process (Praxis)

Praxis focuses on what practitioners actually do, focusing on the socially situated, embedded and driven flow of activity. Contemporary strategic management scholarship increasingly views strategising not merely as a top-down formulation of plans but as a dynamic, socially negotiated, and iterative process – a form of organizational praxis – that unfolds through the ongoing interactions, sensemaking, and enactments of diverse stakeholders across organizational levels (Brorström, 2020; Weiser et al., 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). This perspective emphasizes that strategy emerges and is refined through continuous dialogue, reflection, and adaptation, highlighting the active participation of various actors who contribute their perspectives and co-create strategic initiatives (Brorström, 2020).

A key tenet of this view is the significance of everyday practices and routine coping actions, often performed without explicit strategic intent, as foundational to how strategy emerges (MacKay et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Whittington, 2025). These seemingly mundane activities shape patterns of action and decision-making, demonstrating that strategy can be an unintentional outcome of collective socio-cultural practices (MacKay et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021). Effective strategising, particularly for complex goals like inclusion, necessitates recognizing strategy as a social practice embedded within specific socio-cultural and organizational contexts, shaped by tacit knowledge, dispositions, and routine interactions (Li & Jarzabkowski, 2025; Brorström, 2020).

Understanding the strategising process requires acknowledging its multifaceted nature, encompassing outcomes, labeled activities, involved actors, and recurring patterns of action, both formal and informal (Seidl et al., 2024). This perspective moves beyond hierarchical models to recognize the lateral and networked relations that shape strategy, emphasizing its collective, embodied, and materially embedded character (Whittington, 2025). In specific contexts like healthcare, strategising is an activity-based process driven by practitioners within their operational environments, utilizing tools and often navigating competing objectives (Begkos et al., 2020). Similarly, within advisory boards, strategising

is deeply rooted in practice-based and social processes, influenced by everyday interactions, power dynamics, and informal norms (Marietto et al., 2025).

The “adaptive turn” in strategising research further underscores the continuous, reciprocal interplay between strategy conceptualization and social enactment, highlighting the importance of feedback loops and multi-level interactions in fostering organizational resilience and responsiveness (Weiser et al., 2020). Viewing strategising as a social practice, fundamentally rooted in collective and distributed practical knowledge (“knowledgeability”), necessitates examining the often less visible, routine practices that contribute to the social construction of strategy (Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022; Prashantham & Healey, 2022).

The strategising process of managers is rarely linear (Friesl et al., 2022; Weiser et al., 2020). Instead, research notes the adaptive nature of strategizing, including the flexibility required. This adaptive praxis involves routines where strategy tools are used as boundary objects to link different organisational functions (e.g., planning, budgeting, and performance management). Hannah et al. (2020) champion a pluralistic praxis for strategizing, emphasizing the need to combine and augment analytical models (strategy tools) to enhance utility and rigor. This approach integrates analytical models with diverse methods to sharpen insights, establish causal links that capture the complexity of real-world problems/challenges, and leverages the individual strengths of diverse strategy tools to achieve greater robustness, relevance, and depth in strategic analysis (Hannah et al., 2020).

The strategising process is increasingly understood as a dynamic, socially situated, and emergent phenomenon shaped by the everyday practices, interactions, and sensemaking of diverse organizational actors. Recognizing the embedded nature of strategy within social, cultural, and material contexts and moving beyond purely top-down or intentional views provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of how strategies are formed, enacted, and evolved within organizations. A key function within this process is the use of strategy tools as boundary objects in communicating with the organisation and as vehicles for organisational members to micro-strategize in an informal manner. However, the extent to which strategy tools actually play a role in this micro-process and practice-based approach is still a question for researchers to answer.

2.4 Contextual contingency of strategy tools

The literature consistently highlights that the effectiveness of strategy tools is fundamentally context-dependent (Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Felício et al., 2021). Context is conceived as a dynamic, socially constructed process rather than a static backdrop (Turner et al., 2021). It is inherently subjective, meaning it is perceived and experienced differently by various actors, and it is continuously shaped by power relations, organizational norms, and stakeholder interests (Turner et al., 2021). This relational view implies that strategy tools must be regarded as sociomaterial practices whose relevance hinges on their ability to resonate with and adapt to the prevailing cultural, political, and infrastructural conditions of the setting (Turner et al., 2021). A major challenge, particularly in the public sector, is that many theoretically valuable tools often neglect the everyday context of practitioners and institutions, which is a primary reason for their failure to integrate into organizational practices (Pot et al., 2022). Furthermore, tools are not neutral instruments; they are subject to interpretation and contestation, which determines whether they facilitate or hinder strategizing (Turner et al., 2021).

Consequently, successful strategizing demands contextual alignment: managers must adapt their strategic choices to their unique environmental conditions to achieve desired outcomes (Rho et al., 2021). The effective use of tools, such as performance management, is highly influenced by a favorable context, including administrative stability and positive political-administrative relations between political leaders and staff (Cepiku et al., 2024). External pressure from professional associations or regulations can incentivize the adoption of performance systems (strategy tools). Still, other external pressures, such as those from citizens, may not significantly influence their actual utilization (Cepiku et al., 2024). This underscores the need for reflexivity among practitioners, ensuring that their chosen tools are embedded within and sensitive to the specific, power-laden conditions of their public sector environment (Turner et al., 2021).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical foundation of this study by situating the research within the Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) framework. The S-a-P lens is well-suited to interpreting the nuances of strategizing in complex, non-market environments (such as

the public sector in LMICs) by looking beyond formalized strategic planning (traditional strategic management) and focusing on the dynamic, micro-level processes of strategizing (i.e., practices, practitioners, and praxis) to understand how public sector managers strategize in a different context.

The literature review has yielded three key theoretical conclusions that frame the ensuing empirical investigation and main research questions. First, the S-a-P scholarship is undergoing a critical theoretical evolution, transitioning away from "substantialist metaphysics" and hierarchical ontologies toward "flat" or processual ontologies (MacKay et al., 2021; Whittington, 2025). This shift underscores that strategy is an emergent phenomenon situated in continuous, interconnected socio-cultural actions, requiring research to focus on the embeddedness of practices rather than solely on individual agency (Marietto et al., 2025).

Secondly, the literature review confirms that strategizing is a dynamic, nonlinear process that involves the continuous co-production of strategy through cycles of conceptualization and enactment (Weiser et al., 2020; Friesl et al., 2021). Crucially, this process is mediated by strategy tools that serve as instrumental, symbolic, and political artifacts, and by practitioners whose agency, knowledgeability, and unique managerial interpretations shape how these tools are utilized (Friesl et al., 2021; Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022). Research confirms that deliberate strategy implementation is heavily influenced by managerial intent, interpretation, and perceived control (Friesl et al., 2021).

Thirdly, the effectiveness of strategy tools is critically dependent on the perceptual and cognitive processes of the managers who use them (Desmidt and Meyfroot, 2021; Banks and May, 2025). Managerial perception acts as a central cognitive filter, subject to heuristics, biases, and socio-emotional influences, which determine tool adoption, interpretation, and strategic contribution (Hodgkinson et al., 2023; Meyfroot and Desmidt, 2021). Thus, understanding the subjective lens of the managers involved in strategizing is paramount to explaining strategy enactment.

Despite the rich theoretical insights provided by the S-a-P perspective, the literature review has identified empirical gaps that this study aims to address and, in turn, offer valuable empirical insights to the scholarship on the use of strategy tools in a different setting. There is a pronounced empirical deficit in S-a-P research specifically focused on public sector

organizations (Bryson et al., 2022; Friesl et al., 2021). Consequently, critical gaps exist in understanding how strategy is actually enacted in complex, non-market contexts, particularly where strategizing is often an improvisational process (Kitchner & Ashworth, 2025).

A related gap exists concerning the application and usefulness of strategy tools developed in advanced private sector settings for use in different contexts, such as Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023). This potential mismatch (tool incompatibility) means that inferences drawn from High-Income Country (HIC) private sector research cannot be logically extended to diverse public sector environments. Although the importance of managerial perception is acknowledged, there is a notable gap concerning the involvement of public sector managers in strategic planning (Begkos et al., 2020) and a lack of empirical evidence regarding how context shapes their specific perceptions and utilization of strategy tools.

This study directly responds to calls in the literature to extend the micro-practices of strategic management to new contexts and fields (Brorström, 2020; Li & Jarzabkowski, 2025). By focusing on the perceptions of South African public sector managers regarding their use of strategy tools, this research will leverage the S-a-P's social lens to address the critical gaps pertaining to contextual variation in strategic management practices and contribute essential empirical knowledge to the practitioner-practice-praxis relationship in a unique, under-researched setting. The study thus answers the call to bring managers and their psychological foundations back into the centre of strategic management (Foss & Mazzelli, 2025).

3. Chapter 3: Research questions and objectives

3.1 Introduction

The primary focus of this study is to address the empirical gap in the application of strategy tools by public sector managers, particularly in the distinct context of Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) such as South Africa. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of strategy tools and their usage, this study adopts the Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) theoretical lens to explore the deeply subjective and socially embedded/situated nature of strategising. The main research question this study seeks to answer is: *how public sector managers perceive the usefulness and relevance of strategy tools, and how these perceptions—shaped by the public sector's unique mandate and institutional complexities—subsequently influence their day-to-day strategising activities?*

This chapter outlines the overarching research aim, specifies the main research questions (RQs) and operational objectives, and provides a detailed theoretical rationale for each question, demonstrating its necessity and alignment with the S-a-P theoretical framework established in Chapter 2.

3.2 Overarching Research Aim

The overriding purpose of this study is to explore, from a S-a-P perspective, how public sector managers' perceptions of strategy tools influence their usage during their mandated strategising activities within the South African context.

3.3 Main Research Questions (RQs)

Based on the literature review and the identified gaps concerning strategy tool usage, practitioner competence, and contextual contingency, the study is guided by the following four main research questions:

Research Question One (RQ 1): How do public sector managers perceive the usefulness and relevance of the various strategy tools and frameworks they encounter in their strategising work?

Research Question Two (RQ 2): Which strategy tools do public sector managers use the most during their strategising work?

Research Question Three (RQ 3): How do strategic managers in the public sector perceive their knowledge and effective understanding of strategy tools?

Research Question Four (RQ 4): What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector strategising process?

3.4 Research Objectives

The research questions are operationalized into the following specific research objectives (ROs) that the study aims to achieve:

- **RO 1:** To determine the subjective cognitive perceptions of public sector managers regarding the utility, relevance, and fit of strategy tools within their respective public sector mandates.
- **RO 2:** To identify the specific strategy tools that are most frequently adopted and used by public sector managers, and to describe the micro-practices employed in their application and adaptation.
- **RO 3:** To assess the self-perceived level of strategy tool competence and knowledgeability among public sector managers required for the effective application of strategy tools.
- **RO 4:** To explore the perceived consequences (benefits and drawbacks) of strategy tool usage.

3.5 Theoretical and conceptual rationale for research questions

The four research questions are designed to capture the three core elements of the S-a-P framework — practitioners, practices, and praxis — while maintaining a sharp focus on the public sector's unique contextual dimension. The rationale below justifies the necessity of each question in addressing the stated research gaps.

3.5.1 Rationale for RQ 1: Perceptions, usefulness, and relevance

RQ 1: How do public sector managers perceive the usefulness and relevance of the various strategy tools and frameworks they encounter in their strategising work?

This question is foundational, anchoring the study to the practitioner element of S-a-P. Traditional strategy research often treats strategy tools (practices) as objective, neutral instruments. In contrast, the S-a-P perspective demands an investigation into how the practitioner makes sense of the strategy tool, a process often guided by managerial cognition, bounded rationality, and heuristics.

The need for this question stems from the high rate of tool incompatibility and irrelevance, and from the frequent rejection of tools observed in public sector contexts. The perceived 'usefulness' of a tool like Porter's Five Forces, for instance, is likely distorted when applied to an environment focused on service delivery and legislative compliance rather than market competition. By exploring perceptions, the study directly uncovers the cognitive filters managers use: how their prior experience, organisational norms, and individual judgment determine whether a strategy tool is viewed as a valuable aid or a mandated compliance (tick-box) burden. Addressing RQ 1 is therefore essential for understanding the starting point of the strategising process—the manager's internal decision to accept, reject, or adapt a specific strategy tool.

3.5.2 Rationale for RQ 2: Tool usage

RQ 2: *Which strategy tools do public sector managers use the most during their strategising work?*

RQ 2 shifts the focus from cognition (of practitioners) to observable action, targeting the practices and praxis elements of S-a-P. While RQ 1 explores the managers' intentions and opinions, RQ 2 investigates the micro-practices that result from the use of strategy tools. It is insufficient to list the strategy tools used. The crucial insights lie in how managers deploy strategy tools, specifically, whether they use them formally, informally, entirely, or in a hybrid, adapted manner.

3.5.3 Rationale for RQ 3: Knowledge, Understanding, and Competence

RQ 3: *How do strategic managers in the public sector perceive their knowledge and effective understanding of strategy tools?*

This question redirects focus to the practitioner (manager) element, but specifically addresses the critical dimension of strategy tool competence and knowledgeability.

Effective strategy formulation, implementation, and execution are contingent not only on having the right tools but also on the tacit knowledge and skills of the actors involved. Given the nature of public service and administration, where professional development often lags behind private sector standards, it is vital to assess whether managers feel equipped to use complex, technically demanding strategy tools.

This research question probes the origins of public sector managers' competence in strategy tools. By asking public sector managers to reflect on their knowledge of strategy tools, the study provides tangible insights into why some strategy tools may be used as intended, misused (malicious compliance), or abandoned. A lack of knowledge may (or may not) directly contribute to a strategy tool's perceived uselessness and its subsequent ritualistic, rather than effective, deployment. Addressing this question has crucial practical implications for training, development, and the long-term sustainability of strategic management effectiveness in the public sector.

3.5.4 Rationale for RQ 4: Perceived Benefits, Drawbacks, and Context

RQ 4: *What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector strategising process?*

This final question serves as the synthesizing question, linking all three S-a-P elements—practitioner (manager) perception, practice (strategy tool) use, and the contextual outcomes of praxis (strategising). It moves beyond descriptive accounts to evaluate the overall value proposition of strategy tools as perceived by the public sector managers.

The 'drawbacks' component is particularly necessary to test the theoretical concepts of strategy tool incompatibility and contextual contingency within the context of a highly legally mandated and regulated strategic management environment, that is the public sector. By soliciting public sector managers' subjective evaluations, this question frames the final theoretical contribution, and provides the data needed to formulate policy-relevant recommendations to enhance the strategic value derived from strategy tools.

4. Chapter 4: Research methodology

4.1 Choice of Methodology and Theoretical Justification

This study aims to explore public sector managers' perceptions of their use of strategy tools (the phenomenon) and the influence of those perceptions on their strategising work (Praxis). Given the study's exploratory nature and the research questions that seek to understand the subjective lived experiences, meanings, and sensemaking of public sector managers, a qualitative research methodology is deemed most appropriate (Creswell and Creswell, 2023).

More importantly, the S-a-P theoretical lens adopted in Chapter 2: Literature review, necessitates a micro-level investigation of social and contextual interactions, best achieved through in-depth qualitative inquiry (Prashantham and Healey, 2022). Since the phenomenon of strategy tool use, particularly its contextual contingency and tool incompatibility, in the South African public sector is underexplored, a qualitative exploratory approach provides the necessary depth to generate rich, context-specific theory.

4.2 Research Philosophy and Stance

4.2.1 Ontology (The Nature of Reality)

Ontology pertains to the nature of reality, emphasizing that organisational phenomena are socially constructed rather than purely physical entities (Gioia, 2022). This study took an interpretivist stance, which posits that reality is constructed through social interactions and the meaning-making processes of different actors. Therefore, the study's interest was not merely to describe *what* strategy tools public sector managers utilise, but to understand *how they perceive and make sense of the reality* created by their experiences, interactions, and respective organisational contexts. This focus on the diverse and nuanced meanings public sector managers ascribe to strategy tools directly aligns with the S-a-P focus on the practitioner's cognition and situated experience.

4.2.2 Epistemology (The Nature of Knowledge)

Aligned with the interpretivist ontology, the researcher's epistemological approach to this study was subjectivism. The focus was on understanding the public sector managers'

sensemaking processes associated with their perceived use of strategy tools. Their perceptions, beliefs, understandings, and personal accounts about these strategy tools' usefulness, relevance, and influence were treated as subjective, socially constructed phenomena (Whittle and Reissner, 2024). The researcher interpreted and made sense of the participants' subjective accounts, acknowledging the inherent influence of the participants' perspectives and the context in which they operate. The aim was to generate rich, descriptive insights consistent with the epistemological foundations of qualitative inquiry (Creswell and Creswell, 2023; Whittle and Reissner, 2024).

4.3 Research Design: Phenomenology

A phenomenological research design investigates a phenomenon through the descriptions of lived experiences provided by the individuals who have experienced it (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). A phenomenological research design was suitable for this study, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of public sector managers' (practitioners) perceptions and the meanings they make from their lived experiences of using and interacting with strategy tools (practices) in their daily strategising work (praxis). This design ensures that the derived themes (e.g., strategy tools used by public sector managers, perceived benefits, and results when strategy tools are used correctly) are genuinely rooted in managers' cognitive and practical realities.

The findings were not pre-determined, meaning the knowledge of the phenomenon of strategy tool use by public sector managers was cognitively constructed from participants' semi-structured interview responses. The investigation aims to explore how the formal, structured strategic planning processes within the public sector, often mandated by legislated frameworks (DPME), influence the actual, lived strategising activities of managers.

4.4 Research Setting and Participants

4.4.1 Population and Contextual Sampling (Strategic Alignment)

The study was set up in three public sector institutions in the Gauteng Province of South Africa: a Schedule 3 Public Entity, a National Government Department, and a Local Government Institution. The selection of Gauteng was pragmatic, but the selection of three distinct spheres of government was methodologically intentional. It represents a strategic

choice to explore contextual contingency by comparing how strategy tools are perceived and used across public sector organisations with varying mandates, resource levels, and degrees of autonomy. Including policy-making and implementation levels allows for a richer understanding of the nuances that influence perceptions and the perceived effectiveness of strategy tools. The selection thus serves as a contextual triangulation mechanism, with the heterogeneity of participants and public-sector contexts enhancing the richness and transferability of the findings.

4.4.2 Unit of Analysis and Sampling Strategy

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual public sector manager. The study employed a purposeful sampling strategy to select participants. The use of a small, purposive sample is consistent with a phenomenological qualitative study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Given that the study's focus is on understanding the experiences of strategy 'doers' (practitioners), the sampling was limited to senior to middle-level managers with direct, active experience of using strategy tools in their strategising work.

The final sample size was determined by saturation, resulting in the recruitment of 13 participants from three distinct types of public-sector institutions to participate in the one-on-one interviews. This purposeful variation in organisational context ensured an exploration of potentially different perceptions and experiences across organisational and legislative contexts.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

4.5.1 Research Instrument (Semi-Structured Interviews)

The primary method of gathering data for qualitative phenomenological studies is through interviews with people with first-hand experience of the explored phenomena (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). The interview protocol consisted of semi-structured and open-ended questions designed to elicit rich narrative data in line with the research questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). This method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to probe deeply into the managers' sensemaking and unobservable micro-practices—a necessity for S-a-P research—which may not be adequately captured through observation or quantitative means.

4.5.2 Data gathering process

Data collection was conducted primarily through interviews with public sector managers who have direct experience with strategy tools and are involved in the organisation's strategising activities (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). The confidentiality of participants in the study was maintained from data collection through data analysis to the final report. The researcher did not offer incentives to induce participation. All participants were free to withdraw their participation at any stage of the process. The researcher secured documented consent from each participant as confirmation of their informed consent to be interviewed.

All interviews with the participants were conducted virtually, utilising the ZOOM platform. All interviews took place in October 2025. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes, with the longest at 62 minutes and the shortest at 20 minutes. This was sufficient to compile a comprehensive dataset. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to enable verbatim transcription, ensuring accuracy and facilitating a thorough analysis. The researcher ensured the integrity of data collection through robust audio recording and a secure platform for virtual interviews. The recordings are stored on cloud-based platforms (iCloud and Google Drive) to ensure access and availability for analysis at a later stage.

4.6 Data Analysis Approach

The data analysis began with the researcher reviewing all audio recordings and the transcripts. All transcripts were manually reviewed by the researcher to ensure they completely captured the interview proceedings and were consistent with the audio files. The researcher ensured that editing of the transcripts was limited to removing identifiers and fix minor transcription errors without altering the actual responses from participants. After the editing, the transcripts were given participants' IDs and uploaded to the coding software Atlas.ti to extract high-level concepts and ideas from the data.

The identification of these initial concepts and codes was then conducted. Once all the transcripts were coded, the initial codes were analysed by the researcher for commonalities and aggregated into code groups representing high-level themes. Finally, a list of themes was constructed based on the relationships identified in the analysis. This was an iterative

process, with the researcher going back and forth to the data source/transcripts, forming and reviewing the relationships and the meanings.

The researcher used an inductive approach to analyse the qualitative data, identifying key insights. This approach aligns with the interpretivist stance, which posits that knowledge is constructed through managers' subjective interpretations. Specifically, a detailed analysis of the qualitative data sets was conducted following a reflexive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 12).

Table

Table 2: Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source 2: Braun and Clarke (2006, p87)

Reflexive thematic analysis was appropriate for this study because:

- The sample was heterogeneous (across three spheres of the public sector), allowing the method to capture a diversity of perspectives.
- The research has clear implications for practice, requiring actionable themes.
- It is designed to explore how individual experiences (practitioners) are embedded within broader socio-cultural contexts.

The analysis was an iterative process, involving back-and-forth between initial codes, aggregated code groups, and the final themes. The use of software ATLAS.ti supported the systematic management of data. The final themes were derived from the relationships identified in the analysis, ensuring they were data-driven and reflected the participants' lived realities.

4.7 Research Quality and Rigour

To ensure quality and rigour, the study adhered to established criteria for qualitative trustworthiness. Credibility (internal validity) was established through triangulation of data (comparing participant perspectives with other participants, and the use of probing questions during interviews). The researcher ensured transferability (external validity) of the research by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the study context and participants, enabling readers to assess the potential applicability of the findings to other similar public-sector settings in South Africa and/or around the world. Dependability and confirmability of the research were ensured through meticulous record-keeping (audit trail), the consistent application of code definitions, and the use of software ATLAS.ti to structure the data management process.

The researcher also ensured the acknowledged mitigation of personal bias by transparently noting the researcher's role as a public sector executive—a critical step in maintaining the integrity of a S-a-P study. To ensure quality and rigour during the data gathering phase, the researcher ensured that all data collection instruments, audio recordings, interview transcripts were organized and handled systematically using Microsoft Office applications. The thematic analysis was conducted using the coding functions on ATLAS.ti. to identify general themes from the transcripts. The research adopted an iterative approach, with the researcher going back and forth to ensure the process could be replicated with ease.

4.8 Limitations of the Research Design and Method

The researcher will consider limitations to the study during data collection and analysis. Given the chosen phenomenological-interpretivist research design, the researcher's role in the study may pose a potential limitation, despite mitigation measures to counter bias. The researcher is a strategy executive at a public-sector institution, and their relationship with some participants may influence their responses. Using a small sample size, consistent with the phenomenological qualitative design, limits the breadth of perspective gained from a larger sample in a quantitative study design. The study relies on individuals without institutional backing (due to time constraints associated with seeking permissions), which may limit the depth of access to participants, documentation, and organisational context. The study also assumes that the interviewees will be open and transparent when sharing information and their experiences. Selecting Gauteng Province and three public sector institutions in the province as the study's setting and population limits the generalizability of the study's results to the entire South African public sector.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study, the researcher upheld the highest ethical standards for research involving human participants. The researcher obtained informed consent from each participant before their involvement, in writing by sending a consent form, and ensured they understood the nature of the study and their rights as participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The researcher maintained the confidentiality of participants and the anonymity of their data throughout the research process by ensuring that data were stored without identifiers. The researcher obtained the required ethical clearance from the GIBS ethics committee before commencing the research.

5. Chapter 5: Research Findings

5.1 Introduction

The findings present a detailed exploration of the perceptions of South African public sector managers from public sector entities representing the three spheres of government. The qualitative analysis is based on the perceptions and experiences of highly seasoned participants, whose extensive organisational tenure (ranging from 10 to 20 years) and strategic roles (oversight, policy, execution) lend significant practical weight to the study's findings. Table 2 below shows the demographic profile of the 13 participants.

Table 3: Participant demographic information

Participant ID	Type of public sector organisation	Title	Role	Years in the role	Years in the organisation
Participant 01	National Department	Deputy Director	Public Institutions Oversight		10 years
Participant 02	Public Entity	Head	Service Champion	5 years	20 years
Participant 03	Local Government Entity	Manager	Stakeholder Relations	16 years	21 years
Participant 04	Public Entity	Head	EPMO	6 years	17 years
Participant 05	National Department	Director	Policy, Strategy	11 years	15 years
Participant 06	Public Entity	Head	Product, Policy, Processes design and engineering		17 years
Participant 07	Local Government Entity	Executive	Corporate Strategy & Reporting	5 years	5 years
Participant 08	National Department	Deputy Director General	Governance, Risk, Compliance and ICT	11 years	14 years
Participant 09	National Department	Acting Director	Performance Monitoring & Evaluation	15 years	15 years
Participant 10	National Department	Senior Budget Analyst	Manage and Evaluate expenditure by Departments	15 years	15 years
Participant 11	Public Entity	Head	National Operations		17 years
Participant 12	Local Government Entity	Manager	Strategy Monitoring & Evaluation	5 years	5 years
Participant 13	Public Entity	Manager	Business Architecture		13 years

The qualitative insights included and discussed in this study were generated through a comprehensive qualitative analysis, in which initial granular codes reflecting participants' specific perceptions, experiences, and mentions of the strategy tools were aggregated into higher-level codes representing the main analytical themes.

The data were not fitted into predetermined codes or conceptual frameworks but were instead coded based on participants' cited expressions, consistent with the reflexive thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The themes were derived solely from the transcript data. This process was used to transform raw descriptive data e.g. "...But the question is, look did you adjust your plan to that change in the environment?"

It doesn't allow for that..." to initial code – "rigid planning regime " into key theme – "challenges and drawbacks of using strategy tools".

The reflexive thematic analysis yielded six main themes that address the four main research questions, including the study's overall purpose. The findings are therefore be presented according to these themes covering the following: strategy tools used by public sector managers; contextual contingency and strategy tool selection/relevance; how public sector managers deploy strategy tools; how knowledge of strategy tools is acquired; perceived benefits and results achieved when strategy tools are used correctly; challenges and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector; and finally, suggestions for strategy tool use improvements in the public sector. Direct quotations from the participants are used to support the findings.

Table 3 below shows how the themes generated from the thematic analysis are aligned with the main research questions and conceptual constructs

Theoretical Construct	Research Question (RQ)	Corresponding Main Theme(s) in Findings	Explanation
Strategy Tools (Practices)	RQ2: Which strategy tools do public sector managers use the most during their strategising work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy Tools Used by Public Sector Managers 	Directly answers the "which strategy tools" component, providing the empirical inventory of utilized practices by public sector managers.
Managerial Perceptions (Practitioners)	RQ1: How do public sector managers <i>perceive</i> the usefulness and relevance of the various strategy tools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy Tools Used by Public Sector Managers Perceived Benefits and Results Achieved When Strategy Tools are Used Correctly 	The strategy tool they use is a reflection of its perceived relevance. Captures the perceived utility and value (usefulness) of the tools.
	RQ3: How strategic managers in the public sector <i>perceive their knowledge</i> and effective understanding of strategy tools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How Knowledge of Strategy Tools is Acquired? 	Explores the sources and perceived adequacy of competence.
Strategising Process (Praxis)	RQ4: What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector's strategising process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How Public Sector Managers Deploy and Use Strategy Tools? 	Details <i>how</i> tools are applied in the strategy process (<i>praxis</i>) to achieve benefits/avoid drawbacks.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived Benefits and Results Achieved When Strategy Tools are Used Correctly 	Directly reports the benefits of the strategising praxis.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges and Drawbacks of Using Strategy Tools in the Public Sector 	Directly reports the drawbacks and constraints impacting the strategising praxis.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggestions for Strategy Tool Use Improvements in the Public Sector 	Provides solutions for enhancing the quality of the strategising praxis.

Table 4: Alignment of main themes with theoretical constructs and RQs

5.2 Discussion of the Main Themes

To establish the foundation for the findings, participants were initially asked to list the strategy tools they are familiar with or have actively used in their strategising work. This line of inquiry was critical for establishing the extent of their knowledge and practical familiarity with these tools. Given the diverse professional backgrounds, some participants requested clarity on the scope of the tools to ensure a common point of reference. For this study, the definition of strategy tools adopted is consistent with the definitions found in literature, which defines strategy tools as "...conceptual aids, structured methods, or material artifacts intended to support strategic analysis, planning, decision-making, implementation, and control"(Felício et al., 2021; Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Hannah et al., 2021).

This shared definition ensured that subsequent discussions on tool use, knowledge acquisition, and challenges were grounded in a consistent understanding of what constitutes a “strategy tool” in the public sector. The above definition informs the ensuing discussions.

5.2.1 Theme One: Strategy tools used by public sector managers

This theme captures the strategy tools South African public sector managers use, as well as those they perceive as relevant or irrelevant in the public sector context. The findings reveal that South African public sector managers are familiar with and/or aware of most strategy tools and use the most common tools, such as PESTEL, SWOT, and the Balanced Scorecard (BSC), in their strategising work. The findings also indicate that South African public sector managers do not rely on a single strategy tool for their strategising, but instead use a hybrid, context-specific selection of strategy tools, combining and blending traditional strategy tools to address complex public sector mandates and constraints. Their choice and use of strategy tools are also defined by a strong tendency to augment tools to compensate for perceived limitations of traditional strategy tools.

5.2.1.1 Sub-theme: Most utilised and relevant strategy tools

The analysis of participant responses reveals a clear consensus on a core set of foundational tools considered most relevant and heavily utilised, driven primarily by the need for compliance, environmental/situational awareness, and performance measurement within the public sector. The tandem of PESTEL and SWOT analysis provides an indispensable foundation for situational analysis across nearly all participants.

PESTEL analysis is consistently cited as highly relevant due to the political nature of the environment in which the public sector operates. The importance of PESTEL underlies its widespread application amongst public sector managers. This utility is firmly rooted in the need to understand and be familiar with the political environment unique to the South African public sector. As Participant 03 noted:

"...I mean, as I said, we work in a highly politicized environment, so it is important that you understand the environment in which you operate."

Participant 01 further underscored PESTEL's strategic value in public sector strategising relative to other tools, stating:

"I think PESTEL is more useful, and I would rank them, not in the sense of choosing one over the other, but I'd say PESTEL is more useful."

The importance of PESTEL underlies its widespread application by public sector managers. This point was further emphasized by Participant 07, who stated:

"PESTEL will always work better for me in this space, for various reasons. The space in which one finds oneself is influenced by politics....is influenced by the environment itself."

SWOT analysis remains a widely used, commonly cited framework alongside PESTEL. Participant 01 noted how they use SWOT analysis to help entities build internal capabilities: *"You know, recently, I think it's been SWOT. I think we move more to SWOT to look at entities, you know, like to try and strengthen them."*

Participant 02 noted that they mostly use SWOT to strengthen their operation plans: *"...And that's why it is more at an operational level. Therefore, we mostly use the SWOT analysis methodology."*

Strategy tools that bridge strategy with implementation, monitoring, and resource justification are universally relevant due to public accountability requirements. The Objectives & Key Results (OKRs) model is cited as the adopted execution framework in some organizations, valued for its measurable nature. Participant 04 noted its organizational entrenchment:

"Well, the one that we're using in the organisation, that's been adopted for the organisation, is the OKR model... At this point in time, OKR is the one thing that happens, that we use, that we have been, you know, it's been drilled into our minds anyway...it works in the sense that you have clear objectives that are measurable, for that matter, and you can go and track results."

The Balanced Scorecard (BSC) is viewed as an effective and practical framework for planning and monitoring, linking various organizational aspects, including "customers," "financial," and "people" (Participant 11).

Participant 03 confirmed its effectiveness, stating:

"I think I would say, which is also what we use, the Balanced Scorecard, it's also an effective tool and I think we're using it..."

The Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) and Net Present Value (NPV) are financial tools considered crucial in resource-constrained environments such as the public sector. Participant 05 emphasized the criticality of CBA:

"So, for me, I think that is a critical tool that has to be looked at in government because we talk about limited resources. So, there are no infinite resources, so you always have to check within the limited resources what can be achieved within a particular time frame."

The NPV is also used as a ranking tool based on calculation (Participant 04) to prioritise projects and allocate scarce financial and human resources.

Public sector managers also deploy advanced, process-specific tools to achieve strategic objectives, indicating a move toward more sophisticated analysis. The Business Capability Planning (BCP) and Customer Jobs are valued for their advanced diagnostic capabilities. Participant 13 championed the use of BCP and Customer Jobs:

"Personally, I think Business Capability Planning... So, I like the Business Capability-based planning aspect because it focuses on the capabilities that enable a strategic objective... The other thing (tool) that I like is also one that exposes a different perspective, which is the Customer Jobs."

The Theory of Change (ToC) and Logical Framework are essential frameworks for monitoring and evaluation, and policy planning. These frameworks are deployed in the public sector to monitor the impact of public sector programmes. Participants 08 and 09 allude to its deployment in public administration:

"So, I use the theory of change to drive the strategy... I use a forward theory of change and a backward theory of change. So that's the one we use the most."

Participant 09 also noted the reliance placed on the logical framework:

"...there's a reliance on using the logical framework. There is heavy reliance in Public Administration."

Given the multitude of different stakeholders that the public sector must contend with, the Stakeholder Analysis framework is considered vital for navigating the public sector landscape. Participant 03 states:

"...the stakeholder analysis process is an ideal tool because it allows you to identify the influence of various vendors that we need to engage with...because you're also able to reach the stakeholders in terms of their level of importance."

There is also a pragmatic use of internal analysis tools beyond the typical public sector mandates. In this regard, the Resource-Based View (RBV) is used by some public sector managers to assess the strategic viability of a strategy given the organisation's existing resources. Participant 11 articulated this predictive function and adaptation of the RBV to assess strategic feasibility:

"I do use the Resource-Based View in terms of, to be fair, to say whether this tool,, whether this strategy is going to give us an early indication, whether it's going to realize or not, or is this going to be a bridge too far right."

Beyond the standard and well-known conceptual frameworks, strategizing in the public sector is facilitated by material practices such as databases, templates, reporting tools and guidelines developed specifically for public sector needs. For instance, Participant 10 described sophisticated systems linking strategic planning to budget cycles in the public sector:

"So, in terms of strategic tools, we have databases, for instance, that we use for the MTEC process, the medium-term and expenditure framework that basically guides departments on how to budget over the next three years."

Conversely, the absence of such modern artifacts forces others to resort to inefficient manual processes, illustrating the disparity in strategy capacity across organisational contexts in the public sector. Participant 12 articulated the challenge:

“Currently, in our situation, we do not have any tools, right, as far as the system is concerned. Ideally, you would have a system wherein people are reporting and then uploading their performance information and all that. So, all that information is done manually.”

5.2.1.2 Sub-theme: Strategy tools deemed irrelevant or less useful

While public sector managers use a wide array of tools, the findings highlight a strong consensus that many popular private-sector frameworks are either irrelevant in the public sector context or less useful due to systemic implementation flaws and conceptual limitations. This sub-theme reveals the critical lens managers apply when assessing tool utility. The most common reason for deeming a tool irrelevant or less useful is its conceptual misalignment with the public sector's non-competitive/competition, service-delivery mandate. Strategy tools and frameworks that are fundamentally centered on profit maximization and market rivalry are explicitly rejected by public sector managers.

Participant 02 summarized this context:

"Therefore, you are not coming up with a strategy to address competition... You don't have what we call a competitive kind of strategy. You don't apply them."

Participant 11 explained the impracticality of Porter's Five Forces in the public sector:

"Porter's 5 Forces in government, it is relevant in terms of your SOEs (State Owned Entities), but not necessarily in terms of, you know, like a PUBLIC ENTITY, because a PUBLIC ENTITY doesn't actually have a competitor."

Similarly, Participant 06 noted the flaw in the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Matrix:

"I wouldn't say they are less relevant because it is more about the context, you know. But the context that I'm in, I mean the BCG tool, I would not,,I would not necessarily deploy it because not because it's not relevant, but because you have to flip it upside down in the way that you see you know the different blocks, because that model is...the premise of the model is not really on the service, it's on how do you maximize profit. You know, so but, but I mean, you could still apply it in the public sector, but you will have to flip it

upside down. So, it's not something that I would ordinarily pick at the first, because there's a lot more work to do if you're using that tool in the public sector."

Participant 04 also questioned if the BCG matrix would work in the public sector, stating:

"But I don't think the model of the Boston Consulting Group matrix would necessarily work in the public sector. Why I'm saying that it is because we don't necessarily have specific products that we, you know, if it's a product, it's a product that doesn't go through a lifespan of any sort. it's just the product..."

Public sector managers find comprehensive models that require organizational agility to be unsuitable for rigid governmental structures. Participant 07 noted the conflict in local government:

"If we dissect the McKinsey model, we find that it requires overall freedom to make decisions quickly and a short turnaround time... With the McKinsey model, you need to be as agile as possible; however, local government is often the opposite of agility."

Tools that are widely used or even mandatory are often criticized not for their concept but for their flawed execution, which renders them functionally useless. The DPME Framework for Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans (the centralized planning framework for the public sector) is widely criticized for its lack of detail and failure to enforce accountability. Participant 01 was emphatic in their critique of the DPME framework:

"So hence I'm saying that framework itself, I'm not really a fan of because of those kind of things that are so obvious, but they're not really fixing them."

This failure to guide implementation means managers feel like it can *"straightjacket a person"* (Participant 04), serving only as a structural guide rather than a thinking tool (Participant 08).

Despite being one of the most frequently used tools, SWOT analysis is also seen as less useful due to persistent issues. SWOT analysis's reliance on qualitative judgments makes it more subjective and less reliable as a strategy tool.

Participant 05 expressed frustration that SWOT analysis rarely leads to change:

"We always do SWOT analysis, and we will say, you know, this is the strength, the weaknesses, opportunities. But year in, year out, if I check, we keep on repeating the same thing... the system remains the same".

Other managers questioned its rigor, with Participant 13 calling it "very subjective" and a basic tool:

"SWOT... It's very subjective. I can say some of it, yes, you can make it objective. But some of it is subjective. So, you are only looking at this point in time...if you understand what I'm saying. Your weakness might be for now; it doesn't give you a... your weakness will change next year. Do you understand?"

Participant 09 shared the same sentiments:

"It's basic. It's one of those basics you'd get over it and just move on".

Participant 09 criticized the organisational application of SWOT analysis, noting:

"..It shouldn't be a tool...used only for strategy and in those big forums. Why? Let me put it into context. So, you'll find that a SWOT analysis is done in a bigger organization where we sit with executives who are not the implementers. So, my gripe with that is that there will be a SWOT analysis done at that level, not necessarily at the implementation level"

Participant 08 even noted a flaw in its application, stating:

"...the problem with this instrument is that you know when you put something as a strength, you take the very same thing as the opposite...as a weakness...and that's not how SWOT should work. Then that becomes a weakness of the tool itself, because you are basically cancelling out what was in the other category".

Rapid technological advancements and the availability of data are also challenging the relevance of traditional strategy tools, such as five-year strategic plans. Participant 11 summarised the argument that technological advances necessitate a move away from static planning tools towards continuous adaptation:

“..Some theorists these days believe that strategic tools are not relevant anymore, right. That with AI technology and big data, strategy should not be formulated five years in advance, every year you should have the opportunity to tweak the strategy based on what you see, based on your current state analysis.”

In summary, tool irrelevance in the public sector is determined by a confluence of contextual incompatibility (profit motive vs. service delivery orientation) and institutional failure (flawed execution and repetitive analysis). Strategy tools like SWOT analysis have their place in public-sector strategic management processes, but must be used in combination with other tools.

5.2.2 Theme Two: Contextual contingency and strategy tool selection/relevance

This theme demonstrates that managers do not view strategy tools as universally applicable instruments. Instead, the perceived usefulness, selection, and eventual deployment of any strategy tool are highly contingent on the specific organizational mandate, political landscape, and bureaucratic rigidities inherent to the public sector. This finding directly confirms the theoretical necessity of applying a contingency lens to the S-a-P framework in non-market environments such as the public sector.

5.2.2.1 Sub-theme: Tool relevance is determined by context

Participants universally agreed that tool selection is an adaptive process driven by situational needs, rather than adherence to a fixed methodology. This means the strategising process is contingent on the specific problem being addressed at a particular time, forcing public sector managers to custom-fit strategy tools or dismiss them entirely.

Participant 01 articulated this selective approach, stating that when reviewing available tools, they actively:

"...look at them and we pick the best part, you know, depending on the entity and what it needs at that time."

Similarly, Participant 05 emphasized the external conditions that drive the decision, arguing:

"It is context-specific. It depends on what is it that you want to answer at a particular time that you will then tap into a particular framework."

This focus on situational fit leads to a critique and outright rejection of sophisticated tools that public sector managers perceive as misaligned with their public service mandate.

5.2.2.2 Sub-theme: Rejection of market-centric tools

The most significant finding under this theme is the explicit rejection of strategy tools premised on market competition and profit maximization, such as Porter's Five Forces, the Ansoff Matrix, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) matrix, and the McKinsey 7S Model. Managers noted that the public sector's inherent lack of competition and agility makes these tools irrelevant.

Participant 02 succinctly captured the fundamental conflict:

"The dynamics with the public sector are that it doesn't have a competitor. Therefore, you are not coming up with a strategy to address competition... You don't have what we call competitive kind of strategy. You don't apply them."

This sentiment was echoed by others who explicitly dismissed specific frameworks. Participant 03 noted that complex tools were "less relevant" and "not necessarily relevant and ideal for me," specifically citing Porter's Five Forces and the Ansoff Matrix.

Similarly, the profit-maximizing nature of portfolio management models rendered them unusable. Participant 06 explained their non-deployment of the BCG Matrix:

"...not because it's not relevant, but because you have to flip it upside down in the way that you see you know the different blocks, because that model is...the premise of the model is not really on the service, it's on how do you maximize profit."

This conflict highlights the empirical reality of tool incompatibility—a theoretical issue that managers resolve by engaging in tool rejection and/or, in the public sector, the tick-box mentality.

5.2.2.3 Sub-theme: Institutional and political contingencies

The data further revealed that strategy tool relevance is not just contingent on the sector (public vs. private), but also on the specific institutional and political contingencies within the public sector itself. This variation in the operating environment dictates strategy tool effectiveness across the three spheres of government.

Participant 11, for example, argued that while Porter's Five Forces is generally irrelevant for a typical Public Entity, it gains marginal relevance when applied to State-Owned Entities (SOEs), where market dynamics are slightly present. However, the core difference remains:

"It's just that in government predominantly, we're not selling for profit, right? But our key indicator is the quality of the service delivery that we are doing or is that are we collecting your bin within time every week or are we making sure we're fixing the pothole. That's the strategy with government."

Furthermore, the rigidities of public administration, such as unionized staff and coalition politics, directly limit the application of comprehensive change models. Participant 07 noted the futility of applying the McKinsey 7S model in local government:

"If you look at the McKinsey model, it discusses your staff, skills... In local government, you find that you inherit a lot of 'deadwood' with all due respect...there is resistance from the union's point of view to getting rid of underperforming staff members...you need to be as agile as possible; however, local government is often the opposite of agility."

The political environment acts as a further contingency factor. Participant 07 noted how strategies must constantly adapt to the political climate:

"The political environment determines the political direction... For example, we are in the City of ???... we are guided by coalition government, which means the strategy that you want to actually adopt or work with, you might find that... some of these strategies then get to shift. Either they shift to the left or shift to the right, and it impacts the organization itself."

The above findings confirm that the strategizing process is continually negotiated by practitioners (managers), who must select and adapt strategy tools in response to highly

fluid institutional, economic, and political contextual contingencies. This clearly shows that contextual contingency is one of the core principles governing strategy tool choice, making the strategising process a pragmatic exercise in matching a tool's affordances to the public sector's current reality.

5.2.3 Theme Three: How public sector managers deploy strategy tools

The core theme of tool deployment reveals that strategy is an integrated, systematic, and highly pragmatic process, in which tools are not standalone exercises but rather interdependent stages within the larger organisational and political cycle. Public sector managers use strategy tools to establish a clear line of sight from political mandates to operational capacity and resource allocation. This theme reflects the strategising activities and actions of public sector managers using the identified strategy tools (practices) to address pressing, sometimes conflicting, stakeholder needs and mandates. It highlights the depths of the public sector managers' strategy competence and their ability to utilise the strategy tools at their disposal to address practical business problems and/or opportunities.

Public sector managers demonstrate a high degree of practical strategic competence by articulating multi-step, integrated processes that link diagnostic tools (like SWOT and PESTEL) directly to organizational decisions, resource allocation, and the mandates of the respective public sector entities.

5.2.3.1 Sub-theme: Structured and multi-phase process

Public sector managers describe a strategy tool deployment process (praxis) that follows distinct, logical phases, beginning with data collection and assessment, then moving to strategy formulation and execution. The process always starts with a rigorous evaluation of past performance and the current operating context.

Participant 01 detailed the initial steps:

"Actually, steps are more like you gather information, like past performance in terms of non-financial and financial information."

Participant 05 elaborated on the diagnostic approach:

"...you will then check what basically have we been doing, right. So that is basically to check what are the strengths and some of the questions for you to be able to correct some of the shortcomings will be to say - what are the weaknesses that are currently in the systems?"

Strategy tools are also deployed to define the gap between current realities and strategic ambitions. Participant 04 explained the conceptual model:

"So if you think about a scenario where you are here and you want to be there... So this is your current state, this is a future state that you want to be in, and this process or this gap is filled by a project."

This includes capacity assessment, as Participant 01 noted:

"...you check the entity itself in terms of engaging with the seniors to see, to assess the capability and capacity of the entity itself."

The process is concluded with the formulation of strategies, followed by testing and monitoring of the plans. Participant 06 described this cyclical approach:

"And once those are refined, we then put the implementation plan in place. And then on top of the implementation plan, we generate the monitoring plan, against the implementation plan."

5.2.3.2 Sub-theme: Systematic integration and layering of tools

Strategy tools are deployed not in isolation, but through a conscious effort to integrate outputs from different frameworks to build a comprehensive analysis. Participants reject the idea of using single tools for complex analysis. Participant 03 stated definitively:

"You actually cannot use one over the other if I could put it like that... I can't really say the Stakeholder Matrix is the best method... You find that you are really using all of them."

The output of one tool often becomes the input for the next. Participant 02 showed how diagnostic tools feed execution:

*"And those pain points, you have picked them up when you are doing the SWOT analysis.
What are the weakest links? And you connect to such..."*

Some public sector managers engage in complex cross-mapping between customer, capability, and performance tools highlighting some of the nuances in the strategising activities. Participant 13 described mapping customer jobs to capabilities:

"Then we do a cross-map of these jobs to the capabilities... We examine the business capabilities for each strategic objective and determine, for a customer-specific job, which capabilities align with filing that rate return correctly from an individual ratepayer's perspective."

Participant 07 described layering SWOT onto PESTEL for capacity testing:

"I might able to say if I look at the strength of my organization I might able to throw SWOT in between... I will put in SWOT in between for example and look at, say, at the political landscape - is it stable?"

5.2.3.3 Sub-theme: Linking tools to organisational/political/customer mandates

The deployment of strategy tools by public sector managers focuses on ensuring that all strategic activities are aligned with political and legislative mandates, culminating in resource prioritisation. The first check for any activity is its alignment with the government's policy direction and the organization's strategic objectives.

Participant 01 noted that the initial check is:

"What does the government want to achieve? What will the success of those policy directives look like, and how can this entity assist..."

Participant 04 stated:

"Whatever activity that we want to undertake, does it support any of the OKRs?"

Strategy tools are specifically deployed to manage the unique political and public/service delivery environment. Participant 07 described the proactive use of strategy tools to ensure political buy-in:

"I want to first rank my stakeholders so that I can juxtapose the appetite of the stakeholders vis-à-vis this model. Then I am able to know that I am responding to the needs of my stakeholders first before I even develop the strategy document itself."

The deployment process ultimately serves as a justification for spending public resources.

Participant 13 summarized this function:

"This is another way to ask: are we investing in the right things, or are we prioritizing the right things to invest in?" The goal is that when prioritizing, *"you know that I'm spending money on these particular things, and this is the knock-on effect."*

5.2.4 Theme Four: How knowledge of strategy tools is acquired

This theme reflects how public sector managers gain knowledge of strategy tools, their level of confidence in their understanding and application of the tools, and their perceived training needs. The acquisition of knowledge regarding strategy tools among public sector managers is a multifaceted, predominantly experiential process, relying more on self-direction and practical application than on formal, organization-led training. While confidence in tool usage is generally high, it is overwhelmingly anchored in demonstrated practical experience and continuous self-learning rather than reliance on episodic corporate training.

5.2.4.1 Sub-theme: Experiential learning and self-teaching

Formal training is a secondary source of learning; the most significant knowledge acquisition occurs through daily work demands, research, and self-teaching. The demanding nature of the work environment forces continuous learning and research.

Participant 01 identified on-the-job training as the primary source of training, stating:

"...no formal training, on-the-job training, me reading it, understanding it, and even trying to apply it..."

Participant 07 confirmed this, emphasizing that:

"The environment itself encourages you to look for models and ways to find solutions continually."

Many highly relevant tools were learned outside of a formal classroom/training setting. Participant 08 stated emphatically:

"Self-taught! I think, yeah, I think it's also part of my background. I wouldn't say specific training on it, but it's self-taught exposure and experience."

Participant 13 shared a similar experience regarding learning about a new relevant strategy tool:

"I've learned that the Customer Canvas or the Value Proposition Canvas I have...I only learned it recently, and it was self-taught."

Knowledge of strategy tools is often augmented through informal consultation with colleagues. Participant 01 mentioned augmenting tool knowledge by:

"...also engaging with you know other colleagues...from public entities that understand (those) things better... to ask and learn."

5.2.4.2 Sub-theme: Formal academic training

While less frequent as an institutional intervention, formal academic training provides a critical theoretical foundation that boosts public sector managers' confidence. Formal education, particularly at the Master's level, provides a strong conceptual foundation, while targeted in-house training is reserved for customized governmental frameworks. Several participants cited advanced degrees (Masters, MBAs) as the source of their theoretical knowledge and confidence.

Participant 09 noted:

"...I've gone through the process of saying OK fine, I'm going to do a Master's Degree...in Public Policy...majoring in monitoring and evaluation. So that I can understand exactly what is happening in public administration, what is happening in government."

Participant 13 mentioned learning about other strategy tools whilst doing strategic management at Masters' level:

"The other stuff, like Balanced Scorecard, is something that I've done in my studies in the past. You do that when you are doing strategic management at the Master's..."

Formal training is seen as non-negotiable for analysts involved in compliance frameworks to maintain credibility. Participant 10 stated:

"So, my knowledge has to be at its best to ensure that the department...that (who) inputs into that specific tool, has a very good understanding of what they are supposed to do... if we don't have that knowledge, it then takes away the credibility of the information that the departments would provide."

Participant 05 confirmed the sentiments expressed by participant 10:

"So, these tools, like your cost-benefit analysis, were things we had to do because if Department X wanted funding, it was not just about what you are telling me, that I want to build a road. I had to satisfy myself that whatever you are giving me makes economic sense based on what I know."

5.2.4.3 Sub-theme: High confidence rooted in practical experience and tangible results

Most managers expressed high confidence in their knowledge, justifying it primarily through years of practical application and evidence of strategic success, which they use to hold others accountable. Confidence is directly linked to experience and seniority. Participant 02 attributed their strong confidence in the knowledge and application of strategy tools:

"...the basis that I've been one in leadership for a number of years. I think it's very close to 29 years I've been in leadership... have applied different methodologies, but two, you realize that if you have done something for longer period, you are now comfortable."

Participant 03 similarly stated:

"I think probably because of experience, I would say I am fairly confident..."

For some participants, confidence is based on measurable, past achievements.

Participant 07 noted:

"The confidence that I am having is not just pie in the sky, but these are results... I have developed and implemented significant strategies in the local government space over the last seven years, and they have been effective."

Confidence enables managers to effectively challenge and hold entities accountable.

Participant 01 noted:

"My confidence is high because... I'm able to put my analysis on paper and share with public entities... I am confident in my knowledge on that, you know, that I can even, you know, approach executives and ask those relevant questions..."

While most were confident, Participant 12 expressed a need for support due to never having received training:

"I'm not 100% confident, but I would say I'm in a process of getting there. Okay. Provided I can be afforded an opportunity and support to get to that level."

Participant 06 also expressed a lack of confidence in the application of a new tool, despite understanding its function, due to not having gone through the full cycle:

"So the part that I'm still learning is - moving from the tool to an implementation... I wouldn't say I'm confident because we have not really gone through the full cycle to say yay got it!"

This reliance on self-taught, experience-based knowledge, while fostering adaptable expertise, concurrently highlights the risk of a systemic skill deficit and the potential for inconsistent tool application across the public sector landscape.

5.2.5 Theme Five: Perceived benefits and results achieved when strategy tools are used correctly

Public sector managers view strategy tools not merely as academic exercises, but as indispensable instruments that drive compliance, accountability, resource efficiency, and organizational coherence in a complex, political environment. The correct application of

these tools yields tangible benefits across financial, governance, and operational dimensions, primarily by providing directional clarity, optimizing resources, and mitigating risks.

Public sector managers perceived the correct use of strategy tools as essential for creating structure, rigor, and accountability, effectively transforming higher-level public sector mandates into measurable, manageable, and justifiable activities. The benefits of correct tool usage cluster around three main sub-themes: directional clarity, resource optimization, and risk mitigation.

5.2.5.1 Sub-theme: Directional clarity and mandate fulfillment

One of the key uses of strategy tools is aiding situation assessment and strategy formulation. Strategy tools provide the necessary structure and vision to ensure public entities are focused, systematic, and compliant in fulfilling their legislative mandates. Strategy tools allow organizations to move from reactive to proactive functioning by setting clear goals and objectives.

Participant 07 stated:

"it is a radar that one uses in order to put the peg on the ground and be able to trace where they want to land. And in the absence of a strategy, the public sector only responds to what is in front of them."

Participant 02 emphasized the core function of strategy (tools), summarizing:

"Therefore, strategy, to me, it's important for direction."

Participant 09 added:

"...you're able to see ahead. You're able to plan..."

Participant 04 added that the main benefit is to:

"...Clarify in a person's mind or in the mind of the organization, what is it that you're trying to achieve?"

Implementation tools like management control systems and performance metrics are vital for monitoring progress and ensuring alignment. Many participants believe that strategy tools enforce compliance and make public entities accountable for their missions and mandates. Participant 10 strongly supported this notion:

"...it forces the public sector to be able to fulfill their mandates in a sense that there are certain requirements that they must comply with."

Participant 01 also confirmed the necessity of strategy tools in the public sector:

"So, a strategic tool provides a concrete plan, something that can be substantiated by facts and credible information to say yes, I did serve the public, this is what I did... and these are the many people that I have managed to touch."

Participant 12 added that if strategy tools are used effectively:

"...There is no way an organization can...not be fulfilling its mandate."

The idea that strategy tools introduce rigor and discipline into the decision-making process was mentioned frequently as one of the main benefits of using them correctly. The word 'direction' came up often in the participants' responses. An example of this is presented in the statements of the following participants:

Participant 13 liked that a structured approach:

"...is not airy fairy... it gives you a measurable... So, your initiatives, or the things that you do, are based on something objective."

Participant 06 noted that tool selection *"brings about discipline."*

Participant 05 appreciated that the tools are *"systematic" and "robust", and allow one to "demonstrate the pathway you have followed."*

5.2.5.2 Sub-theme: Resource optimization and accountability

Tools act as a control mechanism over public funds, ensuring scarce resources are managed efficiently, strategically aligned, and accounted for. Tools ensure that the

deployment of resources and funds aligns with the entity's mandate, enabling better governance and oversight. Decision-making tools support priority setting in complex contexts. Portfolio management tools help balance investment against strategic goals, particularly for public value purposes in the public sector.

Participant 01 defined a core benefit of strategy tools:

"...Getting value for money... As a government, you deploy scarce resources. And you need to know if these resources are being utilized for the intended purpose. So, you need those tools to ensure that public entities are accountable for the resources that are being allocated."

Tools establish the critical link between organizational goals and financial plans. Participant 13 emphasized the link between strategy and spending:

"Strategic frameworks are obviously a bridge between strategy and execution."

Participant 08 stated that tools are crucial for *the management of resources and prioritizing issues*:

"... is also for better management of resources because when you know where you are going and what you need to be doing, then you know what motive, what will be a priority in terms of your issues, and how you budget for those resources or the resources that would be required to drive that."

Participant 02 affirmed the help on:

"financial resources and human resources. Because if you don't do that, then you are challenged. You might overspend or underspend."

Strategy tools help clarify the organisation's entire internal value chain, break down silos, and focus effort. Strategy tools are therefore not passive instruments but actively shape and mediate strategic activities in the organisation. Participant 08 highlighted that strategy tools help to:

“...for management purposes, it also avoids conflict because it means that when there's a clear plan, there's also a clear personal performance agreement on what needs to be achieved. And overall, it also helps to say - in the context of the different divisions within the organization - what is the value chain? what are the issues around the value chain? And how do you structure your value chain such that all the relevant parties within the value chain move towards contributing to that whole strategy.”

Participant 04 noted that analysis allows the organization

“..to see all of these bits and pieces and them coming together to work as a whole.”

5.2.5.3 Sub-theme: Risk mitigation and strategic foresight

Analytical and planning tools aid in situation assessment and strategy formulation. By forcing a structured external and internal assessment of issues, challenges, and opportunities, strategy tools help managers identify weaknesses, anticipate failures, and develop robust mitigation plans. Strategy tools help identify risks, weaknesses, and potential pitfalls early in the planning stage, significantly reducing the chance of failure.

Participant 03 noted that:

“...tools help you to identify the challenges that you might have. They help you to therefore plan for those risks that might happen, that might eventually take place.”

Participant 11 added that a combination of tools:

“...might negate a lot of constraints and a lot of flaws upfront in your planning and execution process.”

Participant 09 affirmed that doing strategy right *“can unblock a lot of challenges.”*

Participant 07 stressed that:

“...you must “identify the threats from outside, using things like your SWOT to say what are the threats...”

Strategy tools like Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) and PESTEL ensure that strategic aspirations are practical and achievable within the complex public sector environment. Participant 05 highlights the importance of Cost-Benefit Analysis:

"...because it is the one that "helps you to be able to like, you know, say what is practical and doable."

Participant 07 argued for the value of PESTEL in local government because:

"it affects almost every touchpoint and helps to build a strategy that is effective."

Tools provide a documented basis for decisions, enabling informed debate and easier monitoring, further supporting the notion that strategy tools possess material affordances that influence how strategy is understood, contested, and enacted. Participant 05 noted that if challenged, you are able to say:

"I might not have looked at this because my lens was this particular one."

Participant 04 noted that the OKRs framework:

"works in the sense that you have clear objectives that are measurable, for that matter, and you can go and track results."

Participant 08 confirmed that strategy tools:

"keep you in check in terms of whether you are basically getting to, you know, the change that you want to see."

5.2.6 Theme Six: Challenges and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector

This theme captures the specific problems, flaws, and structural or cultural barriers encountered by public sector managers when using strategy tools. A constellation of human, structural, and cultural barriers consistently undermines the efficacy of strategy tools in the public sector. The primary issue is not the quality of the tools themselves, but the organizational context that leads to their misapplication and poor follow-through,

resulting in a pervasive implementation gap. The effectiveness of strategy tools in the public sector is significantly hampered not by the tools themselves, but by systemic, political, and human factors within the operating environment. The challenges primarily manifest as a lack of flexibility, a prevalence of compliance-based exercises, and critical gaps in organizational commitment and capability.

5.2.6.1 Sub-theme: Systemic and political constraints

Strategy tools often clash with the public sector's rigid planning frameworks, political volatility, and bureaucratic inertia, leading to misalignment and reduced utility. National guidelines are perceived as overly prescriptive and inflexible, hindering contextual adaptation. Participant 11 expresses their frustrations over the perceived inflexibility of the public sector planning prescripts:

"The guidance that we get from National Treasury in terms of the strategic planning framework, right, it governs you to say 'these are the tools you should use' and it does not allow organizations or probably not... it does not create the environment for people to develop their own strategies within a broader guideline."

Participant 01 also shares the sentiments:

"I think it is not flexible. It doesn't take into account the uniqueness of public entities and how they're supposed to operate."

The lengthy political and bureaucratic processes create critical timing overlaps that undermine execution. Participant 02 lamented the bureaucracy within the public sector planning processes:

"...One of the challenges with strategy and so on...it's when do you get resources to do what...you realize that budget allocation timing and budget approval timing and also the approval of the strategy or the plans sometimes you enter the new financial year while you're still busy crafting, and at that time you are supposed to contract. Therefore, quarter one, it's wasted on contracting and so on, not on execution..."

Participant 05 shares this frustration:

"I've been working on one policy since 2018 until today it's still work in progress... And by the time it goes back to cabinet to be approved, a lot has changed in the system."

Public sector managers feel constrained by political interference and pressure to massage information, reducing the objectivity of the strategy tools. Participant 05 laments the impact on robustness of the strategy tools:

"There are areas where, you know, diplomacy will not allow you to be very robust. So if you look at the P(Political) for instance, there is no way at the technical level you can point fingers on the other side. So, you normally will, you know, tread carefully, being courteous about the things that you know are somehow impeding on what you need to do."

Participant 05 continues:

"...there seems to be some contradiction when you now have to even write certain things because you somehow have to massage. I don't know whether it's egos, but you need to sort of like, you know, follow what everyone is saying and not say things as they are."

Political cycles often lead to instability that affects the strategic management process including the outcomes of strategy tools and processes. Participant 05 expresses their frustrations:

"...A new person comes, and when the person comes, he/she says that is not what I want - I want you to follow another route. So, what it then means you end up having strategies that cannot see the light of day because of also changes in those that are supposed to drive them."

5.4.6.2 Sub-theme: Lack of organisational buy-in and compliance mentality

Strategy is often treated as a routine compliance exercise rather than a serious operational driver, leading to poor execution and accountability. Tools are often used to satisfy procedural requirements and to engage in what participants call a 'tick-box mentality' or

'malicious compliance,' thereby reducing their effectiveness, as supported by these statements:

Participant 05: *"Sometimes we do them as a tick-box exercise."*

Participant 06: *"People tend to perform these as a tick-box exercise."*

Participant 10: *"And they are mainly not complied with because either there's a lack of knowledge in how they are supposed to be complied with or it's just malicious compliance. And I think that's my biggest issue."*

Participant 01: *"...the drawback is when an entity itself does not even respect the process itself of just developing a strategy plan, implementing it."*

Failure to enforce consequences perpetuates poor performance. A repetitive pattern is noted, poor performance is identified, but "nothing is being done to correct it" (Participant 12). The lack of accountability (Participant 01, Participant 12) and the failure to implement consequence management allow poor performance to persist (Participant 10).

Participant 01: *"So another drawback is lack of accountability... And I think the fourth one is from the government itself - taking too long to take action for entities that cannot deliver on their own strategic plans."*

Participant 10: *"Consequence management is there, but it's never followed in certain areas. And that's what then continues because the next person is able to do the same thing... but nothing happens."*

There is a well-defined gap between writing a strategy and implementing it successfully, as noted by the following participants:

P11: *"...and that's why you find, you know, these huge gaps between your formulation and your execution."*

Participant 01: *"And I think the second one is when the strategic plan is concretely solid, but the entity doesn't know how to execute."*

Participant 08: *"...there must be a serious buy-in... if the executive is nowhere...closing and understanding and driving it, you will have problems in executing it."*

5.2.6.3 Sub-theme: Human and conceptual deficiencies

A pervasive lack of knowledge, coupled with entrenched traditional thinking, undermines rigorous strategizing and the use of strategy tools in the public sector. According to participants, many public sector employees lack the requisite knowledge and skills to use strategy tools effectively, leading to inconsistent application and poor-quality outputs. This lack of knowledge stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the strategy tools being deployed.

Participant 04 highlights the issue:

"It's a misunderstanding, to be honest with you. Most of the time is that...employees okay, do not understand the model that is being used...So, it depends on people, unfortunately, how they interpret, especially when it comes to OKRs, how they interpret OKRs and how they use them."

This knowledge gap leads to a critical competency deficit. Participant 10 linked the challenge to the need for greater professionalization of the public sector, noting:

"I think maybe it could be an issue of competency, and hence maybe why the need and the force to (do) professionalizing the public service. So, once you professionalize it, you then have individuals who are capable and efficient to implement those strategy tools. But if you don't have competent people, the likelihood is that they can't implement them."

Consequently, strategic planning in the public sector loses its value as Participant 01:

"...the main one that maybe I've identified in my experience, that an entity cannot develop a comprehensive strategic plan... I think people don't really treat it with the respect that it deserves."

Beyond organisational and individual competency issues, the public sector suffers from cultural rigidity/inflexibility, reinforced by the existing planning prescripts and rules, that favour traditional linear thinking ('rational model') over augmenting or combining strategy

tools for robust strategizing as advocated by the new S-a-P thinking. Participant 08 captured this traditional institutional inertia:

"The problem with the Public Sector, regardless of any tool, is that we are so in tune with the traditional way of strategic thinking and of strategic planning."

Participant 11 noted the prevalent single tool mindset that exists in the public sector:

"What I do find in government entities is that we do not use a combination of that. We would rather choose either one or the other, right."

This culture continues to be reinforced by the perception of strategy as an intimidating, top-down discipline reserved for a select few rather than a shared, socially constructed phenomenon. This, according to participants, limits engagement with strategy tools, as participant 11 explained:

"I think in the public sector, in terms of strategic tools, we (are) somewhat limited right,.. in terms of what we can use... in terms of what the private sector can get. The crucial middle step in terms of strategic tools that we use, the implementation is not defined and not classified."

A lack of communication regarding strategy tools compounds this lack of clarity on strategy implementation. Participant 11 summarised this gap, noting:

"...We don't actually spend a lot of time communicating and educating the organization on how to use the tools."

5.2.7 Theme Seven: Suggestions for strategy tool use improvements in the public sector

The preceding themes positioned the findings relating to the public sector managers' choices and preferences, their perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks, as well as the pervasive challenges and structural rigidities (including competency gaps) impacting their strategizing activities using strategy tools in the public sector. This last theme captures the key insights offered by public sector managers, who leveraged their embedded experience to propose/suggest concrete, actionable strategies for improving the use of strategy tools

in the public sector. Their suggestions directly address some of the main challenges encountered in the strategic management discipline in the public sector, namely: insufficient competency, structural rigidity, and a fragmented strategic management process. The consensus is to move away from compliance-driven, top-down approaches toward an inclusive, integrated, flexible, and human-centered strategic management process.

5.2.7.1 Sub-theme: Enhancing competency and professionalizing the strategy function

Participants emphasized that improving strategy execution begins with investing in human capital, ensuring the right people are in the right roles with the right knowledge. Having knowledgeable individuals in key positions is seen as crucial for translating strategy into action and avoiding the process from becoming a burden.

Participants expressed the desire for public sector organisations to have competent people occupying strategic positions in the public sector's strategic management functions.

Participant 05 expressed strong views, adding:

"...Have the right people in the right positions to do their job because it's pointless to have certain corners, not understanding why certain things need (s) to be done."

Participant 08 noted:

"...I think there has to be a serious in-house training of those who are charged and leading the strategy to actually understand these tools."

Participants recommend a mandatory baseline of strategic knowledge to ensure an acceptable level of strategic management literacy and appreciation for the process and the tools. Participant 05 suggested:

"Once you reach a certain level, it must be such that it then becomes compulsory or a requirement before you assume the post, that you have the background knowledge and understanding of this... you know... strategy development in government."

Participant 08 also added:

"...And also those that are driving it must have, as a rule of thumb, 60% at least understanding of the business."

5.2.7.2 Sub-theme: Adopting dynamic and integrated strategy models

Participants called for a move away from rigid, single-tool planning to more flexible, hybrid, and continuous approaches that are sensitive to the environment and internal capabilities. Strategies should be realistic and built upon the organization's existing capabilities and resources, favoring incremental steps over radical change.

Participant 11 stressed the importance of alignment:

"There's an argument on the other side that suggests... to say...you look at the key competencies and capabilities of your organization and build a strategy that's closer to what your organization can deliver."

Participant 11 advised against big leaps:

"...do that in incremental steps rather than going with a gigantic leap, and the bridge is too tall... So, it is either two things. You have the resources to fit the new strategy, and that's not going to come cheap, or you say let me work with what I want and slowly migrate the team...incrementally, right?"

Given the pace of technological and environmental change, strategies must be more adaptable than the current five-year government strategic planning cycle allows.

Participant 11 argued for agility, stating:

"I think, five-year strategic plans...might be a bridge too far because with the change in technology, with the advent of technology, with Moore's Law, the technology at a point in time was disrupted every three to four years...now every six months. One would argue then that we probably have to have much more flexible strategies that allow us to be a bit more, much more dynamic and change our course of actions, and not stick to a plan that's actually five years in the making, right?"

Participant 08 emphasized the need for quick and flexible adjustments to strategies:

"You know your PDC – plan-do-check and adjust. We plan and do, but we don't adjust."

Another suggestion that came through was that instead of relying on a single prescribed tool, public sector organizations should use a *bouquet of tools* to formulate a comprehensive strategy.

Participant 11 proposed blending of traditional tools to create a new breed of strategy tools:

"I think there's a good combination between Porter's (Five Forces) and the Resource-Based View (RBV). I think there's an opportunity to blend those two together... to create something totally different in terms of how new modeling should be."

Participant 11 elaborated on customization:

"I think rather use a combination, and fit for purpose and... as well, we might use PESTEL model, might be more opportune in the branch operations because it considers different things. While on a different division, you might want to use a different model, but then in formulating (for the organisation), you integrate the different models to create one strategy."

5.2.7.3 Sub-theme: Fostering inclusivity and accountability in planning

The strategic planning process must become more open and inclusive, ensuring broader participation from both internal and external stakeholders, including the community. Strategy development should utilize a hybrid, interactive approach that engages all stakeholders to ensure buy-in and a robust strategy.

Participant 08 stressed high interaction:

"...So that it's not a top-down approach or bottom-up approach - it was a highly hybrid approach where there's an interaction and high-level participation. So that at least every voice is heard."

Participant 08 further advocated for external input into the strategising processes of the public sector, noting:

"This kind of planning now also involves the community. It's not just the Department planning for the community; it's also the community—the beneficiaries of the program you are running—who are involved in the planning as well. I think for me that was one that one can benefit from."

Even external parties like external auditors should be brought into the process to ensure strategy understanding, allowing them to conduct *value-add audits* rather than just fault-finding.

Participant 08 emphasized the auditors' role:

"You know you've got your external and internal, your committee members, like your audit committees, you've got Auditor General, you've got internal auditors—they must understand the strategy so that when they do audit, it becomes a value-add audit, not a fault-finding audit."

Furthermore, participants expressed caution about introducing new strategy tools, preferring instead to optimize the existing set of tools.

Participant 10 expressed a preference for continuous improvement and more vigorous enforcement over developing or introducing new tools:

"I think we need to, I don't want to say take them more seriously or make them more stringent in how they should be complied with. I think that would help, but also continuous improvement of the current ones that we have instead of always developing new ones. Yes, it helps developing new ones where there's a need, but if we comply and follow the prescripts of non-compliance, then I think we'll be fine."

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter presents the detailed research findings from the qualitative analysis of inputs and insights from highly experienced South African public sector managers. The findings offer a granular, evidence-based exploration of the strategizing practices of these managers, providing empirical evidence in response to recent calls from S-as-P scholars to examine and understand strategizing practices in different contexts and settings. The study successfully converted rich qualitative data into seven main themes that directly

address the primary research questions, outlined in Chapter 3, related to the use of strategy tools, managerial perceptions, and the strategizing activities of public sector managers.

The empirical evidence highlights several key findings consistent with ongoing debates and discussions within the S-a-P scholarship. First, strategizing in the public sector is a highly situated activity, influenced by context, cognitive biases, practitioners' (managers') tacit knowledge, organisational constraints, and the political landscape. Second, public sector managers, while familiar with many tools and frameworks, tend to be more cautious when selecting or rejecting tools, leading to the rejection of market-based tools (e.g., Porter's Five Forces, BCG matrix) as a result of conceptual conflicts with the public service delivery mandate of the public sector. More importantly, the empirical evidence highlights the proactive augmentation and blending of strategy tools by public sector managers to compensate for their shortcomings and maximize overall usefulness.

Furthermore, the findings revealed the main barriers/challenges/drawbacks to successful strategy tool deployment, including competency and knowledge gaps among employees, leadership misalignment, traditional biases toward strategic planning, and rigid planning prescripts/rules.

In summary, the empirical evidence supports the conceptual links between the core constructs of the S-a-P framework of practices, practitioners, and praxis, highlighting the nuances involved. The next chapter (6) will discuss findings in detail, comparing and validating them against the literature review presented in Chapter 2 above.

6. Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings presented in Chapter 5 in relation to the literature review presented in Chapter 2. This discussion synthesizes the empirical findings from Chapter 5 with the Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 by systematically addressing the four main research questions posed in Chapter 3. The objective is to produce a comprehensive, detailed analysis that demonstrates the study's contribution to academia and, possibly, to the S-a-P literature on the use of strategy tools to accomplish praxis, particularly in the under-researched public sector context of South Africa.

Despite the rich theoretical insights provided by the S-a-P perspective, the literature review has identified empirical gaps that this study aims to address and, in turn, offer valuable empirical insights to the scholarship on the use of strategy tools in a different setting. There is a pronounced empirical deficit in S-a-P research specifically focused on public sector organizations (Bryson et al., 2022; Friesl et al., 2021). Consequently, critical gaps exist in understanding how strategy is actually enacted in complex, non-market contexts, particularly where strategizing is often an improvisational process (Kitchner & Ashworth, 2025). A related gap exists concerning the application and usefulness of strategy tools developed in advanced private sector settings for use in different contexts, such as Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023).

Although the importance of managerial perception is acknowledged, there is a notable gap concerning the involvement of public sector managers in strategic planning (Begkos et al., 2020) and a lack of empirical evidence regarding how context shapes their specific perceptions and utilisation of strategy tools.

This study directly responds to calls in the literature to extend the micro-practices of strategic management to new contexts and fields (Brorström, 2020; Li and Jarzabkowski, 2025) and to bring managers and their psychological foundations back into the centre of strategic management (Foss and Mazzelli, 2025). The discussion of the findings will be structured around the seven main themes emerging from Chapter 5 above, informed by the four primary research questions in tandem with the literature.

6.2 Theme One: Strategy tools used by public sector managers

This theme provides the empirical evidence necessary to answer both RQ2 (Which strategy tools do public sector managers use the most during their strategising work? and RQ1 (How do public sector managers perceive the usefulness and relevance of the various strategy tools and frameworks they encounter in their strategising work?. Specifically, the findings detail the suite of strategy tools used by South African public sector managers, alongside their perceptions of these tools' relevance or irrelevance within the public sector strategising context.

6.2.1 Empirical validation of traditional strategy tools (RQ 2)

The empirical findings detailing the suite of strategy tools used directly address RQ2 and confirm the most commonly used strategy tools among public sector managers. These insights confirm the extant Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) literature, which asserts that strategising in organisations is enacted through a set of practices (strategy tools) adopted by various actors/practitioners (Brorström, 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Prashantham and Healey, 2022). The study's focus on actual practices, rather than prescriptive planning, enabled these insights, which would not have been possible had it adopted the traditional approach to studying strategic planning in public sector organisations.

The confirmed core set of foundational strategy tools includes PESTEL, SWOT, Balanced Scorecard (BSC), OKRs, Value Chain Analysis, Business Capability Planning, Customer Jobs, Net Present Value, Stakeholder Analysis Framework, Strategic Plan, Ops Plan, Databases, Guidelines, and Rules and Regulations (PFMA). This collection of analytical, implementation, and control tools and artifacts, is essential to the public sector manager's arsenal of strategy tools and practices. This suite is consistent with the definition of strategy tools found in literature, which defines them as conceptual aids, structured methods, or material artifacts intended to support strategic analysis, planning, decision-making, implementation, and control (Felício et al., 2021; Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Hannah et al., 2021).

Crucially, the list of strategy tools used or mentioned by the public sector managers leaves out other material artifacts that may not usually be viewed as strategy tools in the same sense as frameworks and methods (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, workshops, internal communication magazines, or standard operating procedures) but are still heavily relied upon to enact strategy in the public sector. Further research may be warranted to explore the strategic role of these non-traditional artifacts in the strategizing activities of public sector managers.

Additionally, the empirical findings show that South African public sector managers do not rely on a single strategy tool but instead employ a mix of context-specific strategy tools, consciously combining and blending traditional strategy frameworks and methods to address complex public sector mandates and respond to environmental constraints. The use of PESTEL and SWOT combination for analysis and feeding the outputs into the OKRs framework is a practical manifestation of the S-a-P perspective, which views strategic activity as inherently situated and socially accomplished through the ongoing interactions, negotiations, testing different ideas, and adaptations (Brorström, 2020; Friesl et al., 2021). Hannah et al. (2021) noted that the real impact of strategy tools (analytical models) is realized when they are used complementarily with other (qualitative) methods (tools), ensuring that decision-making is contextualized within the social processes of strategy formation, further supporting the strategy-as-practice perspective.

Furthermore, the emphasis on tools like Theory of Change and Logical Framework, as well as the use of financial tools such as Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) and Net Present Value (NPV), demonstrates that the tool selection is heavily skewed toward justifying resource allocation, ensuring accountability, and measuring non-financial outcomes—all critical requirements for public sector governance (Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Roberts and Hamilton Edwards, 2023).

6.2.2 Public sector managers' rejection of strategy tools (RQ 1)

Public sector managers explicitly deemed numerous popular private-sector strategy tools, such as Porter's Five Forces, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Matrix, and the McKinsey 7S Model, as irrelevant or less useful in the public sector. This finding is supported by the theorised role of managers as practitioners who do the strategy work in organisations (Brorström, 2020), and by the fact that their managerial interpretations ultimately shape how strategy is executed and which strategy tools (practices) are chosen or rejected (Friesl et

al., 2021). Therefore, public sector managers are duty-bound as critical enablers of the strategy process in their respective public sector organisations to reject or question the efficacy of practices and strategy tools that do not resonate with their subjective interpretations of their mandates or the tool's perceived inherent affordances.

Turner et al. (2022) note that tools must be regarded as sociomaterial practices whose relevance hinges on their ability to resonate with and adapt to the prevailing cultural, political, and infrastructural conditions of the setting. The main reason cited by the managers for their rejection of these popular private sector strategy tools was the conceptual misalignment of their core assumptions, i.e., market rivalry, competition, profit maximisation, and high organisational agility, with the public sector's non-competitive, service-delivery mandate and bureaucratic rigidities. The reasons given by managers are consistent with findings by Mauro et al. (2021) in their examination of performance-based budgeting (PBB) in the public sector, that difficulties with the adoption of private sector tools did not lie exclusively with the type or the workings of the strategy tool selected, but in the overall conceptual apparatus of the public sector.

The act of rejecting a tool based on whether it is useful or irrelevant demonstrates the situated praxis that practitioners engage in to make sense of their activities. It shows that public sector managers are not passive recipients of strategic models but are active agents who apply a critical lens to evaluate a tool's interpretive affordances (Banks and May, 2025; Rampa and Parmentier, 2024). The finding that "you are not coming up with a strategy to address competition" (Participant 02) proves the managers' critical agency in strategising and in the selection and application of practices.

Managerial agency pervades the entire strategising process, as managerial interpretation ultimately shapes how strategising is executed within organisations (Friesl et al., 2021). The S-a-P literature recognises managers as the critical cognitive lens through which strategy is enacted via strategy tools and other practices, positioning them as active practitioners rather than passive executors (Banks and May, 2025). This body of literature underscores that strategic responses are shaped by individual managers' individual cognitive frameworks, emotional states, and contextual environments. Therefore, the managers' choice or rejection of specific strategy tools is not purely a rational outcome. The managers' critical assessment of tools and their reliance on self-taught skills underscore their role as active practitioners and agents in the strategy process.

The findings also reveal that public sector managers' perceptions of usefulness are positive for strategy tools that are able to measure the managers' strategising efforts. This is consistent with the literature that managers prioritise procedural rationality and systematic evidence-based analysis over reliance on intuition (Al-Hashimi et al., 2022). Strategy tools like Balanced Scorecard, OKRs, Cost Benefit Analysis, Net Present Value are used. Even widely used tools were heavily criticised by the participants. The mandatory DPME framework was condemned for being a structural guide rather than a facilitator of thinking, and SWOT analysis was criticised for its subjectivity and failure to lead to corrective action, resulting in managers "repeating the same thing" year after year. This functional failure highlights the downside of ceremonial use ('tick-box' mentality) (Cepiku et al., 2024), where the tools are utilised for the symbolic purpose of legitimising decisions and conforming to organisational rituals rather than for their intended instrumental function (Rampa and Parmentier, 2024). The use of strategy tools, therefore, is subject to the dual-process paradox (Hodgkinson et al., 2023), in which the potential for systematic, evidence-based analysis is often undermined by cognitive or institutional biases. The collective findings on the practitioner strongly support the call by Foss and Mazzelli (2025) to bring the human element and the psychological foundations of managers back to the center of strategic management.

6.3 Theme Two: Contextual contingency and strategy tool selection (RQ1 RQ2)

The theme of contextual contingency situates the public sector managers' responses to RQ1 and RQ2 by demonstrating how contextual factors inform their choices, thus highlighting the nuanced role of context in strategy tool selection and use. This finding validates the literature's assertion that strategy tool effectiveness is context-dependent (Felício et al., 2021; Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020). Turner et al. (2022) note that context is conceived as a dynamic, socially constructed process rather than a static backdrop. They go on to state that it is inherently subjective, meaning it is perceived and experienced differently by various actors, and is continuously shaped by power relations, organisational norms, and stakeholder interests.

This nuanced definition of context validates the participants' assertions that tool selection sometimes depends on the specific problem being addressed at a particular time, arguing that "...it depends on what is it that you want to answer at a particular time that you will tap into a particular framework." And "we look at them and we pick the best part, you know,

depending on the entity and what it needs at that time.” These attitudes around strategy tool selection, where managers selectively choose frameworks, align with the idea of context being socially constructed. The participants’ perspectives also align with S-a-P research, emphasizing that context, as with strategising, is socially constructed through managers’ subjective interpretations and cognitive heuristics and biases, which can introduce systemic biases into managers’ strategising activities (I. R. Hodgkinson et al., 2023). Therefore, further studies could explore the specific mechanisms by which public sector managers’ cognitive heuristics and systemic biases mediate the influence of context on the relevance and selection of strategy tools.

The empirical data also define the concept of contextual contingency beyond a simple public-versus-private dichotomy. Strategy tool relevance (as interpreted by public sector managers) varied across institutional and political contingencies within the public sector, ranging from outright rejection of Porter's Five Forces in a public entity to its perceived relevance in a State-Owned Entity (SOE). This confirms the need for S-a-P to adopt a "flat" ontology that recognises practices as multi-situated phenomena influenced by informal norms, political landscapes, and specific organisational mandates (Marietto et al., 2025; Whittington, 2025).

6.4 Theme three: How public sector managers deploy strategy tools (RQ2)

This theme reveals how praxis is enacted by public sector managers through the systematic use of strategy tools (practices) either as single instruments or in combination or augmentation. It highlights the depth of public sector managers’ competencies and their ability to use strategy tools to pursue their mandates and address sometimes conflicting stakeholder needs. Very little is known about how strategising happens in practice, especially in the public sector (George, 2021). Participants were asked, during data gathering, to describe, for the one strategy tool they use most often, how they typically apply it during their strategising process. This detailed inquiry was designed to establish the extent of the public sector managers’ strategising competence and yielded rich qualitative data on their practical engagement with strategy tools.

The participants’ descriptions of their praxis activities, including how they deploy strategy tools, are consistent with the literature definition of praxis as the flow of activity in which strategy is accomplished (Brorström, 2020). The systematic approach described by

participants, starting with data collection, gap analysis, formulation of strategy, testing, implementation (plan), and monitoring and evaluation, resonates with the S-a-P view of praxis as a deliberate, disciplined effort, and iterative flow of socially situated activity to produce decisions and actions that guide the organisation (Brorström, 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Weiser et al., 2020).

The findings about public sector managers' use of strategy tools reveal important aspects about their practical knowledge of strategy tools and frameworks, such as SWOT, PESTEL, and GAP analysis. This finding is consistent with the literature on the use of strategy tools, which indicates that the practitioners' active engagement with a strategy tool significantly impacts their engagement and perceived agency. Meyfroodt & Desmidt (2021) assert that managers' routine interactions with strategy tools build their self-efficacy (confidence in their ability) and sense of agency. Ultimately, the public sector managers' purported deployment of strategy tools provides empirical support for this view. A case study approach could be used in future research to explore the causal links between public sector managers' reported self-efficacy and the actual success or failure of strategy tools deployed within the public sector.

Whilst the process described above points to a systematic praxis, the S-a-P literature notes that managers' strategising process is rarely linear (Friesl et al., 2021; Weiser et al., 2020). Instead, research confirms the adaptive nature of strategising. The findings on the deployment of strategy tools by public sector managers confirm this view, revealing that they use an improvisational approach to strategising and tool deployment. The purported use of a combination of strategy tools to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of each tool (for example, where SWOT analysis is complemented by or used in combination with PESTEL, or where outputs of a Customer Jobs or Business Capability Analysis are fed into an OKRs framework to ensure implementation and track progress) in the public sector environment was noted. This is in keeping with the literature, where the need to combine systematic analysis and intuitive thinking (spontaneity) for on-the-fly, improvisational responses to challenging circumstances during strategising must be viewed by public sector organisations as a legitimate response (G. P. Hodgkinson et al., 2023; I. R. Hodgkinson et al., 2023). This pluralistic praxis for strategising is indeed needed to leverage the individual strengths of diverse strategy tools and enhance their utility and rigour to deliver on complex public sector mandates (Hannah et al., 2021).

The deployment of tools by public sector managers focuses on ensuring that all strategic activities ultimately contribute to political and legislative mandates, underscoring the critical role that strategy tools play in public sector strategic management practices. In this regard, public sector managers deploy strategy tools to justify spending public resources and to manage the unique political and public-sector service delivery environment. These findings resonate with literature that recognises the political dimension of the deployment of strategy tools as having political affordances that motivate actors (managers) to act in a way that serves particular interests, shifting focus from viewing strategy tools merely as technical devices to acknowledging their role as mediators of power, influence and legitimacy (Rampa and Parmentier, 2024). This confirms that strategizing in the public sector is fundamentally a political and communicative attempt at legitimizing strategic decisions and aligning the public sector organisations with external mandates (Bencherki et al., 2021; Rampa and Parmentier, 2024). The effective deployment of strategy tools in the public sector is therefore an essential praxis for balancing competing stakeholders needs (Roberts and Hamilton Edwards, 2023).

6.5 Theme four: How knowledge of strategy tools is acquired (RQ3)

This theme responds to RQ3 by reflecting on the public sector managers' perceptions of their strategy tool knowledge and how they acquire it. The focus of the question was on deepening understanding of what skills are required for strategy work and how are they acquired by practitioners/actors? It addresses the critical aspect of strategy tool competence and knowledgeability in the public sector, as effective strategising is contingent not only on having the right tools but also on the practitioners' tacit knowledge and skills. The findings from the empirical data reveal that the acquisition of knowledge regarding the use of strategy tools by public sector managers is a multi-faceted process, relying predominantly on tacit and experiential learning rather than formal, organisation-led training. This reliance manifests in on-the-job training, self-research, informal consultation with colleagues and necessity-driven problem solving. This empirical data validates the S-a-P principle of knowledgeability advocated by Rouleau & Cloutier (2022). The principle of knowledgeability argues that the ability of actors to perform their strategising successfully is rooted in the unspoken, tacit knowledge and practical expertise they collectively share, which is a pre-requisite for their strategising actions ((Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022). As discussed previously, the complexity and context-specific nature of public sector mandates often prevent some formal strategy tools from being fully effective and/or

adopted, forcing public sector managers to rely on/use their contextual experiential knowledge to meet their mandates.

The literature indicates that knowledge of strategy tools is obtained through management training, formal education, and strategy workshops (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Management education equips managers to critically evaluate strategy tools for their theoretical and practical soundness, helping them to apply them to solve real-world problems. Several participants cited advanced degrees, such as MBAs and Master's Degrees, as the secondary source of their theoretical knowledge and confidence. The empirical findings indicate that participants involved in compliance-related strategy work view formal training as non-negotiable to maintain the credibility of their oversight work and the information received from client departments.

When asked about their confidence in the knowledge of strategy tools, public sector managers expressed high confidence in their understanding, justifying it primarily through years of practical experience and, in some cases, evidence of strategic success. Those participants that expressed lack of confidence, cited lack of experience with a tool ("I wouldn't say I am confident because we have not really gone through the full cycle to say yay got it.") or lack of training support that will enable them to get to the required level of experience ("I'm not 100% confident, but I would say I am in the process of getting there. Okay. Provided I can be afforded the opportunity and support to get to that level.")

This finding provides strong empirical support for Rouleau and Cloutier's (2022) knowledgeability principle. The public sector managers' strategy tool knowledge and competence are rooted in the collective, tacit, and practical know-how that they continuously deploy during their strategising activities. This tacit knowledge has been built over decades of social practice in their respective roles in the public sector. Consequently, the high confidence in their understanding of strategy tools is based on this demonstrated experience, rather than their formal qualifications. The confident use of strategy tools increases the managers' self-efficacy and sense of agency (Meyfroodt & Desmidt, 2021).

6.6 Themes five and six: Perceived benefits and challenges (RQ4)

Themes five and six provide a clear synthesis of the outcomes of using strategy tools in the public sector. The literature on strategy tools highlights that one of the main benefits of strategy tools is their role as mediators, providing the mechanism for translating an

organisation's strategic vision into quantifiable, measurable targets and guiding day-to-day managerial and organisational activities (Sundström and Svärdsten, 2025). Participants confirmed that strategy tools help with setting clear direction and objectives for their organisations, as highlighted by the following statements:

Participant 02: *"Therefore, strategy, to me, it's important for direction."*

Participant 07: *"It is a radar that one uses in order to put the peg on the ground and be able to trace where they want to land. And in the absence of a strategy, the public sector only responds to what is in front of them."*

Participant 09: *"...you are able to see ahead. You are able to plan..."*

As control systems, strategy tools are associated with accountability, offering several potential benefits including enhanced results orientation, improved effectiveness, better priority setting and better monitoring of progress (Cepiku et al., 2024; Felício et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020). Participants in the study believe that strategy tools enforce compliance and make public entities accountable to the public for the effective and efficient utilisation of public funds. The following participants' statements validate this:

Participant 01: *"...Getting value for money...As a government, you deploy scarce resources. And you need to know if these resources are being utilised for the intended purpose. So you need those tools to ensure that public entities are accountable for the resources that are being allocated."*

Participant 08: *"...is also for better management of resources because when you know where you are going and what you need to be doing, then you know what motive, what will be a priority in terms of your issues, and how you budget for those resources or the resources that would be required to drive that."*

By forcing a structured external and internal assessment of risk, issues, challenges and opportunities, strategy tools help public sector managers identify weaknesses, anticipate potential failures, and develop robust mitigation plans. This aligns with the literature on the benefits of strategy tools. As analytical tools, strategy tools can aid situational assessment

of both the internal and external environments and support strategy formulation (Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020; Hannah et al., 2021).

The findings also highlighted that strategy tools can help clarify the organisation's internal value chain and break down silos. Participant 08 highlighted the material affordance of strategy tools: *"...for management purposes, it also avoids conflict because it means that when there's a clear plan, there's also a clear personal performance agreement on what needs to be achieved. And overall, it also helps to say – in the context of the different divisions within the organisation – what is the value chain? What are the issues around the value chain? And how do you structure your value chain such that all the relevant parties with the value chain move towards contributing to that whole strategy."* This finding validates the literature, confirming that strategy tools are not passive instruments but actively shape and mediate strategic activities (material affordances) (Friesl et al., 2021).

The empirical data strongly confirm the literature that strategy tools serve the critical functions of control and accountability in the public sector, helping public sector managers and organisations navigate complex political mandates, ensure value for money, and anticipate risks. However, the successful realisation of these benefits is often constrained by several unique challenges inherent within the public sector context. A major challenge, particularly in the public sector, is that many theoretically valuable strategy tools often neglect the everyday context of practitioners and institutions, which is a primary reason for their failure to integrate into organisational practices (Pot et al., 2022).

When participants were asked about the drawbacks or challenges of using strategy tools in the public sector, they highlighted the restrictive and rigid nature of some strategy tools, specifically, the public sector planning prescripts, such as the DPME Framework for Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans. Some participants expressed their views on how the planning prescripts are rolled out. Participant 11 stated:

"The guidance that we get from National Treasury in terms of the strategic planning framework, right, it governs you to say 'these are the tools you should use' and it does not allow organisations or probably not...it does not create the environment for people to develop their own strategies within a broader guideline."

Another participant 01 commented that:

“I think it is not flexible. It doesn’t take into account the uniqueness of public entities and how they’re supposed to operate.”

Similarly, the managers’ frustrations with the structural rigidities of the public sector are validated by the historical context of the New Public Management (NPM) movement. According to Banks and May (2025), the broad objective of the NPM movement was to compel public sector entities to adopt private sector accountability mechanisms and improve performance. Crucially, however, this accountability did not necessarily come with the same devolution of power seen in the private sector. This structural imbalance, where organisations must adhere to strict planning frameworks without the autonomy to adapt them to their unique context, creates the lack of flexibility reported by participants.

The literature consistently highlights that the effectiveness of strategy tools is fundamentally context dependent (Felício et al., 2021; Friesl et al., 2021; Gębczyńska and Brajer-Marczak, 2020). It is inherently subjective, and the relevance of strategy tools hinges on their ability to resonate with and adapt to the prevailing cultural, political, and infrastructural conditions of the setting (Turner et al., 2022). Furthermore, strategy tools are not neutral instruments – they are subject to interpretation and contestation, which determines whether they facilitate or hinder strategising. The empirical validation of the above literature can be found in the participants’ frustrations with the political context of the public sector. First, public sector managers lament the lengthy political and bureaucratic processes that create critical timing delays and overlaps, undermining execution and consequently the effectiveness and utility of strategy tools like strategic plans. The following statements by participants provide the empirical evidence to support this finding. Participant 02 had this to say:

“...One of the challenges with strategy and so on...it’s when (do) you get the resources to do what...you realise that budget allocation timing and budget approval timing and also the approval of the strategy or the plans... sometimes you enter the new financial year while you are still busy crafting, and at that time you are supposed to contract. Therefore, quarter one, it’s (is) wasted on contracting and so on, not on execution...”

Sharing the same frustration, participant 05 had this to say:

“I’ve been working on one policy since 2018 until today it’s still work in progress...And by the time it goes back to cabinet to be approved, a lot has (would have) changed in the system.”

Second, public sector managers feel constrained by political interference and pressures to massage information, thus reducing the objectivity of the strategy tools. This empirical evidence further validates the theory that strategy tools are not neutral instruments, but are subject to interpretations and contestations driven by power dynamics (Turner et al., 2022). Political cycles also add another dimension to the challenge, further hindering the outcomes of strategic management in the public sector. The following quote from one of the participants perfectly captures this challenge: *“...A new person comes, and when the person comes, he/she says that is not what I want – I want you to follow another route. So, what it then means you end up having strategies that cannot see the light of day because of also changes in those that are supposed to drive them.”*

Whilst the use of strategy tools in the public sector is associated with several benefits, the evidence supporting these benefits remains elusive due to negative behaviours such as ceremonial use of strategy tools (Cepiku et al., 2024). The pervasive “tick-box” mentality or malicious compliance reported by participants provides empirical validation of the behaviour noted in literature. Furthermore, something not explicitly covered in the literature that exacerbates this behaviour is the failure to enforce consequence management for repetitive poor performance and malicious compliance, which, in turn, contributes to the observed lack of accountability.

Other challenges facing public sector managers when using strategy tools include pervasive, entrenched traditional thinking and limited familiarity with these tools. According to participants, many public sector employees lack the requisite knowledge and skills to use strategy tools effectively, leading to inconsistent application and poor-quality outputs.

6.7 Theme seven: Suggestions for strategy tool use improvements in the public sector

The preceding themes and discussions positioned the findings regarding public sector managers’ perceptions of strategy tool use/relevance, knowledge, and the benefits and

challenges. This theme captures public sector managers' forward-looking agency on how to improve the use of strategy tools in the South African public sector context. The suggestions offered by public sector managers provide a roadmap for moving strategic management practice away from its current compliance-driven, top-down and bureaucratic approach to a more inclusive, adaptive/dynamic, and socially enacted process. The recommendations seek to address the challenges of insufficient competency, structural rigidity, and a fragmented strategic management process.

To enhance competency and professionalise the strategic function in the public sector, participants emphasised that improving the use of strategy tools requires investing in human capital and ensuring strategy literacy to overcome the challenges posed by the current experiential nature of knowledge. Participants recommend a mandatory baseline of strategy knowledge for key positions in the public sector. Participants suggest making background knowledge and understanding of strategy development in government a mandatory requirement once you reach a certain level. There is also a call to have competent people in the right positions and for serious in-house training of officials charge with leading strategic functions.

To address the challenges introduced by the traditional public sector strategic management processes, participants suggest a move away from rigid, five-year planning cycles toward a flexible, hybrid and dynamic approach that aligns strategies with organisational capabilities, and responds quicker to the changes in the environment. Given the pace of technological changes, participant 11 argued that five year strategic plans should be a thing of the past – arguing for more flexibility in the current planning prescripts. This aligns with the S-a-P view of strategy as an emergent phenomenon (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021) and the need for improvisational strategising (Burke and Wolf, 2021; Kitchener and Ashworth, 2025). The suggestion to use a combination of tools such as blending Porter's Five Forces with Resource-Based View (RBV), aligns with the pluralistic process of strategising.

Participant 08 recommended opening up the strategising process to both internal and external stakeholders. They advocated for a hybrid approach that balances interaction and high-level participation, neither strictly top-down nor bottom-up. Extending participation to 'outsiders' and leveraging local knowledge to secure ownership suggests a new approach to strategising in the public sector aligned with the S-a-P view of strategy. Participant 08 suggested including other stakeholders, such as external auditors (e.g., the Auditor-

General), in the process to ensure a clear understanding of the strategy so that, when they audit, they add value. This approach transforms one of the control tools into one that mediates influence and legitimacy (Rampa and Parmentier, 2024).

Finally, managers cautioned against introducing new tools, instead recommending continuous improvement and vigorous enforcement of accountability. This focus on enforcement is crucial to overcoming the pervasive 'tick-box' mentality or ceremonial use (abuse) of strategy tools. Rigorous enforcement restores the credibility of the strategy tool as a control mechanism.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the empirical findings on the perceptions of the use of strategy tools by South African public sector managers using the Strategy-as-Practice perspective as the theoretical framework, directly addressing the empirical deficit and research gaps identified in Chapter 2. The discussion revealed that the use of strategy tools (practices) in the South African public sector is a complex, socially enacted activity (praxis) characterised by critical tensions between formal control mechanisms and legislated mandates, and the adaptive agency of public sector managers (practitioners).

The discussion highlighted several key insights that can add to the S-a-P scholarship:

- Public sector strategising relies on a pluralistic mix of traditional strategy tools/frameworks (e.g. PESTEL, SWOT, BSC, OKRs) and public sector-specific artifacts (PFMA, Databases, Strategic Plans, Ops Plans, Quarterly Reports). Critically, managers demonstrated active agency by rejecting private sector-oriented strategy tools (e.g., Porter's Five Forces, BCG matrix) based on an informed assessment of conceptual misalignment, proving they are not just passive recipients but critical actors and arbiters of practices (Banks and May, 2025; Friesl et al., 2021).
- The study provided rich empirical evidence for the S-a-P principle of knowledgeability (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022), highlighting that the public sector managers' high confidence in their knowledge of strategy tools is premised on decades of tacit, experiential learning (based on "on-the job training", "years of experience") rather than formal training. This shows that their competence is a social product of continuous social practice.
- Strategising is characterised by a necessary pluralistic and improvisational approach, where tools are combined or augmented to compensate for perceived weaknesses of strategy tools. This adaptive deployment of strategy tools is influenced by political affordances and the need for strategy tools to resonate with and adapt to the prevailing cultural and political conditions of the setting (Rampa and Parmentier, 2024; Turner et al., 2022).

In conclusion, by rigorously linking the findings and the discussion to the S-a-P framework, this study offers valuable empirical evidence to the scholarship of strategy tool use in often complex, public sector contexts.

7. Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by summarising the main findings and demonstrating how research questions were answered. It highlights the study's theoretical and practical contributions to the Strategy-as-Practice (S-a-P) scholarship and public sector strategic management. The final section of the chapter highlights the study's limitations and provides suggestions for future research.

7.2 Research contribution

This study sought to explore the perceptions of senior and middle managers in public sector institutions regarding their use of strategy tools, and the influence of those perceptions on their strategising work. Applying the S-a-P lens, the research addressed four main research questions (RQs) and provided a rich empirical view of strategising in the public sector as a complex, socially situated activity, driven by managerial agency and constrained by a unique institutional context.

The study's overall outcomes contribute to S-a-P scholarship by empirically establishing conditions for a contextually contingent strategising praxis in a less-researched, non-market setting. Specifically, the study contributes to theory in three ways. First, the study decisively answered the call from S-a-P scholars (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023; Brorström, 2020; Prashantham and Healey, 2022) to explore practices in other new contexts. Second, by addressing RQ1 and RQ2, the findings provide empirical validation of the contextual contingency argument (Ahumada-Canale et al., 2023). The systematic rejection of market-focused strategy tools (e.g. Porter's Five Forces) confirms that practitioner perceptions act as decisive cognitive filters, deeming tools irrelevant or less useful when their instrumental and symbolic functions conflict with the public sector's mandate of service delivery and public value creation. This establishes that strategy tool relevance is not inherent or automatic, but is determined by situated compliance, political constraints and a focus on service delivery, thereby advancing knowledge of strategy tool utility outside of market-driven contexts.

Third, the study contributes to the literature on the practitioner (actor) element of S-a-P framework by linking capability to organisational outcomes. By addressing RQ3, the

findings revealed a significant competency deficit in strategy tool application, which comprises the application of the knowledgeability principle (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022). In answering RQ4, the study found that this knowledge gap, coupled with institutional constraints, resulted in ceremonial use ('tick-box' mentality) of strategy tools (Cepiku et al., 2024). This provides evidence that the effectiveness of strategising (praxis) is severely compromised by an underlying failure to use strategy tools effectively, reinforcing the need bring managers back to the center of strategic management (Foss and Mazzelli, 2025).

7.2 Implications of the research

Having discussed the contributions to literature, this section seeks to explain the implications for practice. This research, using a S-a-P approach, yields significant implications for management and policy setting within the public sector context.

7.2.1 Managerial implications

The findings offer actionable insights for public sector managers and leaders responsible strategic management functions.

First, managers should focus training and resources on the strategy tools proven to be contextually relevant and widely used, namely PESTEL, SWOT, Balanced Scorecard (BSC) and OKRs. Resources should be redirected away from teaching market-focused strategy tools that public sector practitioners find irrelevant.

Second, management must move beyond ad hoc or self-taught training and implement mandatory, standardised, and recurring professional development on the practical application of strategy tools. This will ensure consistency and address the root cause of the 'tick-box' mentality or malicious compliance.

Third, managers should formalise into routine the use of strategy tool augmentation/combination – using the best of breed to fit situational needs rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach.

Fourth, to combat the top-down/traditional nature of strategy in the public sector, managers must actively involve implementers and other frontline staff in strategising. This approach

leverages the tacit knowledge of those closest to implementation activities and builds practitioner agency, thus increasing the likelihood of successful strategy implementation.

7.2.2 Policy implications

The research highlights the need for reform of the national planning prescripts to better support effective strategic management in public entities.

First, National Departments and other oversight bodies (e.g. National Treasury/DPME) should review the mandatory planning artifacts (like the DPME framework for Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans) to ensure they promote flexible, adaptive planning rather than rigid, five-year cycles. Policy should encourage the integration of data-driven tools and methodologies that align strategy with modern public sector challenges.

Second, policymakers must address the disconnect between mandated tools and the managerial capability to use them effectively. Training guidelines and policy documents should include mandatory competency standards for the use of strategic artifacts.

Third, policy should explicitly allow and encourage departments and public entities to develop context-specific, integrated tools that address unique departmental or public entity problems, thus moving away from the assumption that a single framework is sufficient for all public sector entities.

7.3 Limitations of the research

The researcher made every effort to ensure the research study satisfied all the academic requirements for research rigour. The research design and methodology were structured to yield credible results and minimise bias as much as possible. Despite all of these efforts, the research must still contend with several limitations.

The main limitations of this research fall into three areas: sample scope, nature of the data and generalizability.

7.3.1 Sample scope

The study's use of a purposive sampling strategy resulted in a limited sample size of 13 participants. While the size is appropriate and sufficient to achieving saturation, it inherently imposes limitations on the study's empirical depth. The findings are based on the rich contextual knowledge of 13 senior and middle managers from specific public sector institutions. They do not represent the entirety of strategic management expertise across all levels and types of government departments in the South African public sector.

7.3.2 Nature of the data

The main aim of the research is about exploring the perceptions of public sector managers. Perceptions are subjective and may be influenced by managers overstating their knowledge. This limitation is inherent in this type of study seeking to understand the subjective phenomena of the strategy tool use.

7.3.3 Generalisability

Given the qualitative nature and the specific focus on South African public sector, the findings of the study, while internally valid, face limitations regarding external generalizability. The study's main contribution is its contextualisation of S-a-P research to a non-market, LMIC context with unique political and institutional constraints. This context specificity means that the direct transfer of the findings to other national public sector institutions may be limited.

The above limitations do not diminish the value of the study's findings but serve to clearly define boundaries of the research contributions and provide some direction for possible future studies.

7.5 Suggestions for future research

Building upon the theoretical contributions and identified limitations of this study, several areas of future research are suggested.

- 1) The study relied on managers' perceptions and stated practices. Future research could apply a longitudinal, ethnographic approach that involves observing strategic

meetings, workshops, and the managers' day to day work environment over an extended period of time. This would enable a direct comparison of the managers' perceptions with their actual strategising activities (praxis), providing a more granular understanding of how strategy tools are actually used.

- 2) To complement this qualitative study, future studies could employ a quantitative research design. This would involve surveying a larger sample of public sector managers to assess the correlation between their use of a specific strategy tool and the measurable organisational outcomes.
- 3) Future research should conduct a comparative S-a-P analysis focusing on how both the public and private sectors in South Africa utilise a common traditional strategy tool (e.g. PESTEL, SWOT, BSC, OKRs). This would deepen the understanding of contextual contingency by identifying the specific practices that managers from both sides employ to adapt the tools' output to their respective mandates (public service deliver vs shareholder value).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethical clearance

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance
Approved

Dear Katiso Tabe,

Please be advised that your application for **Ethical Clearance** has been approved.

You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Ethical Clearance [Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

Appendix 2: Informed consent form

Informed consent for interviews

I am conducting research on **South African public sector managers' perceptions of the use of strategy tools**. Our interview is expected to last 45 to 60 minutes and will help us understand how managers in the South African public sector perceive and use strategy tools to achieve organisational objectives. **Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty**. By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

- The interview to be recorded;
- The recording to be transcribed by a third-party transcriber, who will be subject to a standard non-disclosure agreement;
- Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation;
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name:

Research Supervisor name:

Email:

Email:

Phone:

Phone:

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Consistency matrix

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	LITERATURE REVIEW	DATA COLLECTION TOOL	DATA ANALYSIS
1. How do public sector managers perceive the usefulness and relevance of the various strategy tools and frameworks they counter in their strategising work?	Section 2.3.2	Interview questions 1-2	Thematic Analysis
2. Which strategy tools do public sector senior/middle managers use the most during their strategising work?	Section 2.3.1	Interview questions 3-4	Thematic Analysis
3. Do managers in the public sector have the necessary knowledge and understanding of how to effectively utilise strategy tools?	Section 2.3.2.2	Interview questions 5-7	Thematic Analysis
4. What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using strategy tools in the public sector strategising process?	Section 2.3.1 Section 2.3.2	Interview questions 8-9	Thematic Analysis

Appendix 4: Interview guide

Interview questionnaire

Instructions for Interviewer:

- Thanks for your time and for agreeing to participate in this study.
- The purpose of this study is to explore how managers in the South African public sector perceive and use strategy tools to achieve organisational objectives.
- Please note that this interview is confidential and your name and/or the name of the organisation you work for will not be mentioned anywhere.
- I will be recording the interview for a proper transcription and analysis of the interview proceedings.
- Please do speak openly and honestly about your experiences. There are no right or wrong answers.
- Do you have any questions before we proceed with the interview? If you don't have questions, I would like us to start.

Interview Questions:

Introductory question:

1. To begin, could you please describe your role and responsibilities within your organisation? How long have you been in the role? How long have you been in the organisation?
2. What strategy tools (e.g., SWOT, PESTLE, Balanced Scorecard, performance dashboards, project management software) are you familiar with or have used in your strategising work?

Interview Question
1. Thinking about the various strategy tools you know or use, which ones do you find most useful and relevant to the specific challenges and context of your organisation? Why?
2. Are there any strategy tools or frameworks that you find less useful or less relevant in the public sector? What makes them so in your opinion?
3. Which specific strategy tools do you use most frequently in your strategising work?
4. For one or two of the tools you use most often, can you describe in detail how you typically apply them in your strategising process? What steps do you take?
5. How confident do you feel in your knowledge and understanding of how to effectively use the strategy tools you encounter?
6. Have you received any specific training or development on how to utilise strategy tools? If so, how effective was it?
7. Are there any tools where you feel you could benefit from a better understanding of how to use them effectively?
8. In your experience, what are the main benefits of using strategy tools in the public sector strategising process?
9. What challenges or drawbacks have you experienced or observed when using strategy tools in the public sector?

Concluding question:

Of all the things we discussed today, what would you say are the most important issues you would like to express about strategy tools? Is there anything else you'd like to share about your perceptions and experiences with strategy tools in your strategising work?

Appendix 5: Code book/list of codes used

The screenshot displays a qualitative data analysis software interface. On the left, a 'Navigator' pane shows a hierarchical structure of codes. The main area shows a transcript of an interview with several paragraphs of text. A code book is overlaid on the transcript, showing the following codes and their descriptions:

- Currently uses manual-b...lates, reports and KPIs
- Knowledge of different tools
- Currently uses manual-b...lates, reports and KPIs

The transcript text includes the following paragraphs:

concerned, ideally, you would have a system wherein people are reporting and then uploading their performance information and all that. So, all that information is done manually. Okay. Which means now it starts from us having to develop the template, sending out the template to people to populate, and then giving them the deadline, of course, and then requesting for... the supporting documents for their reported performance. And then, I mean, lately with the new developments of OneDrive, we have been able to introduce as well the issue of having a shared folder where we would take the very same templates that you have developed manually and then upload it on the shared folder and then inviting people from... to upload or to update from the shared folder as well as developing... as well as uploading their supporting documents. So yeah, that's basically and another thing that we do is also identify different KPIs where we now conduct the evaluation of those KPIs and draft a report and recommendation for that particular KPI that has been evaluated.

Speaker 1: Thinking about the various tools that you know, that you've mentioned, which ones do you find most useful and relevant to the specific challenges and context of your organization? And why do you find them so?

Speaker 2: You know what is relevant and useful is having a system in place because that one is efficient in managing the people and managing the whole process for that matter. Because now, you would have the system that you open up, right? And the system would automatically send emails or alerts to people to say, the system is open for you to capture and say, for argument's sake, we are reporting for quarter one. You say, I mean, the system, the message would say, the system is open for you, what is it to capture the information for quarter one, right? And then that particular system, remember this, now we're talking about the capture, right? Which are not the KPI owner or executives, right? Because the KPI owners obviously would be your executives. And then now, you would have the person that is supposed to be there as a verifier of that information, right? And then the KPI owner now, which will be the executive now, would also have to verify the information, right? Because in our system, like for instance, we've got a performance management framework that is signifying that we had three stages of verification, right? So we have the first line of verification, which will be your KPI owner, verifying the information before submitting it to us, which is strategy monitoring and evaluation. And then we will also do our verification now of what has been reported in line with the supporting documents, right? So we will be checking the completeness now in this case, right? That you as a KPI owner, you have kept your information, you have signed the information off, and therefore we also agree with you. And then there will be a deadline of verification now. I'm limiting, I'll call you. Sorry about that. So we will have that strategy now. Okay. Firstly, strategy, like we call ourselves, (SME) Strategy Monitoring and Evaluation right. And then SME will do the second line of verification. And then now, once we are done with the second line of verification now, we send this information to internal audit, right? For the third line of defence now.

So, in between this information now, between us and internal audit, there's the process now where this information gets presented to EXCOPE. And then after it goes to the Audit and Risk Committee, it goes to the Board for approval now of that report right. So, when this information reaches internal audit, they will verify what I'm saying and what the KPI owner was saying to ensure it accurately reflects the report, and then draft their own report. So, when this information reaches the Audit & Risk Committee, it must be the verified quarterly report and the internal audit report, just as it is when it reaches the Board. This is also the information that gets submitted to the City. So, it has to have gone through all the stages right, so now if we had a system in place, this whole process was going to happen within that system, and without the involvement of SME. Because there's no system in place, we have to make sure that this whole process happens. And then starting from now, the KPI owner, which is the Executive, has a certificate, which we