

## The Future of Work Study in the South African Context

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*To survive in the current competitive global environment, it is important for organisations to continually look at ways to improve efficiency and productivity. The field of work study seeks to improve the productivity and efficiency of humans, machines and materials. While work study is an important function in organisations, its future in South Africa is uncertain. The purpose of this study was to explore the future of work study by looking at the barriers and contributors to the future of work study in the South African context. The study was exploratory in nature with a qualitative research method. Purposive sampling was used to include work study practitioners who were members of the Southern Africa Institute of Management Services (SAIMAS). Data were gathered from twelve volunteering participants through semi-structured email interviews. The interview transcripts were transferred to Excel sheets to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to identify the different themes covering the barriers and contributors to the future of work study. For work study to have a managerial impact, there should be a smooth flow of processes with minimum interruptions; the findings of this study could help achieve that. The study offered new knowledge about the barriers and contributors to the future of work study.*

**Keywords:** Barriers, Contributors, Future, South Africa, Work study

### Introduction

Organisations in South Africa are affected annually by labour unrest, with employees constantly demanding increased remuneration (Labour Research Service, 2022). Sookdeo (2016) states that “strike season” seems to have become a norm in the South African calendar year but if there is an increase in remuneration, it must be combined with a simultaneous increase in productivity to allow for a win-win situation between the employer and employee.

To survive in the current competitive global environment, it is important for South African organisations to continually look at ways to grow efficiency and productivity. Productivity plays a major role in any company. Therefore, work study is known to be a highly effective productivity improvement method (Rajiwate, Mirza, Kazi, Momin, 2020). According to Ewnetu and Gzate (2023), productivity improvement positively impacts the direct costs of products, as the same output is produced with less input. Productivity improvement can be achieved by sorting or elimination,

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reducing variation, repairing ineffective processes, simplifying the method, optimising the system, maximising turnout-up quality or responsiveness, and reducing set-up time. The field of work study seeks to improve the productivity and efficiency of humans, machines and materials. While there is concern about the future of work study in South Africa there is a lack of research on the topic. This called for an exploration of the issue.

The future of work study in the South African context was compromised when it stopped being a distinct field and was incorporated into other units such as Human Resource Management and Organisational Development. So, while work study is a key function in increasing productivity in organisations, its future in South Africa is uncertain. At the same time, there is limited research on the future of work study as well as the barriers and contributors to the future of work study in South Africa. This led to the following research question: What does the future of work study in the South African context entail? The purpose of this study was to explore the future of work study by looking at the barriers and contributors to the future of work study in the South African context.

On a theoretical level, the contribution of the study entails new knowledge about the future of work study by focusing on the barriers and contributors to the future of work study in a South African context. On a practical level, management and work study practitioners should be aware of the future of work study by concentrating on especially the barriers that could harm this career's future and field of expertise in South Africa.

The outline of the article consists of the introduction, theoretical framework, literature review, research methodology, discussion of the findings and conclusions.

## **Underpinning Theory**

The underpinning theory for the literature review for this study was the contingency theory. This theory suggests that for firms to be effective, certain functions must fit with the organisation or external environment aspects to achieve organisational goals. According to Harney (2016), there is an external and internal fit of an organisational function. External fit means work study practices must fit with the organisational strategy and conditions in the environment. Internal fit means work study practices must work together to deliver the same message and the desired outcome. Delery and Doty (1996) state that by using contingency theory, organisations can promote employee behaviours that align with business strategy, because behaviour is the outcome of an employee's ability and motivation. Therefore, the implementation of work study practices can impact employee behaviour and productivity.

## **Literature Review**

Work study may be defined as a modern discipline which analyses and evaluates all aspects of the work systems which analyses and evaluates all aspects of the work system to enhance effectiveness and functional efficiency (Kiran, 2020). According

to Ewnetu and Gzate (2023), work study aims to find the best and most efficient way of utilising available resources to achieve the best possible quality of work in the minimum possible time and cause the least potential fatigue to the worker. Work study is known as a highly effective productivity improvement method.

Work study consists of method study and work measurement/time study. Method study involves the minimisation of the work content and setting the best way to perform the job. This is implemented to decrease manufacturing costs by saving on operation time. Method study is the systematic recording and critical examination of existing and proposed ways of doing work, as a means of developing and applying easier and more effective methods and reducing costs (Rajiwate, Mirza, Kazi & Momin, 2020). Method study entails the following steps, selection of the job, record of the information and examination of the information (Rajiwate, Mirza, Kazi & Momin, 2020). Motion study means to simplify the job and develop a more economical method of doing work (Rajiwate, Mirza, Kazi & Momin, 2020). Work measurement deals mostly with the investigation of ineffective time associated with a job, and setting time standards to execute an operation by conforming to the standard method. This also results in a systematic investigation of all factors that can impact the production efficiency and economy of the case being studied, which effectively allows for achieving productivity gains (Wahid, Che Daud, Ahmed, 2020). Work measurement/Time study is the application of techniques designed to establish the time for a qualified worker to carry out a specified job at a defined level of performance (Rajiwate, Mirza, Kazi & Momin, 2020).

Work study yields copious information about existing methods and this information helps to identify shortcomings in and determine possible improvements to existing methods. This is called a better method and increases productivity, reduces worker fatigue, minimises losses and improves quality (Gujar & Shahare, 2018).

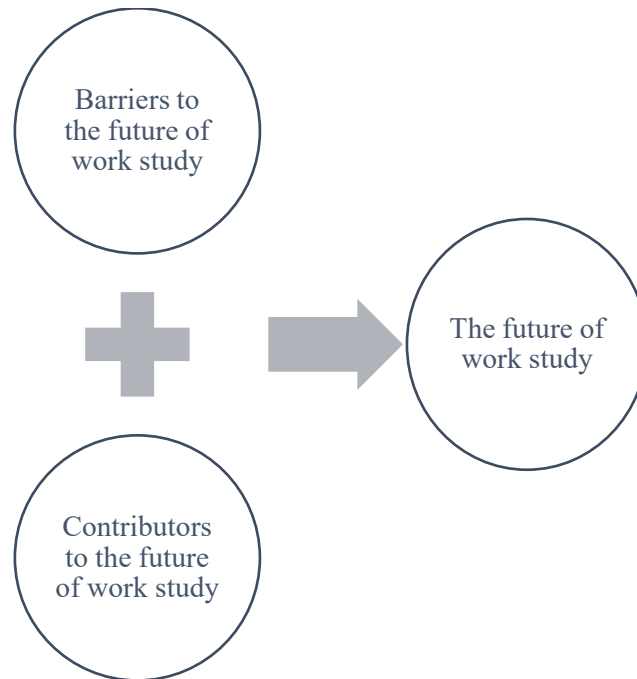
Work study practitioners must try to win and maintain the trust and cooperation of any group which is being investigated (Sookdeo, 2016). Work study practitioners can only keep the goodwill and respect of supervisors if they do not create the impression that they want to take over their positions (Sookdeo, 2005). Decision-making is an important part of work study (Archibald Huang, Chacon & Gaiger, 2018). In many organisations, the head of the work study department is a member of top management and this head must keep top management informed of the possible uses of work study (Sookdeo, 2016). Management needs work study because of its ongoing observation and analysis of the workplace to obtain the applicable facts. This means that management requires someone who can carry out investigations on a full-time basis without interruptions of normal working duties (Sookdeo, 2016) – in other words, a work study practitioner. There is a paucity of previous studies on the barriers to the future of work study.

Work study practitioners are trained to handle workers who do not cooperate and they know how to overcome resistance. Before the start of work measurement, the work study practitioner must gain the confidence and cooperation of the workers and supervisors if he/she is to succeed. If the work study practitioner experiences too much resistance from the staff, management may be compelled to put a stop to the whole work measurement project (Sookdeo, 2016). Archibald et al. (2018) state that teamwork, critical thinking, communication, professionalism and collaboration

are essential work study competencies. Sookdeo (2016) found that work study practitioners should meet the business's needs and add value to an organisation.

### Theoretical Framework

For this study, the following theoretical framework was used to guide the study.



### Research Methodology

The research design, sample, measuring instrument, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed below.

#### *Research Design*

The study was exploratory due to the lack of prior studies on the future of work study. A qualitative research method was used as previous questionnaires were not available and this study had an open-ended approach. This research adopted a constructive interpretive philosophy, which comprised the specific field experiences, perceptions, views and evidence as well as the multiple realities of experts in work study.

*Sample*

Purposive sampling was used to select work study practitioners/specialists who were members of the Southern Africa Institute of Management Services (SAIMAS) and worked in the field of work study with a minimum of 5 years of experience in work study. Twelve members of SAIMAS volunteered to take part in this study.

The biographical information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Biographical Information of the Participants*

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest qualification	Present job title	Placement in the organisational structure
1	67	Male	Master of Business Administration	Private consultant	Self-employed
2	47	Male	Master of Business Leadership	Chief Executive Practitioner (CEO)	Office of the CEO
3	30	Male	BTech	Senior Manager Advisor	Organisational Development and Change Management Unit
4	63	Male	National Diploma	Deputy Head: Management Services	Organisational Development and Change Management Unit
5	59	Male	PhD	Senior lecturer	Department of Operations Management
6	61	Male	Masters Commercii	Private consultant	Self-employed
7	64	Female	Master's Degree	Deputy Director: Organisational Development	Chief Directorate: Human Resource Management and Development
8	64	Male	Master of Business Administration	Private principal consultant	Private consulting firm
9	43	Male	National Diploma	Chief Work Study Practitioner	Organisational Development Unit
10	56	Male	Certificate in Management Services	System Integrator	Directorate Technical Support Services
11	59	Female	BTech	Director: Interventions & Special Programmes Management	Group Human Capital Management Department: Organisational Efficiency Improvement Division
12	24	Female	BTech	Assistant	Institutional Effectiveness and Technology

Source: Authors' own compilation

It is clear from Table 1 that most of the participants were male. All participants had a post-school qualification. Their occupations varied from being part of management to being private consultants, system integrators, academics or assistants. They were employed in divisions such as organisational development, change management, human resource management, operations management, technical support services and institutional effectiveness and technology. Not one of them was employed in a work study unit per se.

### *Measuring Instrument and Data Collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data from 12 volunteering participants. The open-ended interview questions were formulated as follows:

- Share the barriers you experience in your role as a work study practitioner.
- In your opinion, what are the contributors to being successful as a work study practitioner?
- How do you see the future of work study in South Africa?

### *Data Analysis*

The interview transcripts were transferred to Excel sheets to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Manual colour coding, as well as deductive and inductive coding, was used. The saturation of data, which means enough data had been collected to draw the necessary conclusions and any further data collection would not produce new value-added insights, was taken into consideration. Tesch's (1990) method of qualitative thematic data analysis was applied to analyse the data collected by way of open-ended questions about the future of work study. The data were organised into Excel spreadsheets such as to facilitate analysis, and colour coding served to categorise the themes. Deductive coding derived from relevant theory was used. During data analysis, other themes and categories emerged from the data and inductive coding was therefore also applied to develop themes. Due to the fact that there was a lack of previous studies on this topic, inductive coding was mostly used.

### *Trustworthiness*

In a qualitative study, reliability and validity are not required but according to Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2020), trustworthiness must be ensured. Trustworthiness involves the following elements: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability:

- Credibility was established through peer debriefing and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Purposive selection of the participants was used to ensure the credibility of the findings.
- The study used a transparent coding process together with a systematic, comprehensive and exhaustive audit trail of the analysis of data to ensure that the research process followed was logical, traceable and documented in

the interests of dependability (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Reflective journaling during the research process was also used to ensure dependability.

- Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) state that confirmability is determined by checking the internal consistency of the research product. In the present research, this was done by checking the data, the findings, the interpretations and the recommendations. An audit trail was kept to keep the evidence of all the notes, transcripts and data analysis.
- Transferability was obtained by having data sets and descriptions that were so rich that other researchers would be able to make judgements about the findings and transferability in different settings or contexts, as suggested by Elo, Kaarianinen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen and Kyngas (2014).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology's Research Ethics Committee. A permission letter was obtained from the professional body (SAIMAS). Confidentiality was ensured by supplying each participant with a number to protect their identity. Each member signed an informed consent before the interviews were conducted. This consent form indicated that they could withdraw at any point during the investigation, that there would be no questions asked that would make them uncomfortable and that they give permission to be recorded.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the themes are discussed by referring to the direct quotes of the participants.

In Table 2, a summary of the barriers and contributors to the future of work study is presented.

**Table 2.** *Barriers and Contributors to the Future of Work Study in South Africa*

Barriers to the future of work study in South Africa	Theme 1: Lack of understanding of the role of work study
	Theme 2: Manipulation of work study
	Theme 3: Lack of decision-making power
	Theme 4: Lack of management support
Contributors to the future of work study in South Africa	Theme 5: Excellent competencies
	Theme 6: Meeting business needs
	Theme 7: Adding value to the organisation

Discussions on each theme and previous studies are added below.

### *Barriers to the Future of Work Study*

#### Theme 1: Lack of Understanding of the Role of Work Study

Work study on the one hand examines the method of doing the work and on the other hand, determines the time required to do the work. These two main branches of work study namely method study (motion study) and work measurement (time study) are not used or implemented in all the South African organisations. Various participants mentioned that clients did not understand what the role of work study practitioners was.

“... work study is used and not everybody understands it.” (Participant 3)

Sookdeo (2005) found that that during the implementation of productivity improvement techniques through work study, there was great resistance from workers of what work study practitioners can offer.

Participant 12 mentioned that there was a lack of understanding of what work study could offer.

“Lack of understanding/familiarity with work study and what it can offer.” (Participant 12)

At all times, the work study practitioners must try to win and maintain the trust and cooperation of any group which is being investigated (Sookdeo, 2016). It is therefore of great importance, that the role of work study be clarified in South African organisations so that their contribution and value be better understood.

#### Theme 2: Manipulation of Work Study

Managers can sometimes manipulate work study practitioners to suit their agendas and gain. It is therefore essential to agree upon the impartiality of the work study practitioner to ensure the integrity of the outcome of the work study process.

“Before the start of the investigation, the work study practitioner is told what the outcome should be (especially in terms of organisational structure).” (Participant 11)

Sometimes work study practitioners were only used for job evaluations within the human resource management department and not fully utilised for what they were trained to do.

“Work study is merely viewed as an extension of HR responsible for ensuring that jobs are evaluated on demand. What we observe from the outside is that work study practitioners are mainly used/misused to conduct job evaluations to inflate the post levels. This unfortunate situation normally results in top-heavy structures and overpaid.” (Participant 8)

Managers can sometimes ignore the work study report or try to manipulate it because it does not suit their objectives.

“As a practitioner, somehow it is very simple to survive. In cases where the senior manager does not buy into your ideas, they tend to manipulate you if they can see that

you are not giving them what they want or what you are doing does not favour them. In some instances, your submission might be put aside and gather dust been not signed by the executives.” (Participant 9)

Work study practitioners should gain the respect of the management so that their position is not wrongfully used (Sookdeo, 2005). A trustworthy relationship between management and work study practitioners is therefore of utmost importance to allow for work study processes to be ethical and be conducted with integrity.

### Theme 3: Lack of decision-making power

The work study practitioners sometimes experience that they do not have the authority to execute the findings in the report and so just do what the managers tell them to do.

“You do what the boss requests, irrespective of the rationality of such instructions or direction given.” (Participant 6)

Work study practitioners also sometimes do not have a say in making decisions.

“Not afforded adequate voice in decision making.” (Participant 3)

However, Archibald et al. (2018) found that decision-making was an important part of a work study practitioner’s job. If work study practitioners are not part of line management, it will be difficult to properly make decisions to execute the findings of work study investigations. In many organisations, the head of the work study department is a member of top management and this head must keep top management informed of the possible uses of work study (Sookdeo, 2016).

### Theme 4: Lack of Management Support

Managers do not always give their support to work study practitioners because of fear that their shortcomings and weaknesses may be exposed. This could also lead to managers being worried about unwanted consequences including job loss.

“Managers afraid that work study exposes their shortcomings.” (Participant 5)

This may lead to a lack of management support to implement the work study report. It seems that even the mentioning of work study terminologies may lead to management not being supportive of further work study procedures and processes.

“The lack of support from management within an organisation if the terminologies of work study are used.” (Participant 2)

The work study practitioner must be able to rely on the support of top management to do his/her work successfully and the importance of the work study practitioner to the organisation should be communicated to the supervisors, foremen and workers by management (Kanawaty, 1995). A greater awareness, engagement and communication strategy should therefore get the necessary attention.

*The following contributors to the future of work study were identified.*

#### Theme 5: Excellent Competencies

Competencies refers to the capability of applying or using knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours and personal characteristics to perform successfully critical work tasks and specific functions or operate in a given role or position (Wahome, Ng'ang'a & Sakwa, 2013).

Participant 1 is of the opinion that "Having vast experience and thorough knowledge of methodologies, techniques, and tools of efficiency improvement and problem-solving". Experience and knowledge are therefore essential parts of the excellent competencies of a work study practitioner.

For a work study practitioner to properly do his/her work, the necessary competencies should be acquired. Participant 3 mentioned various competencies.

"Being independent, fearless, effective time management and continuous research and development for informed recommendations and mastering the ever-changing business needs." (Participant 3)

Participant 4 added that the work study practitioners must have "thoroughness (not taking things at face value)".

Work study practitioners should also have interpersonal skills to work with people. If the work study practitioner experiences too much resistance from the staff, management may be compelled to put a stop to the whole work measurement project (Sookdeo, 2016). Participant 5 mentioned that a work study practitioner needs to have the personality to work with people.

"Having a personality to work with people." (Participant 5)

Archibald et al. (2018) found that teamwork in work study was essential; this was confirmed by the findings of the current study. A positive attitude and being considerate are also part of being a competent work study practitioner. Honesty in the work study processes and procedures is extremely important or else the report and results may be corrupted.

"Show you are considerate. Have a positive attitude. Be honest. Be a team player." (Participant 10)

To be ethical in the workplace, honesty is almost like a forerunner. Archibald et al. (2018) found that professionalism was critical for work study practitioners.

"Ethical behaviour and professionalism are the cornerstone and foundation." (Participant 5)

#### Theme 6: Meeting Business needs

Work study practitioners should meet the business's needs to ensure efficiency, effectiveness and productivity. Business savvy is therefore important.

“You must understand the business you are working in and you should know the functional side like the back of your hand and understand all rules and regulations relating to your own field.” (Participant 7)

To meet business needs, work study practitioners should be able to continuously conduct research and development.

“...continuous research and development for informed recommendations and mastering the ever-changing business needs.” (Participant 3)

Work study practitioners should proactively organise their own projects to improve service delivery and to illustrate to management and the employees that they are there to assist with improving productivity in an organisation.

“Work study should take initiative and embark on their own initiated projects to improve service delivery. The more they proactively demonstrate the role they could play linked to the value they add, the more they will be used for the right reasons.” (Participant 8)

Sookdeo (2016) found that work study practitioners should meet the business's needs. The application of techniques should therefore be established for a qualified worker to carry out a specified job at a defined level of performance (Rajiwate, Mirza, Kazi & Momin, 2020).

#### Theme 7: Adding Value to the Organisation

Work study practitioners must add value to the organisation so that their functions and roles are not outsourced to external consultants or companies.

“... that there is more than a need/requirement for work study services in South Africa. Work study practitioners in government have to wake up, take the challenge and do something about the prevailing situation. The answer is not to outsource all the projects to the private sector, but to start adding value from the inside.” (Participant 8)

Sookdeo (2016) agrees that work study must add value to an organisation. Work study should add value by staying relevant and focusing on meeting customer needs. A focus on customer needs among work study practitioners is therefore important.

“It is each OD/Management services unit within an organisation's responsibility to ensure the appointment of skilled practitioners (links to training), to actively market their service, to show with their work what value can be added within an organisation, to ensure they stay relevant and efficient, to focus on needs of your customers.” (Participant 11)

#### *Practical and Managerial Implications*

On a practical level, it is essential that think tanks be initiated by relevant stakeholders, such as industry, government and universities, to deliberate the implications of the future of work study in South Africa. Conceiving the potential value-add of work study should have a positive outcome in terms of future organisational

performance. A practical implication of the future of work study is the fact that the areas for productivity improvement in organisations need to be identified. In a globalised economy, competitiveness means the ability to take the most advantageous position in a constantly changing market environment and work study is a practical way to achieve this.

This study can help management and work study practitioners to focus on the essence and value of work study and thus enhance management effectiveness. An awareness of the barriers and contributors to the future of work study can facilitate a smooth production flow with minimum interruptions as well as the optimal use of work study. The lack of management support, limited understanding of the role of work study, manipulation of work study and absence of decision-making power might negatively impact work study. On the other hand, competent work study practitioners who meet business needs and add value to the organisation might have a positive effect on organisations. South African organisations should therefore re-imagine the future of work study to remain competitive in a fast-changing world.

### *Limitations*

A limitation of this study was that it could not be generalised to other countries, as a single qualitative study was conducted. Another limitation was that only members of one professional body participated and the views of additional work study practitioners in South Africa were not obtained. The paucity of literature on the future of work study limited both the exploration of relevant literature and the possibilities of comparing the findings of this study with those of other studies. Lastly, only demographics were considered for this study.

### *Recommendations*

It is recommended that management and work study practitioners be made aware of the barriers and contributors found in this current study to ensure that work study in South Africa not only survives but thrives in the future. Management and employees must understand the role of work study and the manipulation of this field should not be tolerated. Work study practitioners should obtain decision-making power to ensure the implementation of their reports. It is also recommended that management support work study because it will help boost production and productivity. Work study practitioners should ensure that they are competent in time management and teamwork and have interpersonal skills. They should also be considerate, positive and honest. Ethical behaviour and professionalism are the cornerstones of the work study profession and must be evident at all times. Work study practitioners must meet the needs of the business and add value.

For future research, it is recommended that this research be extended to other countries to investigate the value that work study can add in the global context. A quantitative study can also be conducted to determine the demographic differences in how management, employees and work study practitioners perceive the future of work study in South Africa and globally. Work study research can impact future work in a positive manner where hybrid companies have a mandate and an

opportunity to reimagine how and where they work. The right strategy, supported by the right technology, can empower businesses and employees to be more innovative and efficient while striking better work-life balance. The most efficient way of utilising available resources to achieve the best possible quality of work in the minimum possible time and cause the least potential fatigue to the worker will then be ensured. Future work study research will also enhance the analyses of a job to find the most efficient way to do it and how long it should take. This goal of productivity improvement by eliminating waste and unnecessary steps can have a positive impact on Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0.

## Conclusions

In this study, new knowledge about the barriers and contributors to the future of work study was obtained. The future cannot be predicted but alternative work study futures can be forecast, envisioned and then invented. Work study can assist in giving South African organisations a competitive edge. Organisations should rethink the future of work study to remain competitive in the global sphere.

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