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Supplier Relationship Management and Organizational Performance: A Focus on Public Procurement

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Abstract: To attain operational excellence, organizations must enhance their supplier-buyer relations on a global scale. Organizations must strengthen their relationships with suppliers and buyers to obtain competitively priced goods and services of superior quality. A positive relationship between the two parties can also result in enhanced trust, quicker response times, and improved communication. This study examined the effects of the Supplier Relationship Management (SRM) framework on the operational effectiveness of agencies responsible for the essential procurement of goods and services. The principal aim of the research was to ascertain the SRM strategies implemented in public procurement and evaluate how they influence organizational performance. The research study implemented a descriptive design, which entailed gathering quantitative data. The study's target population comprised 50 personnel employed in the public procurement divisions. A total of 43 respondents were recorded from a diverse range of agencies and divisions dealing with public procurement. Furthermore, the research employed a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended inquiries to gather quantitative data for the subsequent analysis. The findings of the descriptive analysis show no indication of explicit SRM strategies being implemented in the organizations included in this study, according to the findings. The findings also uncovered many challenges that negatively impact the performance of organizations dealing with public procurement of essential goods, including a lack of commitment and trust among public procurement divisions and supply chain partners. In order to achieve organizational performance, the study suggests that pharmaceutical organizations place a greater emphasis on commitment to SRM through the implementation of systems that monitor, appraise, and evaluate performance at a strategic level.

Keywords: Supplier Relationship Management, Public Procurement in Namibia, Customer Relationship Management, Global Supply Chain Management

1. Introduction

Amidst the current global instability in terms of conflicts (Obrenovic et al., 2023), environment and climate (Sun et al., 2023; Guan, et al., 2023) global markets are characterized by intensified competition and extensive supply chains. Organizations are confronted with novel obstacles, one of which pertains to the effective management of supply chains. The expansion of distribution channels and a growing reliance on outsourced manufacturing and logistics contribute to supply chains' escalating intricacy and dynamism (Smith et al., 2004). In addition, the rapid evolution of business practices and globalization place organizations under immense pressure to continuously reduce costs while enhancing the quality, delivery index, performance, and responsiveness of their processes or products. Improving supplier-buyer relations becomes more apparent as operational excellence is pursued (Smith et al., 2004; Obrenovic et al., 2020). The principal aim of this study was to assess the impact that Supplier Relationship Management had on the efficacy of the public procurement divisions. Public procurement divisions in Namibia play an essential role in the domestic healthcare system, and procurement of essential goods is entrusted with the vital duty of ensuring that healthcare facilities and personnel throughout the country have access to medical supplies and essential medications. Operations management enables the public procurement divisions to procure and distribute essential goods nationwide. Hence, public procurement divisions ensure the maintenance of a comprehensive and unified supply chain, which includes all stages of the operations process, purveyors supplying products or services, intermediaries, and the final consumer. When formulating an operational procedure, it is imperative to consider the supply network to enhance the quality service delivery of public procurement divisions. This capability empowers the operations manager to accurately discern the necessary inputs for a specific operational procedure and the customer demands that must be satisfied.

2. Literature Review

In order to maintain their operations, public procurement divisions are highly dependent on essential goods and medical supplies sourced internationally (Feeley, de Beer, and Sulzbach, 2010). Consequently, public procurement divisions must maintain positive buyer-supplier relationships with their suppliers. Supplier relationship management (SRM) is an operational business concept wherein the interactions between an organization and its suppliers are managed and optimized. SRM, as it pertains to public procurement divisions, is the systematic approach to overseeing the associations with suppliers who deliver products and services. Macedo and Pinho (2006) argue that managing supplier relationships is an essential component of the operations of non-profit organizations (NPOs). The agency acknowledges the substantial contribution that its suppliers make to guaranteeing the accessibility of critical medications and medical supplies. NPOs and public procurement divsions are required to cultivate a robust supplier relationships founded on collaboration, transparency, and mutual trust (Macedo and Pinho, 2006). Close collaboration is essential between the public procurement divisions and suppliers to ensure that the latter understands the buyer's needs and expectations. This encompasses the provision of precise specifications for the medications and medical supplies that suppliers are obligated to deliver and the assurance that suppliers are informed of the delivery schedules and deadlines.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves the purpose of introducing and describing the theory while also explaining the existence of the research problem. The theory of constraints supported the present investigation. Eliyahu Goldratt initially proposed the theory of constraints (TOC) in his 1984 book Goal as a comprehensive management philosophy intended to assist organizations in consistently attaining their objectives. As a management paradigm, the TOC considers any manageable system constrained in its ability to accomplish a more significant number of objectives by minimal constraints. A minimum of one constraint is invariably present, and the TOC employs a focusing process to discern said constraint and subsequently reconfigure the remaining components of the organization (Jones, 2018). The constraints theory posits that non-profit organizations' supply chains can be assessed and regulated by examining fluctuations in three key metrics: throughput, operational expense, and inventory. Inventory consists of all funds the system invests to acquire items for sale. The amount of money spent to convert inventory into throughput is an operational expense, while throughput represents the rate at which the system generates revenue from sales. In addition, the current study is pertinent to the commitment trust theory of relationship management, which posits that the success of a relationship is contingent upon the presence of two essential components: trust and commitment (Jones, 2018). This study thus employs the two theories above to elucidate the notion of SRM and its influence on the performance of organizations.

2.2 Supplier Relationship Management Concept

Echtelt et al. (2008) contend that SRM is a strategic approach to maximizing value and minimizing risks by managing interactions with suppliers of products and services. SRM seeks to establish collaborative and robust partnerships with suppliers, which have the potential to generate advantageous results for all respondents. SRM is a comprehensive approach to overseeing interactions and undertakings about the organization that delivers goods and services. Business and academia have paid considerable attention to SRM for the past three decades, ever since it was established on the principles of trust and dedication. SRM has given enterprises many advantages and worth, such as reduced expenses, enhanced quality, more accurate predictions, and mutually beneficial supplier partnerships (Krajewski and Ritzman, 2017). It comprises all activities and strategies implemented by an organization to oversee its interactions with suppliers. In recent years, the significance of supply chain risk management (SRM) has grown in tandem with the complexity of global supply chains and the imperative for organizations to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their procurement procedures. An essential element of SRM entails the formation of enduring partnerships with suppliers. This objective can be accomplished via many methods, encompassing collaboration, information sharing, and communication. By establishing robust supplier relationships, organizations can optimize their supply chain operations, curtail expenses, and bolster their capacity for innovation. Strategic SRM approaches supplier management more comprehensively, ensuring that supplier strategies align with the organization's overarching objectives. Enhanced supplier performance, decreased supply chain risk, increased innovation, and decreased expenses are all advantages of SRM. Buyers can also access expertise and resources to help them improve their products and services by developing strong relationships with suppliers. According to Slack and Brandon-Jones (2018), after they reviewed the literature and interviews with representatives of firms that have successful SRM programs, they found that the six practices listed below characterize the best SRM practices:

- Manage total business with each supplier (consolidate contracts, tie future business to performance).
- Measure and shape supplier performance (establish performance measurement system, rank suppliers, set targets, reward performance).
- Involve critical suppliers early in product design (leverage their design capabilities and knowledge of manufacturability and innovation, reduce complexity).

Host high-level meetings that promote dialogue with suppliers (demonstrate a mutual commitment to the relationship, promote dialogue on expectations and ways to improve, share future and technology roadmaps, and present awards).

- Recruit skilled personnel (recruit experienced personnel with the right qualitative and quantitative skills).
- Develop personnel to have a thorough knowledge of suppliers (educate personnel to know suppliers' processes, costs, capacities, and capabilities and can work with and help suppliers fix processes to meet current needs and continually improve).

2.3 Organizational Performance

Organizational performance refers to how well an organization achieves its market-oriented and financial goals (Krajewski and Ritzman, 2017). Previous studies have found a positive correlation between supplier chain integration operational and business performance, stakeholder satisfaction, and organizational enduring success (Tang, 2015). Accounting measures are more backwards-looking, whereas market measures are more forward-looking (Krajewski and Ritzman, 2017).

2.4 Supplier Relationship Management Practices

De Toni and Nassimbeni (2000) indicate that improving supplier quality includes certifying suppliers on quality and providing technical assistance. Supplier quality improvement would result in improved quality and productivity, enhanced design of the parts and reduced costs (Tang, 2015). In addition, incentives such as long-range relationships, contracts, and commitment are expected to encourage suppliers to improve the quality of their products, as suppliers account for almost 30% of quality-related problems (Krajewski and Ritzman, 2017). Generally, a value proposition refers to the promise of delivering value via a particular product or, in this sense, by an SRM Programme or a sub-project (Echtelt et al., 2008). The previous section covered examples of potential values companies target or benefit from SRM Programmes; therefore, this section focuses more on the theory of how a value proposition is formed and business strategy alignment for an SRM Programme or a specific SRM case/project. In the context of SRM, business strategies are seen as necessary to cover for the sake of value creation (Obrenovic et al., 2020); if an SRM team wants to form a value proposition for business and generate value via an SRM Programme for it, it is a fundamental requirement to identify businesses priorities, targets, objectives, fundamentals, restrictions, and value drivers, so that the SRM Programme can be adapted to serve the business.

3. Research Methodology - Materials and Methods

The choice of research design reflects the decisions about the priority given to a range of dimensions of the research process. In addition, a research methodology creates the blueprint for the data collection, measurement and analysis (Creswell, 2018). A research methodology's primary function is to ensure that the data obtained allows the study to address the research problem logically and explicitly efficiently. The study adopted a descriptive research design. Zhang and Li (2020) state that descriptive research can be either quantitative or qualitative. According to Creswell (2018), a descriptive research design entails collecting data that defines events and arranges the data, tabulates it, depicts it and describes the data collection. A descriptive research design often uses visual aids, for example, graphs and charts. Visual aids are essential for helping the reader understand data distribution. Creswell (2018) further advances three research approaches, namely quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches. Echtelt et al. (2008) suggest that the choice to use each approach is influenced by the researcher's worldview, the condition of the problem under study and research objectives. This study adopted the quantitative research approach. Quantitative research was used because it provides a picture of phenomena. The target population in this study was 50 employees from procurement management departments in the public sector. A random sampling technique was used to collect data from 43 respondents (professionals) experienced with public procurement. The technique was believed to be fitting for this study, as it allowed only those perceived to have specific knowledge of procurement and supplier relationship management to participate, in line with the beliefs of Wisner and Tan (2018).

Davies and Hughes (2014) pinpoint that research instruments are measurements, for example, questionnaires or interview guides, intended to obtain data on a topic of interest from a research topic. Research instruments are tools used to collect data. The study used structured questionnaires because of their ability to offer accurate and straightforward responses, thereby providing appropriate information for the study (Creswell, 2018). Questionnaires also allow for the comparability of responses based on question uniformity. Questionnaires are a primary data collection tool. However, an important point to consider is that when crafting a questionnaire, the researcher must ensure that it is "valid, reliable and unambiguous" (Davies and Hughes, 2014). In this study, the researcher self-administered structured questionnaires to the targeted Ministry of Health and Social Services employees to collect quantitative data. Based on the findings, one can safely argue that appropriately developed questionnaires have many advantages. According to Davies and Hughes (2014) and Creswell (2018), the advantages include questionnaires are an efficient means of collecting information on a large-scale basis; they can also be sent simultaneously to respondents, data can be easily collected from field sites, questionnaires also ensure anonymity this allows respondents to be able to share information freely, data collected can be more identical, accurate and standard and finally, questionnaires save time they time-efficient when dealing with larger samples.

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

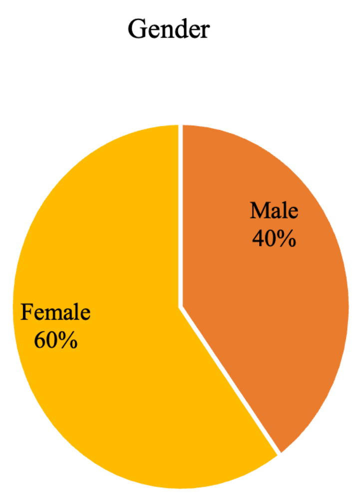


Figure 1: Gender

Figure 1 shows that of all respondents, 60% were female, while 40% were male. Respondents who were 19-25 years old constituted 5% of the sample, those in the 26-35 years category constituted 14%, and those in the 36-46 years category constituted 64% of the sample. Those in the 46 years and above category constitute 17% of the population. Most of the sample falls under the 26-35 years category.

4.2 Supplier Relationship Management Practices

They are bearing in mind that in modern supply chain management, organizations are putting innumerable supplier relationship management practices in place to support their supply chain management. On that note, respondents were asked to show the extent to which they agree with the existence of the following supplier relationship management practices in their organization on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5

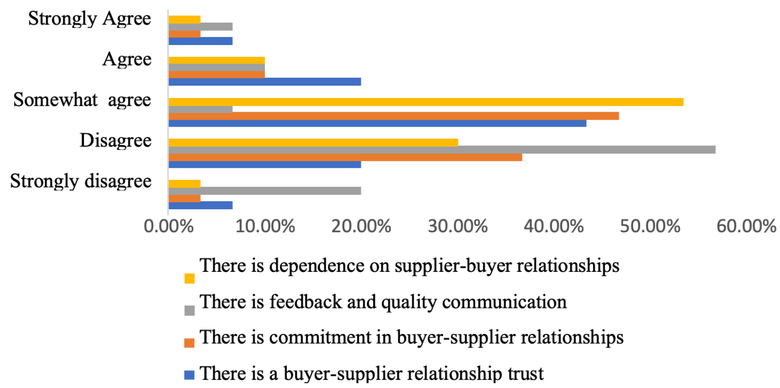


Figure 2: Supplier relationship management practices

The research sought to establish the nature of the supplier-buyer relationship and its effects on the performance of the public procurement divisions. Figure 3 shows that 43% of the respondents agree that there is buyer-supplier relationship trust, 25% agree, and 20% disagree. The remaining 12% were divided between strongly disagree (6%) and strongly agree (6%). 47% of the respondents agreed that there is a commitment in buyer-supplier relationships. 37% disagreed, 3% strongly disagreed, 10% agreed, and 7% strongly agreed. The study also sought to determine if there is feedback and quality in communication: 57% disagreed, 20% strongly disagreed, 7% somewhat agreed, 10% agreed, and 6% strongly agreed. 43% somewhat disagreed with the fact that there is a buyer-supplier relationship, and 40% shared equally between those who agreed and those who disagreed, whereas 3% agreed and 3% disagreed. These results suggest that there may be room for improvement in the relationships between suppliers and the public procurement divisions. Improving trust, transparency, and communication between these parties may be required to resolve these concerns; doing so could result in improved outcomes for all parties.

4.3 Supplier Integration in The Supply Chain

The research results indicate a notable need for improvement in implementing effective supplier integration across the supply chain, including manufacturing, warehousing, and retail. This implies that the surveyed companies must integrate their suppliers proficiently into their operations, potentially resulting in reduced efficiency and escalated expenses. 70% of the respondents disagreed that the chain and its suppliers are integrated, indicating that most surveyed personnel are dissatisfied with their current supplier integration practices. This indicates that public procurement divisions should assess their supply chain procedures and seek opportunities to enhance supplier integration. Also concerning is that only 10% of respondents concurred that suppliers are integrated into the chain. The 20% of respondents who disagreed but did not vehemently disagree may suggest that these businesses are attempting to integrate their suppliers but have not succeeded.

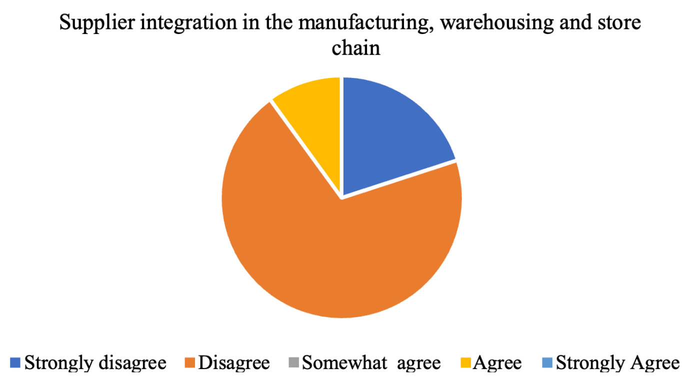


Figure 3: Supplier integration in the supply chain.

The findings underscore the importance of public procurement divisions prioritizing supplier integration as a fundamental component of their supply chain strategy. Organizations can increase supply chain performance, decrease expenses, and streamline operations by effectively integrating suppliers into the manufacturing, warehousing, and retail chains.

4.4 Supplier Selection

The results suggest that a significant portion of the respondents believe that selecting suppliers with the same goals and values as their organization is essential to public procurement divisions, with 47% agreeing. However, a notable percentage of respondents (37%) disagreed with this statement, indicating that they may prioritize other factors, such as cost or product quality, when selecting suppliers. Regarding the willingness of suppliers to adapt to the buyer's needs, the results indicate a divided opinion, with 40% of respondents disagreeing and 40% disagreeing to a limited extent. This could imply that respondents believe suppliers should be willing to adapt to some extent but may also have limitations or conditions regarding the extent to which they are willing to do so. Furthermore, only a tiny percentage of respondents (13%) agreed that suppliers should be willing to adapt, and an even smaller percentage (7%) strongly agreed. This could suggest that the majority of respondents do not place a high priority on supplier flexibility when making their selection.

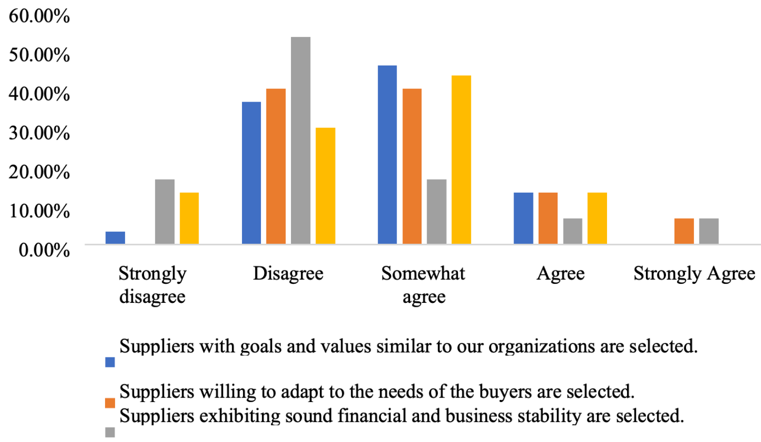


Figure 4: Supplier selection

These results suggest that while some respondents believe in selecting suppliers with shared values and goals, most may prioritize other factors. Additionally, the divided opinion on the willingness of suppliers to adapt to the buyer's needs could indicate that this factor may only be a significant consideration for some respondents.

4.5 Supplier Training and Feedback

Based on the results, a significant majority of the respondents (67%) strongly disagreed with the statement that public procurement divisions provide training and feedback for suppliers. In addition, a further 17% also disagreed, indicating that most respondents do not believe that public procurement divisions provide adequate training and feedback for suppliers. The fact that only 10% of the respondents agreed with the statement suggests that there may be room for improvement in how public procurement divisions provide training and feedback to their suppliers. However, it is worth noting that a small percentage of respondents (3% each) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, which could indicate that some suppliers are receiving sufficient support from public procurement divisions.

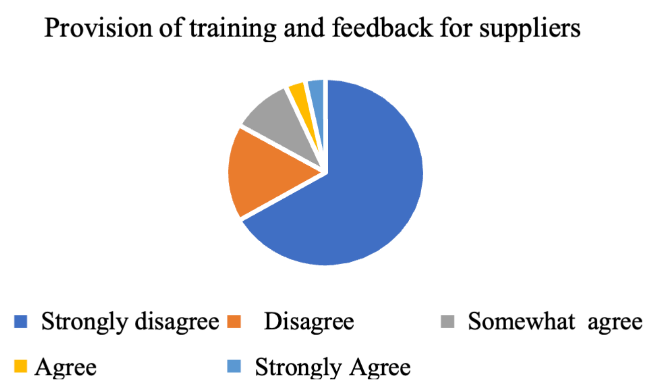


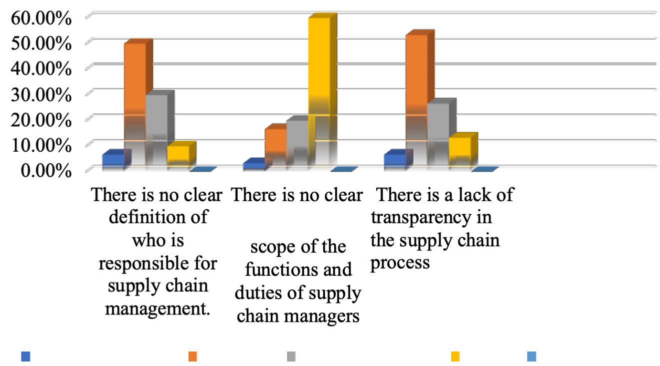
Figure 5: Supplier training and feedback.

Results suggest that there is a perception among most of the respondents that public procurement divisions could do more to provide training and feedback to their suppliers. This information could be used by public procurement divisions to identify areas for improvement and to address any concerns or gaps in their supplier support program.

4.6 Challenges in Supply Chain Management

4.6.1 Lack of Clear Definition of Responsibility, No Scope of Functions and Lack of Transparency

According to Wisner and Tan (2018), organizations must establish clear communication channels with their suppliers, vendors, and partners to ensure that all parties know the supply chain process's activities and expectations. The results presented in the study suggest that several challenges hinder the implementation of effective supply chain management practices in organizations. See Figure 6 below.



Respondents indicated that one of those challenges is a need for clarity on who is responsible for supply chain management. 50% agreed, 30% agreed to a limited extent, 10% strongly agreed, and 7% strongly disagreed. 60% of the respondents disagreed that there needs to be clarity on the scope of the purposes and duties of supply chain managers. 20% somewhat agreed, 17% agreed, and 3% strongly agreed. Figure 6 shows that 53% disagree that there needs to be more transparency in the supply chain process. 30% somewhat agreed, 10% agreed, and 7% strongly agreed. The results highlight the importance of clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of supply chain managers and ensuring transparency in the supply chain process to overcome challenges and improve supply chain management practices in organizations. One of the significant challenges identified is the need for clarity on who is responsible for supply chain management. This lack of clarity can lead to confusion and inefficiencies in the supply chain process. It is essential for organizations to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of supply chain managers to ensure that there is no confusion and that the supply chain process runs smoothly.

4.6.2 High Transaction Costs, Exploitative Suppliers and Lack of Integration

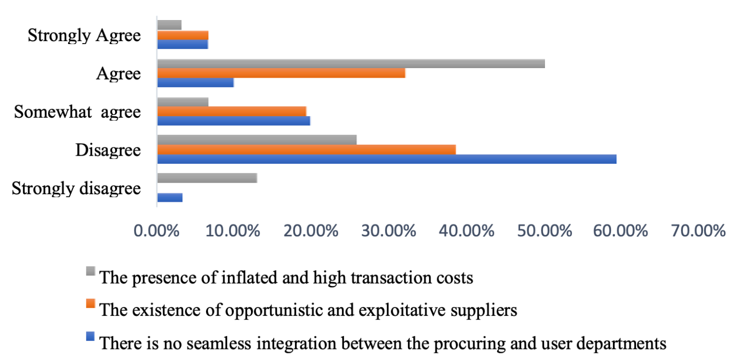


Figure 7: High transaction costs, exploitative suppliers and lack of integration

The study also sought to establish other supply chain management challenges impacting the supplier-buyer relationship. 50% agreed that inflated and high transaction costs are a challenge. This was opposed by 27%, who chose to disagree and 13%, who strongly disagreed. 7% were unsure they agreed to a limited extent, and 3% strongly agreed that there are inflated and high transaction costs. Figure 7 above indicates that 33% of the respondents feel that the existence of opportunistic and exploitative suppliers poses a challenge; however, 40% disagreed, 20% agreed to some extent, and 7% strongly agreed. 60% disagree that there is no continuous integration between the procuring and user departments. 20% somewhat agree, 10% agree, 7% strongly disagree, and 3% strongly disagree. The results suggest that several supply chain management challenges impact the supplier-buyer relationship. Half of the respondents identified High transaction costs as a major challenge, which is a significant concern as it can increase the cost of procuring goods and services.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of effective supply chain management and the need to address the challenges that impact the supplier-buyer relationship. By addressing these challenges, municipalities can improve their procurement processes, reduce costs, and ensure the delivery of high-quality goods and services to the public (Wisner and Tan, 2018).

5. Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that there needs to be more trust between public procurement divisions and their suppliers. The findings do not agree with Wisner and Tan (2018), who, in his findings, argue that trust is everything in supply chain relationship management and one major factor for superior performance. It is essential, therefore, for public procurement divisions to focus on aspects that build trust with its key suppliers. Additionally, trust is vital and beneficial to the supplier for them to establish, spread, and retain the buying firm's trust; this is important in instances where trust can lead to more benefits for the supplier. Additionally, it is essential to note that trust building can be expensive, challenging and a time-consuming procedure, but the critical thing is to look at the benefits, such as robust, effective and long-term buyer-seller relationships (Lee and Kim, 2021; Tjizumaue et al., 2023). Public procurement divisions must build strong relationships with suppliers by strengthening trust and sharing reliable information. Moreover, to ensure that information distortion is avoided, technology improvements are essential to facilitate the timely sharing of information. As Wisner and Tan (2018) suggested, technology helps partners share real-time information with each actor in the supply chain. The same is supported by (), who found that sharing real-time information with their business partners helps to minimize real-time problems, reduce costs, improve productivity and enhance the firm's profitability.

Research findings indicate that there needs to be supplier training and feedback. This result implies that if public procurement divisions are to achieve excellence in supply chain management, it is essential to start by launching superior relational norms. These are established by stressing the interchange of engagements for reliability, for instance, through offering long-term contracts. On the other hand, appropriate sharing of risks and rewards is essential; public procurement divisions can also focus on supplier evaluation and feedback to enhance communication and joint problem-solving. Lastly, public procurement divisions should focus on safeguarding top management's commitment to developing sustainable and effective supplier relations. In other aspects, the results signify that the suppliers selected by public procurement divisions are the ones that deliver appropriate levels of service, and public procurement divisions also select suppliers that deliver materials just in time (reliable suppliers with shorter lead time). This helps organizations to curtail lead time problems. Lee and Kim (2021) indicate that suppliers account for nearly 80% of lead-time problems. Within a lean production setting, JIT procuring necessitates the supplier firms to deliver regular supplies in small lots. The research also highlighted several challenges that obstruct the supply chain management practices of public procurement divisions and suppliers exist. According to the study's findings, lack of clarity on who is responsible for supply chain management stood out as one of the key challenges that public procurement divisions face.

The challenge of lack of clarity on who is responsible for supply chain management is a significant obstacle that public procurement divisions and their suppliers must address to optimize their supply chain management practices and service quality (Ahunjonov, Asa and Amonboyev, 2013; Nautwima and Asa, 2021; Nautwima and Asa, 2022). Effective communication, collaboration, and supply chain management systems can help mitigate this challenge and improve overall supply chain performance. For public procurement divisions to fully integrate an SRM Programme that entirely influences and supports its business strategy, their stakeholders must support the SRM's objectives and vice versa. This relates primarily to high-level senior support, which is vital for companies in public procurement divisions’ SRM execution. The value proposition of SRMs can help in gaining support from all other functions, and even so, sometimes SRM initiatives can come from senior management itself; in such instances, this indicates an enterprise's advanced value creation-based strategy (Asa, Prasad and Htay, 2013; Asa and Prasad, 2015; Shutes and Day, 2016;).

6. Conclusion

Based on the study findings, public procurement divisions have a considerable opportunity to improve their overall performance, and that of the organizations by appropriately using SRM strategies. While improved SRM practices may not be the only key for public procurement divisions to improve its overall performance, the organization must review current SRM structures to detect the weak links and address them accordingly to influence performance positively. In conclusion, to operate effectively, it is critical to build strong relationships with suppliers by strengthening trust and sharing reliable information with them in all sectors. Moreover, to ensure that information distortion is avoided, technological improvement is essential to facilitate the timely sharing of information, which is critical in modern organizations.

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