Employment Services South Africa usage: Perspectives from jobseekers and employees

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Abstract

This paper examines the perspectives of the Department of Employment and Labour employees and jobseekers on the usage of the Employment Services South Africa (ESSA) system. The system's primary aim is to place unemployed South Africans in available job opportunities by facilitating information sharing between employers and jobseekers based on the jobseekers' qualifications and experience. Data was collected from 34 respondents, including employees of the Department of Employment and Labour and jobseekers, through qualitative interviews. The findings revealed that many unemployed jobseekers did not effectively use the ESSA system. While the ESSA system is valued by the Department of Employment and Labour employees, its adoption, perceived usefulness, accuracy, and effectiveness among jobseekers are lacking. The system still struggles with low visibility, a lack of awareness, and trust among jobseekers, who often look elsewhere for effective recruitment.

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1. Introduction

Public employment services (PES) are instrumental in job matching, a critical function that facilitates the functioning of labour markets and promotes employment opportunities. They also offer various tailored employment-related services to jobseekers and employers. PES, typically established and operated by national, regional, or local governments, aim to create a more efficient, inclusive, and resilient labour market that benefits individuals, businesses, and society (Jobs and Development, 2024). For jobseekers, PES are invaluable in their search for suitable employment, gathering and sharing information about job vacancies, coordinating with employers, and matching jobseekers' skills with suitable opportunities. They also provide crucial job search assistance to enhance the chances of successful job placement (Jobs and Development, 2024).

During times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, agile and proactive, PES proved essential to prevent unemployment through schemes such as short-time work, streamlining benefit applications, and adjusting job-search requirements to match the evolving job market (OECD, 2020). However, despite their importance, the effectiveness of PES varies. Research demonstrates that jobseekers utilising PES endure prolonged unemployment durations compared to those employing other search strategies, as companies rarely depend on PES, often favoring other recruitment avenues such as self-nominations, newspaper advertisements, headhunters, and personal relationships (Baños et al., 2019). Additionally, the public employment agency, while commonly used worldwide, in South Africa, it has been found to have a low hit rate and often leads to low-paying jobs as many jobseekers are not familiar with the services of PES (Demana et al., 2024; Loewald, et al., 2021).

The main functions of Employment Services in South Africa are to match jobseekers with available job opportunities, register jobseekers in the database, register job vacancies and other employment opportunities on the system, and enable the placement of jobseekers with companies and other job opportunities. Employment Services South Africa stems from Chapter 2 of the Employment Services Act (2014), which defines work opportunities as vacancies or openings for employment, self-employment, community service, or work experience. This implies that any vacancy or job opening that is available in any company or organisation is a work opportunity, be it a formal job, internship, learnerships, in-service training, contract or seasonal employment, is regarded as a work opportunity (Employment Service Act, 2014 Act 4 of 2014).

Studies have shown that PES participation provides job brokerage through the public dissemination of vacancies, increases the probability of formal employment, improves employment outcomes for disadvantaged social assistance recipients, increases the employment opportunities for low skilled jobseekers, and decreases unemployment rate (Ravn & Nielsen, 2019; Demana et al., 2024; Loewald et al., 2021). For instance, Germany and France offer distinct forms of career support through Public Employment Services, specifically in career visualisation and planning methodologies (The International Centre for Career Development and Public Policy, 2024). The Federal Employment Agency in Germany provides integration-focused counseling and job placement services for the unemployed. Upon registering with the PES, each unemployed individual schedules a personal consultation with an employment integration counselor, evaluating client skills, competencies, and personal circumstances including mobility, childcare, health, economic, and social conditions (Cedefop, 2020a). On the other hand, Pôle Emploi, the government employment service in France, offers assistance through personal consultations and digital resources. They provide information, guidance, and placement services for adults seeking employment, retraining, relocation, and skill enhancement. Employment counsellors provide this service via a nationwide network of employment agencies that accommodate all adults, regardless of their job status (Cedefop, 2020a).

While numerous scholars have focused on public employment service challenges and different approaches to delivery and implementation (Suárez et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022; De Moraes et al., 2022), past research has paid much less attention to jobseekers and the Department of Employment and Labour perspectives towards employment services usage in the South African context (Demana et al., 2024; Banos et al., 2019). To expand the understanding of this phenomenon, this study examines the Department of Employment and Labour employees' and jobseekers' perspectives towards the Employment Services South Africa (ESSA) system usage. To address the research gaps, the study relied on Davis' Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) theory. TAM theory postulates that the acceptance of technology is predicted by the users' behavioural intention, which is, in turn, determined by the perception of technology's usefulness in performing the task and the perceived ease of its use (Marikyan, 2023). The study outcomes will contribute to the literature on public employment services by complementing previous PES studies. Drawing from the TAM model, this study shows differing perspectives on the usage of the ESSA system between jobseekers

and Department of Labour employees working with the ESSA system. Finally, the generated insights can inform evidence-based decision-making and ultimately contribute to more effective and responsive employment services in South Africa.

2. Literature Review

Public Employment Services (PES) exist in various countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Mena regions as an essential component of efficient labour markets (ILO, 2020). According to the International Labour Office (ILO), PES are usually part of government ministries, labour in particular, which are tasked with planning and implementing many active and, at times, passive labour market policies that help unemployed workers enter the labour market. This is done by providing labour market information. PES offers job-search assistance to work seekers and places them in the relevant job. They also offer unemployment insurance benefits and administration and manage various labour market programmes (ILO, 2020).

From the employers' perspective, PES act more than just intermediaries. They foster communities by collecting information about job vacancies and matching it with suitable jobseekers. The entire section of the report, "The World of Public Employment Services", is devoted to PES from the employers' perspective, including new approaches to improving employers' perceptions of PES and their engagement with these services (ILO, 2023). From a societal perspective, PES are critical for combating unemployment and facilitating social inclusion. Their institutional and organisational structure has a significant influence on the design and implementation of active labour market policies (ALMPs), which help to improve the functioning of labour markets, facilitating both geographical and occupational mobility and (re)directing workers to productive activities (ILO, 2023).

According to Yilak (2018:17), the delivery of PES differs from country to country. Traditionally, PES can be offered by national departments, usually the Ministry of Labour in particular country or other entities independent of the government. When looking at the Middle East and Africa, countries such as Jordan, Yemen and Egypt provide PES using their labour ministries. In contrast, countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Syria and Morocco provide autonomous entities that operate within the laws set by the Ministry of Labour and are only supervised by a particular government department (Yilak, 2018:17). In South Africa, PES are provided using an online system called Employment Services South Africa (ESSA). This system helps alleviate unemployment in a country's economy. The South African government

was fit to implement this intervention to decrease unemployment. ESSA is positioned within the PES branch of the Department of Employment and Labour (Pupuma, 2018:3).

According to the South African Department of Employment and Labour (2019), ESSA is a system used by the Department of Employment and Labour to enable employment. All companies and private employment agencies must register job opportunities with ESSA when they have job opportunities. Potential employers may register a job opportunity on the system, possible employees will be searched for by the system and a match will be looked for. Jobseekers may also log into the portal and apply for vacant job opportunities. The system is also responsible for fusing sector-based data from different Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and using that information to assess the different skills and employees the labour market is looking for (South African Department of Employment & Labour, 2019). It is evident that employment services are crucial and more essential than ever in supporting workers in navigating the volatility of labour markets, especially in South Africa. The country is currently grappling with high unemployment rates, which stand at 32.9%, marking an increase of 0.8 percentage points in the first quarter of 2024 (Q1: 2024) compared to the fourth quarter of 2023 (Q4: 2023) (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Scott et al. (2022) argued that in some contexts, PES performance has sparked controversy. For example, since the inception of ESSA, despite a growing number of registered users, the platform has achieved only limited success in placing jobseekers. The Department of Employment and Labour's 2019/20 Annual Performance Plan reported that, out of 800,000 registered jobseekers, only 50,000 were placed in work or learning opportunities. Similarly, the 2022/23 Annual Performance Plan indicated that, although 850,000 jobseekers were registered on the ESSA platform, only 50,000 job placements were achieved. Furthermore, the 2023/24 Annual Performance Plan revealed that, while 900,000 jobseekers registered on the platform, only 60,000 secured employment through it.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study used the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The TAM is a theoretical framework that researchers use to analyse factors that impact technology usage and explain the underlying factors that motivate users to accept and adopt new information technology systems. Initially conceived by Davis in 1989, the TAM model assists researchers in understanding and predicting how users buy and use new technology. The two main

assumptions of this theory are that individuals utilise technology because of its perceived ease of use and usefulness, assuming that attitude towards utilisation, intention to use, and actual utilisation of technology depend on the technology's perceived usefulness and ease of use (Malatji et al., 2020). It further states that it is not a matter of whether the technology is useful itself but rather a matter of individuals' perceptions of how helpful is. This alludes to the fact that this perception will vary among individuals depending on various backgrounds, demographics, and contexts through which it is analysed (Malatji et al., 2020).

TAM has evolved to incorporate social influence and cognitive instrumental processes to explain perceived usefulness and usage intentions (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Venkatesh and Bala (2008) further expanded TAM by developing a comprehensive nomological network to predict individual-level adoption and use of information technology. This integrated model has been instrumental in guiding research on interventions to enhance employees' adoption and use of IT systems. Vankatesh et al. (2003) developed the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) to harmonise the literature on technology acceptance by integrating various views on user and innovation acceptance. The UTAUT aims to provide a unified model for understanding technology acceptance. Additionally, the Affective Technology Acceptance Model extends TAM by incorporating positive and negative effects to elucidate further factors influencing technology acceptance (Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023).

Studies have shown that TAM is a robust tool for understanding user perceptions and predicting acceptance of new technologies (Dawson et al., 2017). It has been widely used to examine user acceptance and willingness towards various technologies, including computer technology and information products, in diverse contexts such as healthcare, tourism, and small and medium-sized enterprises (Huang et al., 2015; Marikyan & Papagiannidis, 2023). This study uses TAM and TAM2 to assess the perspectives of ESSA usage, considering the following constructs; perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, which were developed, pre-tested, and validated in several studies.

4. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research methodology, which enables a thorough exploration and disentanglement of the profound life experiences of the individuals included in the study. according to Busetto et al. (2020), qualitative methods primarily focus on using

visuals and reasoning to analyse human behaviour and comprehend widely held assumptions. The approach followed is well-suited for this study as it facilitates the exploration of research topics that cannot be answered through quantification. Additionally, it can aid in examining the distinct intricacies of ESSA system usage. Moreover, using a qualitative approach offers insights into the understanding of the issue under investigation. It also aids in assessing jobseekers' perspectives on the ESSA system usage and its usefulness.

Purposive sampling was used to select 34 respondents. Eighteen of the respondents were employees of the Department of Employment and Labour who were responsible for the operational aspects of the ESSA system. They comprised 16.67% at the senior management level (including Directors and Deputy Directors), 16.67% at the middle management level (Assistant Directors), and 66.66% at the operational level (clerks and practitioners). Among the middle management respondents, many had extensive experience with the system, including some with over ten years of experience. Of these 18 employee respondents, an equal gender distribution was observed, with nine (50%) being female and nine (50%) male. On the other hand, the remaining sixteen participants were jobseekers with nine (56.25%) being female and seven (43.75%) male. In total, 34 respondents participated in interviews conducted in Pretoria, Gauteng Province. The respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 52 years, with the majority being between 25 and 30 years.

The choice of sampling method was motivated by its ability to enhance respondents' involvement and facilitate the opportunity to ask probing questions, thereby obtaining comprehensive insights into the subject of discourse. Campbell et al. (2020) contended that while employing purposive sampling, one must exercise discernment in choosing cases that would optimally facilitate the investigation of research questions and achieve objectives. Therefore, the chosen technique is pertinent to the investigation.

Primary data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews to understand jobseekers' perceptions of the effectiveness of ESSA usage. Adedoyin (2020:1) notes that in-depth interviews involve extensive interviews with a limited number of participants, allowing researchers to dedicate a substantial amount of time to each participant. These interviews were conversationally conducted. In-depth interviews were designed based on the aforementioned TAM constructs of simplicity of use and utility. In addition, secondary data was used, and sources were selected based on their relevance to the research topic and problem, considering their reliability, authenticity, meaning and representativeness.

Qualitative data acquired from the respondents through in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic data analysis. The key themes centered on the perceptions of job searchers and the Department of Employment and Labour employees regarding the use of ESSA. Thematic material was generated using excerpts from the respondents' transcripts, summarising the findings and forming conclusions.

In this study, approval to conduct research was granted by the University of Pretoria Ethics Committee, signifying that the study meets ethical standards and aligns with institutional guidelines. Informed consent was a key component of the process, and participants voluntarily signed a consent form, affirming their understanding and agreement to participate, with the assurance that they could withdraw at any time. A detailed interview protocol was developed to ensure the research process was systematic, respectful, and mindful of participants' well-being. Measures were implemented to safeguard participants from any physical, psychological, or emotional harm throughout the study. Confidentiality of data was strictly maintained through strategies such as anonymisation, secure data storage, and restricted access to sensitive information, thereby protecting participants' privacy and fostering trust in the research process.

5. Findings

5.1. Knowledge of the ESSA platform

In the quest to understand the respondents' knowledge of the ESSA platform, they were asked whether they had any knowledge of it. Based on this question, all 18 of the respondents from the department had knowledge of the ESSA system, while only seven of the 16 jobseekers had knowledge of it. Interestingly, of the 18 respondents from the Department of Employment and Labour, three indicated that they had no idea about the system before working for the department.

Among the seven jobseekers familiar with the system, it was interesting that although they indicated that they knew about the system, most indicated that they only found out about the platform on the internet, with one stipulating that they found it out mainly through the internet and using social media. However, nine respondents expressed a lack of familiarity with ESSA.

Participant 1 from the unemployed jobseekers added: "*I have never heard of the system; it is the first time hearing of it from you*". Participant 11 supported this statement by saying, "*I*

just came here for my UIF. They just told me to fill out the form and submit it. I did not know there was an online system."

Experience level of using ESSA*.* The study sought to assess respondents' levels of experience in using the ESSA website for job searches, aiming to establish the familiarity of both Department of Employment and Labour employees and jobseekers with the platform. Among the 18 departmental employees surveyed, six reported using the system as a job-search tool for over six years, six had used it for two years, three for five years, two for three years, and one for four years. This distribution provides insight into the varying levels of user experience with the ESSA platform among department employees. In contrast, nine of the 16 jobseekers interviewed reported having no knowledge of the ESSA system, and therefore did not respond to this question. Among the seven participants familiar with the system, only two reported having two years of experience using ESSA, while the remaining five had only recently begun using it, with usage periods ranging from two weeks to three months. This indicates limited experience with the ESSA system among the majority of the participants.

Frequency of use. The participants were asked about their frequency of ESSA system usage. The results indicate considerable variation in usage patterns among the Department of Employment and Labour employees when searching for employment on the ESSA website. Twelve respondents reported using the system weekly, five used it monthly, and one accessed it daily. Among the unemployed jobseekers, nine out of 16 had never used the ESSA system, attributing this to a lack of knowledge about the platform. Of the seven participants familiar with the system, five reported using it only once per month, while one participant indicated an inability to re-access the system due to password-related issues. The remaining two respondents were registered.

Ease of use of the ESSA system. Participants were asked about the system's ease of use, and 100% of the Department of Employment and Labour employees said it was easy to use for those who use it frequently. However, they also mentioned that for first-time users, the system could be very difficult to navigate, especially for those who are not technologically savvy. They noted that the following prompts were required to use the system effectively. The Department of Employment and Labour employees supported these statements.

Participant 2 suggests that the platform is relatively user-friendly for individuals with basic computer knowledge but can be challenging for those who are not computer literate. Registering is straightforward, similar to other websites and social media platforms, but

navigating and searching for opportunities can be difficult for those with limited computer skills. Participant 13 opines, *"it's not user-friendly for people on the outside."* Participant 4 added, *"it was a bit challenging for me when I was applying for jobs and using the system for the first time. It wasn't very user-friendly. I am computer literate, so I was able to figure out how to navigate through the system easily. However, it can be quite difficult for someone unfamiliar with how to use the system."* Participant 6 stated, *"the ESSA system is fairly user-friendly but has limitations. Most of the time, if you are not aware of how to use it specifically, you won't be able to access opportunities. If you are not well versed with ESSA, you cannot use it."*

From the jobseekers, perspectives on the ease of use, the majority, 62%, had not used the system, whilst of those that had experienced the system, 20% indicated that the system was not easy to use, whilst the other 18% said the system was easy to use. As an example, Participant 8 shared, *"it's quite difficult because after inserting your ID, I think your password is your ID. I'm not too sure, but it's quite difficult to access because after finding these troubles in the system, you are unaware of logging errors. It's not so easy"*. Participant 1 retorts, *"registering wasn't difficult. The only problem was retrieving my password. Yes, I used my maiden surname, not mine. No, I used my marriage surname, not my maiden surname. So, it gave me a problem, and I was not able to reaccess the system."* Of the 18% who indicated that the system was easy to use, Participant 4 (2023) alludes, *"it is easy because you don't use transport to go up and down looking for a job; just do it through the phone because all you need is data."* Participant 3 posits, *"it was easy. Everything was straightforward. It was not difficult."* Participant 9 highlights*, "it is very easy for a person, one needs to know basic English as I only know basic English; it is very easy to apply."*

Quality of the ESSA system. Respondents were also asked to rate the quality of the ESSA system compared with other job search platforms. Based on the results, all the Department of Employment and Labour employees stated that the system was of good quality, offering what it was designed to do. However, the seven jobseekers who had engaged in the system were of the view that the system was intermediate and not of good quality compared to the other platforms. For example, the Department of Employment and Labour employees can be quoted as supporting the system, specifically stating the following. Participant 8 stated, *"currently, ESSA is a high-level quality system. It is very effective. Many people are finding employment through the system, and numerous opportunities are available."* Participant 15

said, *"for its purpose, it is of high quality, and not just because we were involved. Officials from Germany assessed the system in 2013 or 2014 and provided very positive feedback, stating that it meets the standard of the German system in every way. Due to network challenges, improvements are needed to make it faster. Overall, ESSA is of high quality but has minor operational errors."*

Contrary to these narratives, all seven jobseekers who had experience with the system stipulated that ESSA is an intermediate-level system, as depicted in their sentiments. Participant 16 states, *"I would say it's an intermediate quality system. I think so because, in my opinion, comparing it with other recruitment systems focuses more on registering work seekers rather than finding a job or the job search itself. Most, if not all, recruitment systems focus on the opportunities themselves and in a way or along the way, you get an opportunity to register should you be interested. It is for this reason I would rate it intermediate".* Participant 1 claims, *"I think intermediate because I had to get assistance. I could not do it on my own; it was quite difficult to receive my password. Okay. Yeah. Had I not received assistance, I wouldn't have been able to retrieve the password".* Participant 8 reveals, *"it is an intermediate-quality system because of the errors you find when logging in and the troubles of the system itself, which are not easy to navigate."* Participant 10 highlights, *"it is an intermediate-quality system because for now, I have not received anything concrete from ESSA, so for now, I would say it is an intermediate system."*

Accuracy of the information on the ESSA system. Upon inquiring about the accuracy of the information on the system, many of the Department of Employment and Labour employees believed that the information was accurate, and one universal reason respondents felt the ESSA system had accurate information was that the ID numbers of jobseekers were sourced from the Department of Home Affairs. However, the same respondents indicated that human error and incorrect information had been prevalent in the system. These factors affected the ESSA system's placement capacity.

Participant 4 opines, *"the only issue that I have is that if you search opportunities on the system, you would find that the opening and closing dates for opportunities don't correspond with what you would find in your DPSA circular or something like that because you would find that, on DPSA, it would have already closed. Then, when you go on the ESSA system, there is an extended period".*

Participant 5 states, *"some of the other aspects of the information, for example, your qualifications, your skills, your location, are inaccurate. Sometimes, individuals do not put accurate information on the ESSA platform. Thus, it makes it harder to reach the individuals if they do not have accurate contact details, accurate location, and so forth. When work seekers are called for possible employment, they are unreachable."*

Participant 15 reveals, *"for instance, if you ask me about a sector, I'm a person with IT, and then you ask me to choose a sector of my field. It might be difficult because it cuts across some of the things, as your OFO is a language that most users are not familiar with, and that is the difficult part about the system because people may not know what to choose, and that information is crucial. Therefore, if they choose anything, it has its repercussions, especially in terms of assisting them to find employment".*

Participant 7 asserts, *"partly, it is, but not fully accurate because sometimes you find that you go on the system and then, for example, you see that there's a person who holds a public management qualification rather than a degree in public management. So, when you verify, call the person to find out if they actually have the qualification, and they will tell you that they're still busy with the qualification, so it's not fully accurate".*

Participant 14 posits, *"OK, if you consider the opportunities. One needs to be smart in terms of searching for opportunities because I have noted that you get different types of input regarding opportunity names. For example, if you find an opportunity called client service officer written in full, it will be easy to search for. Other times, you find an abbreviation instead of a full title. At other times, the same opportunity, other suffixes will throw the meaning away. This leads to you not finding the opportunity itself, so it depends on the input side of the system operators. Now, this becomes difficult for an end user to navigate".*

Participant 16 illustrates, *"I mean, compared to the number of people being registered, unfortunately, we do not have control over the qualifications that are captured by the people, so that might pose a question about the accuracy of the information".*

With regards to jobseekers, of the seven who answered the question, two stated that the information was accurate, whilst the other five indicated that they did not have enough knowledge to comment on the accuracy.

Usefulness of the ESSA System compared to the other platforms. To evaluate the users' perceptions of the system's usefulness, respondents were asked to rate their utility. They were also asked to compare ESSA with other job-seeking platforms and to indicate their

likelihood of using ESSA over other platforms. Based on the responses, the majority, 13 Department of Employment and Labour respondents, indicated that the system was very useful and preferred other job seeker platforms. They cited bias and familiarity with the ESSA system as the primary reasons for their preference.

Participant 2 highlights, *"I would use ESSA. You know, the reason is that I feel like it works for me. I registered with many other platforms, you know, but never called for interviews, whereas my CV was always updated in everything. When I registered for ESSA, I started getting job interviews, which meant my CV was recognised, and there was nothing wrong with my CV. With the other platforms, I filled in, registered and did everything but received no interviews or recognition whatsoever."*

Participant 1 shares, *"OK, in this case, because I work with ESSA. So I would actually say that it's the one that I would opt for."*

Participant 3 admits, *"since I also work with the system, it's more likely for me to use ESAA as I am more exposed to ESSA."*

Participant 6 suggests, *"Based on my experience, I strongly prefer ESSA. It has been very useful for me in the past."*

Participant 14 claims, *"Now I'll say ESSA has an edge over the other platforms because the other platforms' functionality is not as good as ESSA's. As I said in the previous question, when you go and check the status of your application, there is feedback in that regard, even though it does not expand on the feedback with other platforms that I used before. There's no feedback in that regard from the other platforms."*

Contrary to the statements, the five respondents felt that they would use other platforms for the following reasons.

Participant 4 explains, *"I wouldn't. For me, not likely. Because you can upload your perfect CV on a different job-seeking platform, it is easier to search for jobs on other platforms and apply. For those reasons, ESSA is not very likely."*

Participant 5 shares, *"All right, I would choose, honestly, choose other platforms instead of EESA because of how efficiently they're run. Regarding the other platforms, you are somewhat guaranteed a response, be it good or bad. However, with ESSA, they can say that you have been screened, but you do not receive any call. You do not receive any information or you do not receive anything that pertains to your screening."*

Participant 7 describes*, "I think I would generally use other platforms because I do not normally use ESSA to apply for positions. The reason is that when there is an available opportunity, sometimes when you go to ESSA, it is not always user-friendly. When you go to ESSA and then you put in those reference numbers, you find that when you're searching for that opportunity, it will just say 0 results found by trying to avoid that admin. I'd rather go to other platforms instead of using ESSA."*

Participant 9 hints*, "Yes, uh, compared to those other platforms, OK, sometimes people think it's a network connection regarding the ESSA side. You'll find that it's down sometimes, sometimes it's up and running compared to those private ones. The private ones are more reliable than ESSA."*

Participant 10 reveals*, "I'm not much likely. I'd rather go with other platforms, sorry to say, but I think they are much more focused."*

Regarding jobseekers, of the seven who answered this question, four stated that the system was useful and that they would use ESSA as their preferred job-seeking tool over other platforms, while the other three stated that they would rather use the other platforms as they did not find ESSA very useful. Participant 9 shares*, "I would rather use ESSA because it is very convenient and straightforward."* Participant 10 opines*, "I can say ESSA because it is linked to a government department. Yeah, I think the best."* Participant 8 reveals*, "I have been using GPG, and it's easier because your password is saved automatically on my Android phone; you know the system automatically receives a password. I then log in, and it automatically logs in after I put my ID, you know. And, yeah, the logging part, the logging in part is quite difficult."*

6. Discussion

This paper provides empirical evidence of the perspectives highlighted by the Department of Employment and Labour employees in conjunction with jobseekers based on their experience in terms of using the ESSA system. Based on a sample of 34 respondents, the findings indicate that while the Department of Employment and Labour employees value the ESSA system, its adoption, ease of use, and perceived usefulness among jobseekers are lacking. The system struggles with low visibility and a lack of awareness and trust among jobseekers, who often turn to other sources for effective recruitment. For example, the Department of Employment and Labour's employees are generally well-informed about the

ESSA platform, with all 18 respondents aware of it. However, jobseekers' awareness is significantly lower, with less than half of them knowing about the platform. This suggests a potential gap in outreach and information dissemination to the intended end-users, jobseekers. This observation aligns with the findings of Loewald et al. (2021) and Deloitte (2023) that many PES face challenges in raising awareness and engaging jobseekers.

Regarding the experience level of using ESSA, the Department of Employment and Labour employees have a wide range of experience levels, with some using the ESSA system for over six years. In contrast, a majority of jobseekers are not aware of the system's existence, while a few others have mostly had minimal experience in its use. This aligns with the findings of Demana et al. (2024) that not many jobseekers are familiar with PES services. Although PES conducts advocacy sessions and stakeholder engagement to educate both employers and jobseekers about the services they provide, most still do not know of PES. The limited experience with the ESSA system among the majority of participants has important implications for the platform's efficacy. Minimal familiarity suggests potential barriers to effective job-seeking support, as well as a possible lack of sufficient outreach, training, or engagement strategies by the Department of Employment and Labour. If most users lack a deep understanding of the platform, the intended benefits of the ESSA system may not be fully realised, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to enhance user engagement and system effectiveness.

With respect to the frequency of use of the ESSA system, usage patterns vary significantly between the Department of Employment and Labour employees and jobseekers. While some employees of the Department of Employment and Labour use the system frequently (daily to weekly), many jobseekers have never used it. These findings highlight limited and infrequent engagement with the ESSA system among jobseekers, suggesting potential accessibility issues, a need for better user orientation, and the importance of addressing technical challenges, such as login difficulties, to facilitate more regular use.

Regarding the ease of use of the ESSA system, although the Department of Employment and Labour employees find it easy to use, this is not the case for many jobseekers, particularly those who are technologically challenged or first-time users. This is consistent with the findings of Loewald et al. (2021), whose study reveals that PES has been found to have a low hit rate as many jobseekers are not familiar with its services. In addition, Nkanata (2019) asserted that the absence of usage and intention to use renders a system ineffective.

This supports the underlying TAM model, which states that numerous factors influence technology usage and motivate various users to embrace new information technology systems in the quest to find employment. This suggests that the system interface could be improved to be more user-friendly and inclusive, potentially increasing its adoption rate.

The Department of Employment and Labour employees rate the ESSA system's quality favourably, in contrast to jobseekers, who perceive it as only moderate compared to other platforms. This finding aligns with the research by Scott et al. (2022), who argue that algorithmic tools implemented in PES have often provoked controversy, highlighting the need for a job seeker-centric approach. Similarly, Johnston and McGauran (2021) identified gaps in information, training, support services, and employer connections as critical barriers to the effective use of PES. In addition, Agneni et al. (2021) found that fewer than 10% of jobseekers registered with PES secured a job interview, with a quarter experiencing difficulty effectively navigating the job search process, leading to feelings of distrust and demotivation. Applying the TAM, it may be deduced that jobseekers' perceptions of the ESSA system's usefulness contribute significantly to its perceived quality, reflecting Joseph Juran's quality philosophy of "fitness for use" (Ramkumar, 2019). This suggests that to meet jobseekers' quality expectations, the Department of Employment and Labour must ensure that the ESSA system demonstrates high-quality attributes and reliability. Addressing these elements could enhance jobseekers' satisfaction and overall engagement with the platform, thereby improving its utility as an employment service tool.

Although a majority of jobseekers indicated that they did not have enough knowledge to comment on the accuracy of the ESSA system, the Department of Employment and Labour employees trust the accuracy of the ESSA system. However, the employees also pointed out that human errors and incorrect information were prevalent in the system which impacted its placement capability. This finding aligns with the ILO (2022) study which revealed that inaccurate information on the PES system can be attributed in part to insufficient data and system interoperability, as well as a lack of adequate infrastructure. Without seamless data integration and robust technological infrastructure, it is challenging to ensure accurate, up-to-date job post and applicant information across the PES platform. These limitations hinder the platform's effectiveness, reducing its reliability for jobseekers and employers alike, as errors and outdated information may persist without timely updates and verifications. Addressing these issues is crucial to improve the quality and usability of PES systems.

Regarding the usefulness of the ESSA system compared to other platforms, most of the Department of Employment and Labour respondents find the ESSA system more useful than other platforms. Similarly, a majority of jobseekers stated that the system was useful and that they would use ESSA as their preferred job-seeking tool over other platforms. This perspective supports the two main assumptions made by TAM theory, which stresses that individuals may decide to use a specific technology because of its perceived ease of use and usefulness. In the context of TAM theory, it is assumed that jobseekers' attitudes towards the utilisation and intention to use compared to the actual utilisation of the technology or a system depend mainly on the technology's perceived usefulness and ease of use. Further, the theory argues that the use of a system may not always be a matter of whether the technology is useful, but that it might depend on individuals' perceptions of how helpful this technology is.

This study contributes to the PES literature in various ways. First, it provides perspectives on jobseekers and the Department of Employment and Labour employees in charge of the ESSA system. These findings align with the literature that stipulates that while many PES are building consumer-grade digital services for jobseekers, many struggle to use these activities because of low digital literacy, lack of digital access, and lack of user-friendly service portals (Deloitte, 2023). In addition, Nkanata (2019:291), asserts that the absence of usage and intention to use renders a system ineffective. Additionally, the findings support the TAM assumption that perceived ease of use indirectly affects usage behaviour by influencing perceived usefulness (Davis, 1993). According to the model, an application that is expected to be easy to use is more likely to be perceived as helpful, increasing the likelihood of its acceptance and use (Davis, 1993). Furthermore, the findings confirm the TAM2 constructs regarding job relevance from the Department of Employment and Labour employees' perspectives. Job relevance is an individual's perception of the degree to which the target system applies to their job (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). The notion that output quality enhances the perception of a technology's relevance to the job supports the idea that improved output quality increases the likelihood of positive technology perceptions (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000).

Based on the findings and supported by seminal sources in public employment services, technology adoption, and human-computer interaction, here are some recommendations for improving the ESSA system. Firstly, the Department of Labour and Employment Services need to improve awareness among jobseekers through targeted campaigns, leveraging social media and online platforms where jobseekers are likely to spend time. This aligns with

diffusion theories from Everett Rogers, who suggest tailored communication strategies for different segments of users. Secondly, in order to reduce human error and increase information accuracy, the Department of Employment and Labour can adopt the ILO (2022) recommendation, which calls for the digitalisation of PES to better respond to the needs of clients as digital tools offer great potential for improved targeting, evidence-based decision-making and faster response times. Thirdly, robust feedback mechanisms that allow users to report issues and suggest improvements can help to continuously enhance the system. Fourth, regular audits of system data should be conducted to ensure accuracy and timeliness, as suggested by the principles of database management systems. This could help minimise errors and outdated information, which are critical for the effectiveness of a job search platform. Fifth, the Department of Employment and Labour should attract jobseekers and employers to use the ESSA system by highlighting success stories, showcasing unique features unavailable on other platforms, and possibly integrating with popular social media platforms for easier access. Sixth, the Department of Employment and Labour should offer continuous training sessions for the Department of Employment and Labour employees to update them on new features and best practices for using the system effectively. Lastly, there is need for the Department of Employment and Labour communicate the unique benefits of the ESSA system over other job search platforms, such as specialised matching algorithms or partnerships with key employers. These could be derived from the system's familiarity with and recognition of CVs, as noted by the Department of Employment and Labour employees.

7. Conclusion

This paper highlights significant disparities in awareness, ease of use, and perceived usefulness between these two groups, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to bridge these gaps. On the one hand, employees of the Department of Employment and Labour demonstrate a strong familiarity and positive perception of the ESSA system, recognising its potential to streamline employment services. On the other hand, jobseekers have shown limited awareness of the system and engagement in its use as they often faced various challenges in using the system effectively. This dichotomy points to a fundamental need to devise improved outreach and communication strategies to raise awareness, particularly among jobseekers.

As part of its findings, this paper identified critical areas that could be scrutinised in order to enhance the ESSA system's usability and user experience. These areas consist, among other things, of simplifying the interface, providing digital literacy training, and ensuring accuracy by offering up-to-date job listings. This is essential if the Department of Employment and Labour wants to increase the platform's adoption by jobseekers resulting in improved retention rates. Additionally, leveraging insights from the TAM would guide the development of a more intuitive and valuable system that fosters greater user acceptance and reliance. By addressing these practical implications, the Department of Employment and Labour can create an environment that significantly enhances the effectiveness of the ESSA system. As a result, this will not only improve jobseekers' experiences but also ensure that the platform fulfills its intended purpose of facilitating efficient and equitable employment services in South Africa. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to a more robust and inclusive labor market that would be beneficial for both jobseekers and employers in the country.

Noting the potential limited generalisability of this study, future studies may investigate regional disparities in the accessibility and effectiveness of employment services in South Africa. This could highlight unique regional challenges and best practices. Further, a future study may examine how digital literacy and internet access affect jobseekers' ability to use online employment services. This area could address the digital divide and offer insights on improving accessibility.

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