RESEARCH REPORT

**WHOLESALE & RETAIL SETA
LEADERSHIP CHAIR: GAUTENG**

Project 2022/2

TOWARDS ENTERPRISING FUEL RETAILERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fuel retailers have to compete in open systems that are regulated, and the factors that influence their profit margins are not always completely under their management's control. For these reasons, these systems/ organisations need to function optimally. Each individual in these organisations could be viewed as an element in the system, and ideally needs to be an enterprising problem-solver (which includes management and the levels below management). The types of problem that all individuals need to be able to solve are in four domains: communication, product/service construction, strategy, and systemic integration. For a fuel retailer to function optimally, systemic integration between various levels needs to take place.

The primary objective of this study was to understand the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual challenges and experiences of fuel retailers in order to understand the fuel retail system better. The specific secondary objectives included exploring and describing how employees in the retail system deal with the problem-solving domains of communication, the construction of products/services, and strategy. The sub-objectives were defined accordingly:

- To explore and describe the retailer's ability to *communicate with* and relate to people in the business;
- To explore and describe the retailer's ability to *construct or produce* product and/or service offerings, and their ability to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer); and
- To explore and describe the retailer's *strategic* alignment or positioning within the system.

The researchers sampled and interviewed a total of five fuel retail owners, five retail managers, five retail frontline employees, and five fuel attendants in an effort to understand and interrogate the challenges each of these roles faced in order to create a holistic picture of the overall challenges of the fuel retailer. The findings outlined the importance of viewing the business not only as part of a system that is influenced by many variables, but also as a system that can exert an influence on and into the larger system. This could be achieved by viewing staff as key components who have the power to exert influence, and by focusing on how engagement takes place, and how information and communication flows at the retailer.

The findings also suggested that high levels of communication might lead to higher levels of trust, and that communication is not only a problem-solving domain but also an element that supplements and supports other problem-solving domains such as strategy and the construction of products and service packages. Fuel retailers are ultimately encouraged to become enterprising – in other words, to focus on developing problem-solvers in their business, as this would help these retailers to compete in and adapt to an agile environment more effectively.

The recommendations in this report could enhance systemic integration, which is the overall goal, in order to promote enterprising individuals in the fuel retail systems; and the enterprising element is ultimately important for agility. Agility is proposed, of course, as an outcome of a truly competitive system that is congruent and in which each individual is a strong enterprising element.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Any retail environment can be viewed as a system that operates with subsystems in order to deliver/offer the right goods at the right time at the right place to the right people (Hänninen, Mitronen & Kwan, 2019). These retail systems are open systems, are susceptible to economic changes, and can also be influenced greatly by other aspects in the system (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2020). For the system to produce the desired outcomes/outputs in spite of disruptions or changes in the macro-environment, it simply needs to be adaptable. In this regard, the people in the system need to be able to respond innovatively to any changes, challenges, or shifts.

The ideal is that every individual/person in a system (each person is also an element) should ideally be empowered to respond (rather than react) to any actions that take place in the system. Thus, people's creative responses to changes, shifts, or challenges in the system are viewed as enterprising. The underpinning theory, therefore, is that each individual is a problem-solver on their own level and becomes an enterprising individual or player/element in the retail system who influences the entire system positively.

The problem-solving domain of design thinking was used as an underpinning theory for this study, as it could be applied to various levels (subsystems) in the retail system – for example, with employees who work directly with customers and with managers who work with staff or at head office. The framework enabled us to determine the domains of problem-solving defined by Buchanan (1992, 2019).

1) Communication or symbolic problems;
2) Construction;
3) Strategy; and
4) Systemic integration, which incorporates the first three.

The researchers therefore wished to understand the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual challenges and experiences of the fuel retailer in order to understand the fuel retail system better. In addition, the researchers specifically wished to explore and describe:

1) The retailer's ability to *communicate* with and relate to people in the business;
2) The retailer's ability to *construct or produce* product and/or service offerings, and to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer); and
3) The retailer's *strategic* alignment or positioning in the system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Enterprising people

In this study, the term 'enterprising people' could be viewed as describing problem-solvers with an internal locus of control. This problem-solving ability requires creative thinking (Glăveanu, 2018) – but it also requires any person in the system to be aware that their role could involve assuming responsibility and engaging in decision-making that relates to their responsibility (Kim & Lee, 2018). 'Responsibility' is the ability to respond (to be 'response-able') to various challenges (such as a pandemic) to a suitable standard (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). This implies that enterprising players/people in the retail space (whether in management or on a lower level) should be able to respond innovatively to problems. In this regard, responding to problems could also be viewed as the ability to create or devise solutions to problems. We therefore argue that such responses or the devising or creation of solutions, when done innovatively, could be equated with designing on an abstract level; this would be in line with how Buchanan (2019) and Dorst (2011) view design.

The stance is thus taken that enterprising managers or employees are designers of their own systems, or at least of the subsystems in which they operate. This literature review therefore cannot be understood if a systems perspective is not understood first.

Fuel retailers as coordinated systems for enterprising people

A system can be defined as a process that contains interconnected structures (input, transformation, and output/outcome), and that also has feedback loops and flows that shape certain behaviours in that system (Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017). A distinguishing feature of a system is that it is not determined by the different characteristics of each of its components, but rather by the way in which each component is structured and by the pattern of interaction and interdependence between the components (Almaney, 1974). The type of interaction between components that is required suggests that it represents more than the sum of its parts; this is known as 'holism' – the system itself is explained in its totality. An employee, for example, might be a subsystem of a work group, which itself is a subsystem of a department, which in turn is a subsystem of a larger industry. A subsystem is important, because it interacts with other subsystems as well as within the larger system. So a change in a subsystem could have a far-reaching impact on or after-effects for not only other subsystems but also the larger system (Almay, 1974).

A fuel retailer could also be viewed from a systems perspective, and have components such as inputs, a transformation process, and outcomes/outputs. An important notion is that every system (in this case, a fuel retail system) has certain principles. For the sake of this report, the focus on the principle of a system that operates as a cohesive whole is especially important, and will be discussed particularly in terms of how it might play out in the transformation component of the system. References to inputs and outcomes/outputs will be made as they relate to the transformation component.

The transformation component of a fuel retail system

In a system (in this case, a fuel retailer), inputs are transformed into outputs; but the external environment – such as competition, government regulations, or the economy (Roberts, 2019) – influences the system and how the inputs could be transformed into outputs. Financial, human, and other resources could be viewed as inputs, while the outputs would be products or services and the overall performance and effectiveness of an organisation (Turner & Baker, 2019).

According to the congruence model, there are four key elements that have to work together in a system. These are often used by management as key performance drivers, and are underpinned by the congruence model (Sabir, 2018). The four elements/key performance areas that are particularly relevant to the transformation phase in the system are: 1) the tasks (any form of work done by employees can be viewed as a task); 2) the people (employees, management, owners, etc.); 3) the organisational structure (involving all the policies, processes, procedures, and systems); and 4) the culture (tangible aspects such as values, vision, and leadership style, but also some intangible aspects of employee-management relations).

In the congruence model, the principle of wholeness in systems applies (Lartey, 2020). Concurrence can be viewed as a change management process that focuses on the performance of an organisation, based on how it operates as a system (Sabir, 2018). Sabir (2018) explains that the congruence model can be used when systems are embraced as a whole, whether for change management or when some design thinking is applied to solve problems.

Problem-solving in retail systems

Human beings have the ability to solve problems in a system. This implies that the people in a retail system also have the ability to solve problems. Buchanan (2019) refers to such problem-solving as "designing solutions". Many authors also link such solution design to an ability to apply design thinking to various contexts (Linton & Klinton, 2019; Buchanan, 2019).

Design thinkers

Design thinking has been applied in many business contexts and, in particular, in the context of producing innovative solutions to problems (Cousins, 2018). One way to view an innovative solution is through the lens of using creativity to solve a problem (Nilsson & Jahnke, 2018). Such creativity might entail applying the available resources in the best possible way to solve the problem optimally.

Problem-solving from a design thinking perspective can entail following five steps:

1) Empathy/discovery: understanding the audience for whom you want to 'design';

2) Define the problem: describing the needs of customers/clients;

3) Ideation: producing many possible creative solutions;

4) Experimentation or creating a prototype (product or service): creating a potential solution;

5) Test: sharing the prototype with the target user to get feedback in order to modify it.

However, it is important to understand that these steps are not always applied in a linear way, and that some steps might need several applications before a problem is solved or a suitable solution is produced. In a fuel retail setting this might imply that, when the industry presents the retailer with certain challenges (for example, the impact of the external environment, such as fuel prices or regulations) that limit the profitability of the organisation, some steps might require managers and employees to explore a few solutions before they implement the best possible solution to the problem (for example, being as effective as they can with the systems and resources that they have within the regulated environment).

In this regard, Dorst (2011) argues that defining a problem well is a very good start to solving it. In other words, simply understanding what the problem is that a person is trying to solve, or having at least a broad idea of what the problem entails, is already a good step towards an innovative solution. In this regard, the earlier work of Richard Buchan, a thought leader on design thinking, offers some problem domains that assist people to place the problems that they are solving (Buchanan, 1992).

Problem-solving domains

Any system, whether social or more business-oriented, has several open <u>and</u> complex problems to solve Studies of these refer to them as 'wicked problems' – that is, as problems that do not have a simple solution, but instead need several steps to be taken towards the solution; and, as one aspect of the problem is solved, another might arise that needs immediate solving or considering (Sarasvathy, 2021). This implies that a problem might start out in a particular way, but that, as one starts to solve it, it becomes clear that another aspect of the problem also needs attention in order for it to be solved. In this way, the problem shifts from one problem domain to another.

The problem domains to which Buchanan (1992) refers in his earlier works are as follows:

1) Communication or symbolic problems: these are any aspects relating to communication in a system between people or to how a meaning is portrayed – for example, brand image. A system's theoretical approach views an organisation (such as a fuel retailer) as consisting of a set of variables. A flow of information occurs between these variables, which is what makes the role and importance of communication in a system evident. Communication has the ability to bind the system components and to serve as a link to the outside system, and it can also help the system to grow. Conflict might also occur between system components, in which case communication is used as a maintenance mechanism to restore order; it could also be seen as a way to tie decision centres together to form a synchronised whole. Each subsystem may be viewed as a communication subsystem that should function as efficiently as possible in order to ensure the internal stability of the entire system; and communication is a way to maintain the system efficiently (Almay, 1974).

Apart from being a maintenance system that secures order and brings decision centres together, communication also plays an adaptive role. Communication from the outside world (e.g., regulatory trends, changes in customer needs) needs to be identified, captured, and dealt with accordingly. The efficiency of dealing with these aspects (applying the adaptive component), in turn, is largely dependent on efficient communication. If the captured information is not swiftly communicated to the correct system components, appropriate and timely decisions cannot be made (Almay, 1974). So communication plays a large part in ensuring the effective coordination and achieving of goals, and has a role in socialisation, decision-making, problem-solving, and – importantly – change management (Rajhans, 2012).

2) Construction, which pertains to any problem-solving in which people have to engage in constructing/ producing products; it might also be putting together new offerings or services, or the creation of experiences, such as the customer experience or the staff experience.

3) Strategy, which relates to any alignment of ideas, skill, resources, or positioning in order to enhance competiveness, which could include individuals in subsystems.

4) Systemic integration: this incorporates the other three domains, and is then seen as the ability to apply the other three problem-solving 'skills' so that people in subsystems are able to align via communication and/or constructing services or experiences. Alternatively, such people might decide to launch their own endeavour if the problem-solving skills become part of their personal system. Either way, enterprising individuals who are able to solve relevant problems can enhance systems.

In the fuel retailing industry, one might see wicked problems in the form of wanting to solve a training problem – for example, among staff, in order to improve customer service. The training might be offered from a strategic perspective, but then it is realised that the true problem lies with communication between staff members rather than only between customers and staff; and this needs to be addressed first, before the system can perform as a whole (that is, be congruent) in achieving strategic goals. Although communication is depicted as a problem domain in this review, it is also important to highlight that communication can also play an additional role in enabling the cohesive effective functioning of a system (of a retailer, for example).

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study was to understand the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual challenges and experiences of a fuel retailer in order to understand the fuel retail system better. Drawing on the work of Buchanan (2019), the specific secondary objectives that were explored were to explore and describe:

- The retailer's ability to *communicate* with and relate to people in the business;
- The retailer's ability to *construct or produce* product and/or service offerings and to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer); and
- The retailer's *strategic* alignment or positioning within the system.

The research methodology for a study depends, first, on establishing the research paradigm, also called the research philosophy. This is followed by the approach and the design.

Research philosophy, approach, and design

'Research philosophy' refers to the research orientation that is followed and that explains the researchers' cognitive belief system, worldview, or viewpoint through which the research is conducted (Möller & Halinen, 2022). This study was positioned in the *interpretivist* philosophy, which is concerned with understanding the subjective reality of human experiences (Kelly, Dowling & Millar, 2018), and prioritises achieving an in-depth

understanding of a phenomenon rather than attempting to generalise it (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This philosophy further assumes a *relativist ontology* (the research is collected from individual participants' experiences and biases), a *subjectivist epistemology* (based on real-world phenomena), and a *naturalist methodology* (the researcher is a participant observer, and data is collected from natural settings and analysed through cognitive engagement with participants) (Gannon, Taheri & Azer, 2022; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Myers, 2019; O'Donoghue, 2018).

The research approach is concerned with whether a study adopts a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach (Gaus, 2017). The exploratory nature of the formulated objectives and areas of exploration developed for this study meant that a *qualitative approach* was best suited. It is also important to establish whether the research approach will consist of an *inductive* or a *deductive* approach. 'Inductive' refers to deriving specific insights or concepts from a data source (*something actually is*), while 'deductive' means developing insights or concepts that are guided by the existing literature or by a theory (*something must be*) (Arrighi & Ferrario, 2008; Hammersley, 2019).

Another approach that can also be applied is abductive reasoning, which allows the researcher to develop hypotheses, explanations, or theories (Mirza, Akhtar-Danesh, Noesgaard, Martin & Staples; 2014), and suggests that *something possibly is* (Arrighi & Ferrario, 2008). This study adopted an abductive approach to the analysis of the data, with the specific approach of moving between existing theory and possible new insights. The approach taken was therefore a careful one that allowed for a reading between the lines in obtaining findings and drawing conclusions.

The research design that was followed was an exploratory-descriptive design: a review of the literature identified knowledge gaps, which justified conducting the research (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019) to understand holistically the daily challenges of fuel retailers and their staff.

Thus, meaning was constructed from data gathered in natural settings, with the researcher acting as a participant observer (O'Donoghue, 2018) (the naturalist methodology), and the data was analysed through cognitive processes that were informed by interactive processes with the participants (Kivunja & Kyini, 2017).

Sampling

This study followed a non-probability convenience sampling approach. The researchers were supplied with a list of fuel retailers that had a relationship with the W&R Seta; this list was therefore not representative of all fuel retailers in South Africa. Retailers on the list were contacted and supplied with a letter from the W&R Seta explaining the study; only those who indicated their willingness to participate were included in the sample. Quota sampling was then applied, as the researchers wished to interview at least 10 managers and owners and 10 frontline staff and fuel retail attendants in order to ensure a fair sample size and a fair possibility of achieving data saturation.

Table 1: Participants' profile

Role	Number interviewed
Fuel retailer owner	X 5
Fuel retail manager	X 5
Frontline employee	X 5
Fuel attendant	X 5

Data collection

The data was collected by a trained moderator from an appointed research company called 'The Culture Foundry'. The moderator conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the participants during the course of April 2022, both in person and via telephone conversations. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and supplied to the researchers. The questions that were posed to the participants were informed by the literature and by the developed objectives and the areas of exploration (AoEs). Both samples were prompted to answer 15 questions, and each interview typically lasted 40 minutes to one hour.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using an abductive approach, which enabled the researchers to identify both knowledge that was not coherent, or that contrasted, with the existing literature and new insights. The transcripts were read and coded using the principle of the constant of comparison, and using open codes (that is, assigning direct codes to the transcripts to obtain the direct meaning); then axial codes (categorising the open codes according to similarities) were developed (Murphy, Klotz & Kreiner, 2016; Pandey, Singh & Pathak, 2018). Co-coding was also used: two researchers engaged in the coding process, and the codes were iteratively compared and consolidated to ensure that they were consistently applied to the data (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020).

The trustworthiness of the analysis was ensured by applying the criteria of *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *conformability* (Murphy *et al.*, 2016). Triangulation is one of the most important processes to ensure *credibility* (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). It involves applying investigator triangulation (the use of two or more researchers to analyse the data and extract conclusions) and theoretical triangulation (multiple theoretical orientations were applied to understand the findings). These two triangulation methods were applied in the study.

An objective of qualitative research is to expand knowledge by transferring findings from one context to another. However, *transfer* is argued to be possible only when thick description provides a rich portrayal of the research process that was followed and detailed contextual information (Stahl & King, 2020). This was achieved in this study by providing a description of the participants who were included in the study to ensure that the data collection was not incorrectly influenced. The methods applied, as well as the timeframe during which the data was collected, were detailed, and the results were integrated with the previous literature. These all served as aspects that could support achieving transferability.

Dependability is concerned with ensuring the *consistency* of an analysis, while *confirmability* requires the researcher to remain neutral during the analysis and the assessment of the analysis (Panday *et al.*, 2018). The use of two researchers to do the analysis and coding, as well as their comparisons of results and discussions to reach conclusions, allowed for the removal of potential bias and achieving consistency and neutrality in the findings that were obtained.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The main area of exploration and the three sub-areas of exploration are outlined below. The results are reported by beginning with the general findings related to the main AoE, followed by the sub-AoEs and the fuel owners' and managers' responses, followed by the same sub-AoEs and responses of the fuel attendants and frontline staff. For each of the two interview samples, the area of exploration is stated first; this is followed by the questions that were asked, then by the overall interpretation, after which verbatim quotes are provided. Each sub-AoE per sample concludes with the overall identified themes and findings and by their integration with the relevant literature.

Main area of exploration

The researchers wish to explore the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual challenges and experiences of the fuel retailer in order to understand the complex problem areas that need to be solved on various levels in the fuel retail system.

In obtaining some background in order to understand fuel owners' and managers' challenges, four broad questions were posed:

Q1: How did you become a fuel retail owner / manager? Share your story with us.

The results suggested that not just anyone can become a fuel station owner. Most owners came into the industry through generational ownership or government transformation programmes. Two worked their way up from being petrol attendants.

[P21] "Hahaha, it's like a cartel, not just everyone can become a fuel station owner. Especially for women. But I applied through a transformation programme and got it."

Different types of ownership determine the experience the owner has:

- Investing in the physical building, the land, and associated assets ('prop-co').
- Purchase of the business operation only ('op-co').
- Purchase of both ('prop-co / op-co').

Owners that own both have more responsibility and liabilities, but earn larger profits. On the other hand, they lack funding from the umbrella brand. So, although they have greater margins, they can feel overwhelmed by the costs that they incur to maintain a pump station, such as a new roof or upgrading the pumps.

Q2: Would you do it again?

All of the respondents replied 'yes'. It seems that this answer is deeply rooted in the fact that they have been doing it for many years, they understand the industry, and they enjoy it.

[P18] *"It's a lovely industry. It's an amazing industry. Why? Because once you understand it, and once you know how to make the most money, and stick to that, you just carry on, you know? So for us, we pride ourselves in the taxi market."*

Q3: What advice would you give someone in this space?

The advice included the importance of remaining focused on the business, accepting the long hours, the diverse aspects of management, understanding the franchise agreements, and the need to have a long-term vision before one can make money.

[P17] *"It's like you will manage maybe your cashiers, you will manage your stock, you will manage maybe your staff, you will manage a lot of things. Yes. You see, but if you don't know any or some of these things and you just come in as manager, you can't manage all of these things."*

Q4: In your role today, what are some of your biggest challenges that you need to overcome?

The responses included the challenges of dealing with customers, theft, the many role players (government, labour laws, oil companies), and ongoing expenses.

[P21] "It's expensive, like the canopy needs replacing. I have to pay for that, and don't have the brand helping"

[P13] "Look, I think for me, the biggest challenge is rules and regulations for us as retailers … There are too many role players and too many rules, you know? Yeah. Like, as I'm sitting here right now, you know someone from labour may walk in wanting to check: Are you paying people according to this revenue you have? Is the staffroom clean? They also want to come and check. It's, like, and then you have the oil company itself with its own safety and other things; and where it's unfortunate about these things is that there are costs

that relate to all of these requirements, and then how everything must just fit in, and nobody really cares how much it costs. You must just comply. And I think that's the biggest challenge."

FUEL RETAILER MANAGER / OWNER

Sub-AoE 1: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to communicate with and relate to people in the business

- Questions and interpretation

Q1: How do you rate the levels of motivation and sense of team among your staff?

Reponses varied; the majority felt that their motivation was fair (medium), with one participant stating that it was very low and one stating that it was very high. Suggestions by some included that more incentives need to be provided for motivation; that low payment is problematic and leads to low motivation; that motivation varies because the staff are human, and one cannot expect 100% every day. One offered their staff the opportunity to work longer hours (60 instead of 45 a week to earn more money). Last, the expectations placed on them by the oil company and the retailer were very high indeed.

[P12] *"It's unfortunate that it's quite high; and if you sometimes – the staff, like on the forecourt in particular, you know they serve a shift; I don't know, maybe 100 customers minimum, and sometimes it's almost impossible that you expect this person to be offering whatever superior service we say we expect them to offer throughout the day."*

Q2: How do you motivate your staff? Are there any rituals or regular things you do?

The main theme that was identified was the use of incentives (cash rewards, or a mystery shopper initiative), with three participants referring variously to motivation through caring, regular communication, establishing a particular culture, and providing them with loans as an incentive; one referred to having a community braai initiative.

[P18] *"Yes, they're got the same amount of hours in a week; but then, if the incentive is a hundred cars per day, and I bypass that, then me as a boss I'll say: For every 20 cars [by which] you bypass the quota, I will give you R50 grand; and that's important. So I incentivise."*

Q3: How much support do you get from the [insert retail brand] in driving staff engagement?

The support received seemed to vary. A few participants referred to the oil companies having a mystery shopper initiative, while others referred to fuel supply and marketing support, and some to training support. Two participants were dealer-owned and dealer-operated, and seemed to feel the most positive about the support they were getting – there was regular contact and check-ins.

[P5] *"Like, this mystery shopper comes and they give incentives, and we on top, we give, if you achieve 100% you get R1000."*

[P2] *"So [brand removed] is more like on the marketing side and seeing that there's proper supply on the fuel supply side."*

[P21] *"So when we're dealer-owned and dealer-run, things tend to be a little bit heavy on the owner side in terms of carrying the cost. And so yeah, [brand removed] has a lovely, you know, programme where they do come in regularly, they check on our staff. And yeah, it's quite a healthy relationship, I must say."*

Q4: Is there a difference in the way that you communicate with your staff versus customers?

Communicating with equality and respect was the dominant theme – talking with as much respect to employees as to customers. Some reference was made to sometimes having to establish a tone of "who is boss".

[P21] *"Umm, yes and no; no, in the sense that, of course, we're all human, so respect is, you know, unilaterally goes across the board, but obviously my staff as, you know, the captain of the ship, I communicate in a manner that derives, you know, a lot of results."*

Q5: How much do you feel that you understand your customers and what their needs really are? What are your customers' top three needs?

An overall dedication to customer needs and providing good customer service was evident as a dominant theme, with varied reasoning about what customers want. These included mentioning that customers want recognition (acknowledging a concern), that meeting customer needs is key, ensuring convenience, providing them with attention; one mentioned speedy service (as their outlet is located on a highway).

[P2] *"I think number one is customer service, the customer[s], they want attention. They want you to pay attention to what you're doing, especially on the forecourt, because if you don't pay attention there might be contamination, you might put more money; so I think customers are more worried about you not paying attention to them."*

[P17] *"And then the second one, it's like, to be nice with [them], to smile, like, when you approach them you must smile to show them it's like, it's like, to show them you are happy to see … them, it's like, you need them. It's like, you treat them as your best customers."*

Q6: How much do you feel that the staff across your business understand and prioritise these needs?

There was a split over whether the staff understand and prioritise the business. Some mentioned that, with regular reminders and talks, staff know, and should know (however, they are frequently reminded), whereas some felt that the staff do not, with two in particular stating that staff do not make the link between the customers being the source of the business's income and their salaries. One indicated that staff are not able to handle customer problems themselves.

[P13] *"I don't think they understand at all times, I don't think they all understand, some do, some don't. I think some of my staff are just here to work, they cannot correlate between a customer walking in and them actually getting paid. Hmm. Do you understand what I mean? They can't relate to that."*

[P17] *"It's like some of them don't understand, I don't want to lie, because sometimes they can't handle these problems themselves. Like they will come inside the office and they will call you before they talk with the customers, you see?"*

[P18] *"Yeooh, I pretty much hope they understand those needs because we discuss them all the time. I mean, the customer always does come first and, and that I'll always relate to my staff. If we treat them badly, or don't treat them well, we don't get them coming through, and if we don't get them coming through I don't make the revenue to pay you or to even pay for the lights."*

- **Summary of AoE findings**

Sub- AoE 1: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to communicate with and relate to people in the business	
Question	**Findings**
How do you rate the levels of motivation and sense of team among your staff?	Fair / medium
How do you motivate your staff? Are there any rituals or regular things you do?	Incentives Loans / longer hours (more money)

	Communication / culture
How much support do you get from the [insert retail brand] in driving staff engagement?	Varied Marketing and fuel supply Mystery shopper Check-ins
Is there a difference in the way that you communicate with your staff versus customers?	Communicate with staff with respect Authoritative (when required)
How much do you feel that you understand your customers and what their needs really are? What are your customers' top three needs?	Good customer service Recognition Convenience
How much do you feel that the staff across your business understand and prioritise these needs?	Varied Yes (due to reminders) No (link between customer and revenue to clear)

This particular Sub-AoE's domain in the literature refers to the communication aspect of the problem-solving domain (Buchanan, 1992; 2019) – that is, communication between people (staff internally and customers externally) or how meaning is portrayed. The results suggest that communication is varied and so could be improved. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2005), communication is so ingrained as part of human life that one forgets its pervasiveness, importance, and complexity. The responses from the fuel managers implied a strong use of communication mostly as a maintenance system (Alamey, 1974): maintaining motivation levels, reminding staff about and maintaining customer service levels, speaking authoritatively when needed, in order to maintain daily operations. The reference to whether staff "understand the business" also implies that there is not an effective flow between the goals towards which people need to work, and possibly why. This could pertain to the lack of adaptive communication, which, according to Alamey (1974), is a key factor in growth.

Sub-AoE 2: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to construct or produce product and/or service offerings and to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer)

- Questions and interpretation

Q1: How do you design and implement new services? What does that journey typically look like?

The majority referred to getting direction from the oil companies, with only one mentioning the importance of listening to and engaging with customers to understand their needs and wants.

[P21] *"Well, we get a lot of directives from the fuel company, remember? A lot of our mandate comes from them, we are under the umbrella, so they would they would give us the strategy from the top and we just filter it down. There's not really much of anything unique that we bring on board in terms of that."*

- Summary of AoE findings

Sub-AoE 2: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to *construct or produce* product and/or service offerings and to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer)	
Question	**Findings**
How do you design and implement new services? What does that journey typically look like?	- Oil company mandate / initiated and implemented

In respect of the ability to construct (Buchanan, 1992; 2019), there seems to be limited station-owner involvement or initiative in the construction of products and services, and a heavy reliance on the franchise. This is to be expected, as the participants are all part of different franchise models and agreements.

Sub-AoE 3: To explore and describe the retailer's strategic alignment or positioning within the system

- Questions and interpretation

Q1: How competitive do you think your business is within the local market? Please elaborate on your answer

Q2: What makes a fuel retail business competitive or not, in your opinion?

In response to these two questions, the majority stated that customer service is key to making their business competitive. Less prominent aspects that were mentioned included that peripheral offerings are essential (e.g., a convenience store), that safety is key (feel safe, keep safe), location, and brand loyalty.

Some responded by reminding the interviewer of their context – of being in a heavily regulated environment and at the mercy of increasing and fluctuating fuel prices.

[P9] "*It's service. Service.*" "*So it's, we, we, it all depends on the service; if we give good service I think we will retain our existing customers.*"

[P12] "*So the competition generally always holds down now to your offering outside of fuel, you see? Yes. Like, you shop, what do you offer there in your shop? I think where we are, we are very competitive, to be honest, because there's really no shops, it's an industrial area.*"

[P17] "*Yeah, it's good service. Yeah. It's, like, when you treat your customer with a good service, give them service with a smile, and then your customer, maybe they will come to your site and support you.*"

Q3: What are some of your biggest goals for the future? What areas of your business are priorities for you in 2022?

The majority sentiment was concerns about fuel price increases, with a focus on other income streams (such as the shops) staying above water, and recovering in a post-Covid-19 world. Some mentioned operational initiatives such as upgrades and adding more convenience features (such as Chicken Licken).

[P21] "*Um, you know, I think because of COVID – sjoe – we don't have much money or funds to work with to improve anything really, you know, it's been, it's been such a terrible, terrible couple of years. Yeah. I think for me it's just keeping my staff, you know, encouraged, keeping my staff on the ground, keeping them motivated, you know, and keeping them healthy, really. Yeah, unfortunately at this point, there's nothing major except staying alive, staying above the water.*"

[P9] "*We would like to, we want to feel to grow, but unfortunately the price of petrol is affecting [us], and so we, even [brand name removed] is concentrating more on... So our focus now is more in the shop, retail, and our shop group.*"

- Summary of AoE findings

Sub-AoE 3: To explore and describe the retailer's strategic alignment or positioning within the system	
Question	**Findings**
How competitive do you think your business is within the local market? Please elaborate on your answer	• Customer service
What makes a fuel retail business competitive or not, in your opinion?	• Safety, location, brand loyalty, convenience store
What are some of your biggest goals for the future? What areas of your business are priorities for you in 2022?	• Recovering (post-Covid-19) • Fuel increase concerns • Store focus / more convenience options

In respect of strategic alignment (Buchanan, 1992; 2019), the core aspect of the strategy as a way to secure competitiveness seems to be a focus on customer service. However, the findings from AoE 1 suggest varied understandings of customers' needs. This could be a problem for some fuel stations, as this is a core aspect of remaining competitive. The future strategy focus seems somewhat short-term, with only some indicating a store or convenience aspect as a stronger focus. This is not surprising when one also considers the findings on communication: the 'why', or the purpose of alignment with business goals, is not only important for growth, as pointed out by the trusted model of Alamey (1974), but might also link to higher trust within the organisation. The expression, 'high communication, high trust', seem to apply here. The two aspects of strategy and communication remain separate problems to solve; yet within a system such as the fuel retail industry, with various levels of people who operate in the system, they seem to be inseparable.

EMPLOYEES

Sub-AoE 1: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to communicate with and relate to people in the business

- Questions and interpretation

Q1: What advice would you give anyone starting in this space?

The dominant theme was to adopt a customer-centred orientation: know how to treat / work with / handle customers; know how to handle and conduct yourself. A second, lesser theme was the importance of remaining focused. Focus was explained in the context of the job's purpose/vision: know what you want, why you are doing the job, and focus to save money. Only one person mentioned career growth and the career prospects offered by this industry.

[P4] "*And just serve the customers, customers expect to be treated well, they don't wanna be treated badly. And as everyone knows, the customer is always right, you understand? Okay.*"

[P15] "*Oh, someone who wants to work here for the first time? They have got to be a good listener and they must be humble as well. They must not be saying that the manager is younger than them and then they disrespect her/him.*"

[P8] "*I would advise them to, they must work hard, and they must focus. Okay. And to save money, I think we can save money so that, maybe, if I want to go back to school, then I have some money to pay, or if I want to improve my house; but I think young people must think more about saving money these days. Okay.*"

Q2: In your role today, what are some of the biggest annoyances in your everyday work?

The two dominant themes were (1) how to treat the customers, and how people treat the fuel employees (disrespect, a poor attitude); and (2) the frustrations of containing and managing oneself (remaining patient, separating personal emotions from work) in a people-intensive environment.

[P3] *"No, you know, here you need to have a great deal of patience, have time as well, because days are different. Look, we work with customers here, and there are times when a customer will come in here, and they're in a bad mood because of something that happened at home; you should keep calm and address them politely, give them good service, and then thank them when they are driving off."*

[P1] *"So the challenge is that sometimes customers are very, very, rude; like, some of the customers, because they come here, they think maybe, if you're working here sometimes – like, if you're an attendant or you're a cashier or whoever – you are not a human being, like you don't have any future. So your future is around here, so you're going to end up here, and then you don't have any vision."*

Q3: What ideas, if any, have you always had that you wanted to share with management/owners/ franchisers?

These varied, with no dominant theme. Two participants mentioned having proposed ways in which to reward customers; two referred to the need for management to invest more in their future through training, education, and empowerment. One mentioned having shared their concern about the long hours, and needing better incentives.

[P10] *"Or we can just, even when the customer is filling up a full tank, we can just, just to make that customer to come again, give them some coffee or a coffee and a muffin or something. Wow! Then they will come back."*

[P23] *"So if ever, like, if they come here like every day, at least like give them a cup of coffee – you see, just something to say thank you, even if it's just for the drivers, you see?"*

[P20] *"Oh! Like, when people get here, you find that they work extremely long hours, and they cover for other people as well, so they become dog tired. Okay, so you'd suggest that they have a better scheduling system, a better roster system, so that the people that work on the forecourt are able to rest in between. Yes. Oh, okay, cool, absolutely. And better incentives. Yes, there are existing incentives in the company; however, they could add more incentives."*

Q4: Do you feel part of a team? Please elaborate on your answer.

There was a very strong sense of team among all the participants. Reference was made to aspects such as helping one another out, covering shifts for one another, sharing stories, and communicating.

[P8] *"Um, yeah, we help each other with shifts. Let's say, for example, if I come to work a bit late. So, when you get here late? Yes, then I can ask my colleague Shirley to cover for me, and then I can cover for her sometimes. So we try to help each other. Okay."*

Q5: What does the brand [insert retailer name] mean to you? What three words would you use to describe it?

Two dominant themes emerged: employment and empowerment, and being customer-centric / people-orientated.

[P4] *"Yeah, my sister, according to me it's a good brand, it's actually a great brand. I never imagined that today, I mean, when a lot of people lost their jobs, they started flocking in here, submitting their CVs. Hmm. So, as someone who has been working for [brand name removed] myself, I would say it means a lot not only to me but to other*

employees as well. Everyone is working hard, no one is slacking or leaving their job or whatever, everyone just wants to work, and they're proud of [brand name removed], you understand?"

[P10] "*[brand name removed] is a good industry. Here you can, they have opportunities, they can give you an opportunity, and it is a great company to work for.*"

Q6: How much do you feel you understand your customers and what their needs really are?

The overall sentiment was that employees understand their customers well: they want fast, efficient service, engagement, and acknowledgement (listen, remain calm). Some referred to enjoying customers and customer engagement and making customers feel better.

[P20] "*I feel like, you get – I understand our customers because, when you arrive at a petrol station to come and fill your car, you're actually looking for simple things. Firstly, to make sure that there is petrol in your car, but you want a quick service. So you don't want someone who is going to drag his feet, but at the same time you want a petrol attendant that offers you the other services that they normally offer.*"

[P6] "*So that's how we normally engage, and then we become friends at the end of the day. Sometimes they ask others, where is Jerry today? Then they can tell you, 'No, Jerry is not in today'. And they ask, 'Is he okay?' And maybe I am doing night shift, or maybe I was doing day shift. Okay. Or maybe I am on leave. So that is what it is, it gives you great motivation to know that the customers don't just see you as a petrol attendant, they see you as a person.*"

Q7: How would you rate communication across the business? Tell us the reason behind your answer.

Communication between team members was described as good, happening often, helping to understand one another. However, some referred to the communication between employees and superiors as poor and/or not regular enough.

[P6] "*So, especially when – if somebody is down, for example, they might make mistakes. Like, they do make mistakes, like maybe putting a mixture of wrong fuel at the time, but we make sure that it doesn't; even if he comes to the office, we make sure that the communication on ourselves, we make sure that that person must be with us and try to lift him up. To be honest, the communication is brilliant.*"

[P20] "*So I'd give it around five. Five? Yes, and the reason I say this is because I feel like our supervisors here are slow to communicate.*"

- Summary of AoE findings

Sub-AoE 1: **To explore and describe the retailer's ability to *communicate* with and relate to people in the business**	
Question	**Findings**
What advice would you give anyone starting in this space?	- Be customer-orientated - Focused (job vision/purpose)
In your role today, what are some of the biggest annoyances in your everyday work?	- Treatment of customers - People-intensive environment
What ideas, if any, have you always had that you wanted to share with management/owners/franchisers?	- Customer rewards ideas - Training ideas

	• Hours and shift challenges
Do you feel part of a team? Please elaborate on your answer. What does the brand [insert retailer name] mean to you? What three words would you use to describe it.?	• Strong team sentiment • Employment and empowerment • Customer orientation
How much do you feel you understand your customers and what their needs really are?	• Well (fast, efficient, engagement, acknowledgement) • Uplifting (making customers happy / feel better)
How would you rate communication across the business? Tell us the reason behind your answer.	• Good (between employees) • Variable (between employees and superiors)

In terms of Buchanan's problem-solving domains (1992; 2019), communication between employees seemed strong, whereas communication between employees and superiors could still be improved. Many forecourt employees have had business ideas, but they seem not to have communicated these. When comparing owners' and managers' responses on what they say is the employees' perception of customer needs with the responses of the employees' actual conveyed perception, a disconnection was also evident. Drawing on the communication literature of Almaney (1974), it seems evident that there is a lack of adaptive communication between employees and superiors – in other words, there is limited sharing of knowledge about changes in consumer needs or behaviour and or about the external environmental changes between the two parties.

Sub-AoE 2: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to construct or produce product and/or service offerings and to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer)

• Questions and interpretation

Q1: Have you had any training from [insert retailer name]? Tell us about the training you have had. If you have not had any training, tell us whether you would be interested in getting some, and in what areas you would like it to focus.

Most participants commented on having received training. This included 'on the job training', customer service, safety, and training on fuel types. Only two participants commented that they wanted additional training. One felt that there was a very poor culture of training in general, and the other commented that he/she would like additional training to know how to become a supervisor and to grow in the business.

[P1] *"So, when I came here I didn't know anything about [the] industry, we had to go through training. I have a certificate that I got, and then from there we went to [retailer name removed], and they teach us how to use oil, how to use the nozzles and so forth, and what is 93 and what is 95? The difference between the diesel, and even, even further? Like, what does it mean, like what [retailer name removed] stands for, and all those things? So we were told, we were taught."*

[P4] "*The training that I have been to, okay, the first training was around oil, you understand? And then there was one regarding promotions, and there was also training around safety and what to do in [the] case of [an] emergency, so yeah. Around safety as well, we were being taught what to do in case the garage catches fire. Like, there is a panic button that we need to press, and there is also a first aid box that we keep here so that, if someone faints or collapses on the forecourt, we're able to give them first aid help."*

[P20] *"I think, because I've been working for a very long time, I don't know about everybody else, but something I would appreciate is somebody that is very passionate about the job that I do is, like, how to, like, become, even if it's just a supervisor or one of the guys that actually work inside as cashiers. So, like, just a training in the basic side business."*

Q2: What do you think good service or a good experience is?

The majority of participants referred to the emotional component – that is, either how you as the service provider should manage your own emotions, or how you should aim to change or influence a customer's emotions. The answers were therefore very focused on the theme of managing emotion.

[P6] *"In the form of my knowledge, good service is when you come across a very maybe rude customer, and you're able to calm him down and make sure that, when he leaves, he leaves with a smile. So that's what I think of as good service."*

[P10] *"Yeah, it does, because sometimes I manage to change a customer's mood."*

[P20] *"In fact, they often tell us here: 'Guys, you have got to approach our customers with a smile', and that is exactly what we do. Oh yes! Because sometimes, when you look at a customer, you can immediately tell that they're in low spirits, and you have a bit of a chat with them. Sometimes customers come in, and they're not having the greatest of days, and they are not in a good mood; but once they are attended by you with care and with respect and dignity, then they can leave with a smile on their face, and you feel like that's a good experience."*

Q3: What is a bad service experience?

The overarching theme was not acknowledging or responding to the customer's needs, and/or engaging in conflict with the customer.

[P4] *"Bad service, my sister, is not pouring in the right petrol that the customer has asked for. And also when they approach the customer, they don't greet her, they just stand there and stare at the customer, waiting for the customer to say what she wants."*

[P15] *"Fighting with the customer. Fighting with the customer? Yes, if the customer's fighting you, you fight back. Also, you shouldn't give a customer a reason to complain that you did this and this and that, but you left you left out this particular thing here. You must give them a complete service they are expecting."*

Q4: How do you rate your personal levels of service delivery? Is it important to you? Is it rewarding to deliver a great service experience?

All of the participants felt that they delivered good service. Emotional references were made here again – for example, saying that it is rewarding to yourself, making a customer feel good/better and putting them first, always remaining calm, being passionate about what you do.

[P1] *"Also, while you're doing what you're doing, you must also love what you're doing because, if there is no love there, you can't expect to do a great job in something that you don't love. So you must always teach yourself and teach your soul and tell yourself that I am here and I'm working here. So don't, don't say I was supposed to be a doctor, but I am just an attendant, no. So you are just an attendant right now. So while you are working on your goals, where you are, love what you do and love the people that [you] are working with, and make sure that you are working as teams."*

[P8] *"Yes, because in my training, they said it was important that we always put the customer first, okay, and that we must always listen, listen to the customer when they speak. And if they [say] there is a problem, we can go and talk to our manager. But it's, it's, it's very important for us to listen to the customer and to understand what, what they want when they come to us. Sometimes they need petrol, sometimes they need a, like, maybe they have had a tyre puncture, and sometimes you need to check their oil and things like that. So we just need to listen to the customer."*

- Summary of AoE findings

Sub-AoE 2: To explore and describe the retailer's ability to construct or produce product and/or service offerings and to create an experience (for the staff and/or the customer)	
Question	**Findings**
Have you had any training from [insert retailer name]? Tell us about the training you have had. If you have not had any training, tell us whether you would be interested in getting some, and in what areas you would like it to focus.	• Yes ,varied (fuel, safety, customer service) • Some want more training
What do you think good service or a good experience is?	• Emotion-driven (uplifting mood, happiness)
What is a bad service experience?	• Emotion (fighting, not acknowledging)
How do you rate your personal levels of service delivery? Is it important to you? Is it rewarding to deliver a great service experience?	• Good (personal perception; offering good service is a rewarding personal experience)

Employees' ability to construct or produce a product or service in line with Buchanan's framework (1992; 2019) suggested a heavy reliance on managing the emotional aspects of the customer during the service delivery experience. According to Cho, Rutherford and Park (2013), the act of expressing "organizationally desired emotions" during the service delivery process is known as 'emotional labour'. This is an important component of being a frontline employee, because a positive attitude and positive emotions are important to support the perception of good customer service and to help to create customer satisfaction and loyalty. When employees practise high levels of customer engagement, they might be prone to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Cho *et al.*, 2013). Constructing the service experience is therefore very emotionally loaded in these employees' case, and it might be important to help them in this process, to avoid burnout. An interesting question that could be asked here is: How could one align this emotional labour with the employee's personal goals? Rothenberger (2017) argues that, when an employee experiences an alignment between the values of the organisation and their own, they might feel more motivated; and energised and this in turn helps them to avoids burnout. Values drive actions (Rothenberger, 2017); thus the premise is that the tasks that the employee perfoms are also guided by their values. So the saying, "What is in it for me?" has a clear answer in the mind of such employees. In this regard, strategy and constructing customer experiences might be strongly linked in the context of the fuel retail industry.

Sub-AoE 3: To explore and describe the retailer's strategic alignment or positioning within the system

- Questions and interpretation

Q1: How competitive are you? Is it important to you to be good or the best at something?

The majority did not make statements that implied a heavily competitive orientation. Stronger reference was made to focusing on doing the job well. Only one participant referred to being very competitive and always comparing tips with others; another referred to the importance of putting the fuel brand first because the service that is offered is a reflection on the brand.

[P15] "*I am here to do a job, and then afterwards I just leave for home. So just as long as I am doing a good job, I am quite happy.*"

[P16] "*You have to keep [up] that momentum to know that, obviously, as a brand of [brand name removed] and what-you-call, employee or whatever, you have to make sure that [brand name removed] always come first. If there was a competition against other retailers, you have to think about ways to bring [brand name removed] up.*"

Q2: What are some of your biggest goals for 2022 and beyond?

The responses varied. Around half of the participants stated goals in terms of savings – saving money "so I can …" – while others mentioned goals relating to growth – owning their own garage, or becoming a truck driver; and one mentioned setting goals and another that they wanted to go back to school.

[P6] "*Yeah, everyone has got goals, but for myself I haven't thought about it. But one thing I wish, the position that I'm in, I'm not really happy about. If I can go from what I'm doing as a, what-you-call, as a quality marshal, I think I want to grow more to see more of what else I can do. But my goal is that I can improve my work, better improve my work for this 2022, then I can see what I'm doing.*"

[P1] "*Yes. So can you, can put that away that money and you can buy groceries at the end of the year. You can do whatever you want to do, you can go on holidays. It's just you don't have the money, you're saying, 'I'm working in the garage, and I cannot afford to do this and this and that'. But when you're, when you plan for it that in December I want to enjoy December with my family, you can.*"

[P3] "*So your biggest goal is that you see yourself in the future as being successful. Yeah… like becoming a garage owner myself one day.*"

- Summary of AoE findings

Sub-AoE 3: To explore and describe the retailer's strategic alignment or positioning within the system	
Question	**Findings**
How competitive are you? Is it important to you to be good or the best at something?	- Job-focused (task-orientated)
What are some of your biggest goals for 2022 and beyond?	- Saving money - Growth (goals)

The strategic alignment, based on Buchanan's (1992; 2019) framework, suggests a very operationally focused and day-to-day drive among employees. Merely 'doing a good job' and 'carrying on' seemed sufficient – no competitiveness was strongly evident in the work environment itself. Personal future goals mostly included aspects such as saving enough money to be able to build a house or to improve their lifestyle in some way. Strategic alignment did not seem evident, therefore. However, the earlier reference to the construction of customer experience that could be aligned with personal goals might apply here indirectly.

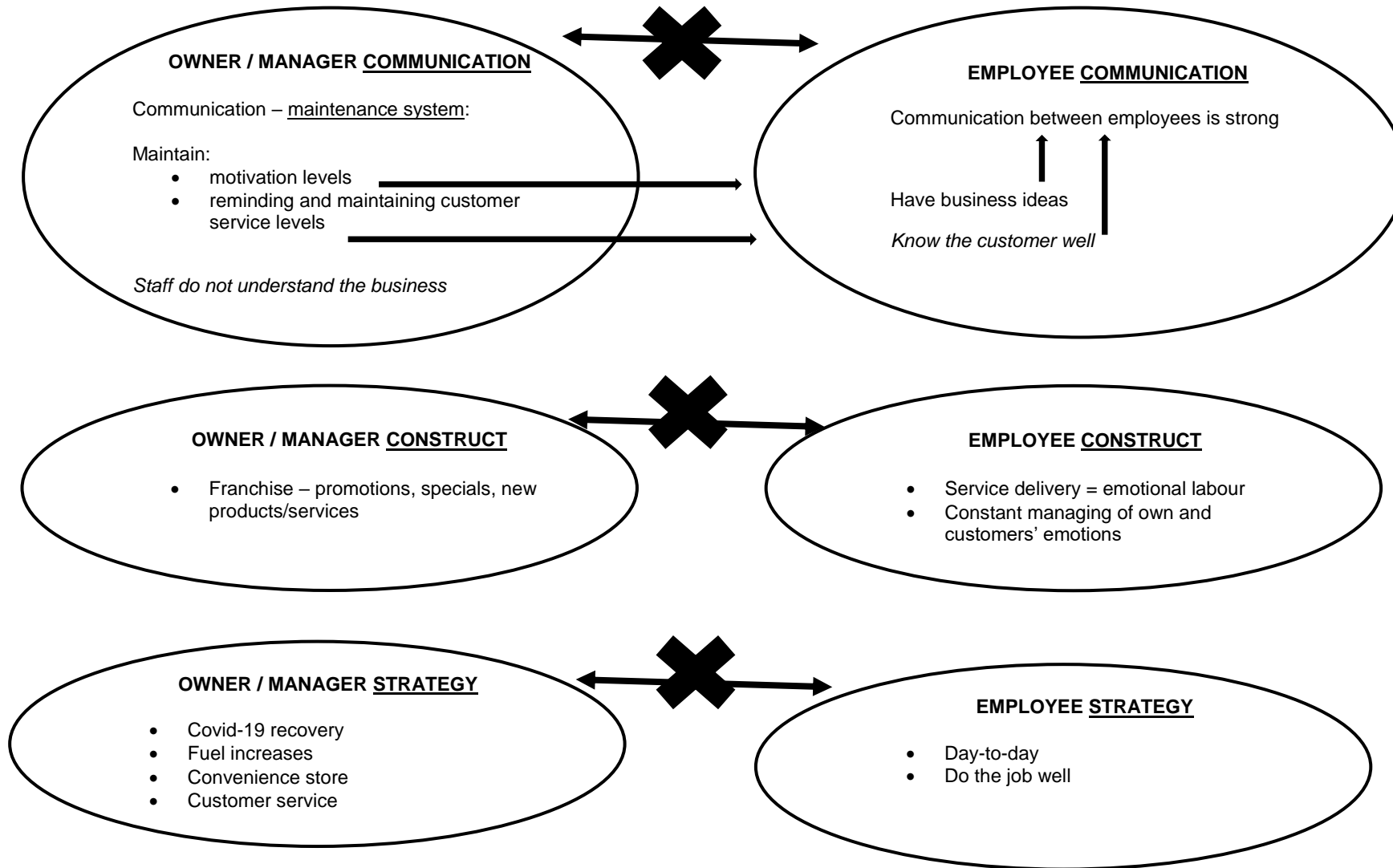**Figure 1** Systemic integration visualisation

Figure 1 outlines the results for each Sub-AoE from the two participant samples (owner/manager and employee). The results suggest that systemic integration is not evident between the two parties, according to the proposed problem-solving framework of Buchanan (1992; 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To be enterprising in the retail system translates into being able to understand and apply systemic integration. This means, in turn, that a manager or employee understands that:

1) he/she as an individual is part of a greater system that is dynamic and that will be influenced by economic factors (it is thus an open system);
2) an individual can influence the system through their place in the **structure**, **tasks** that they perform, the **people** who are affected, and the individual's role in the **culture** of the retailer; and
3) an individual has the ability to respond to challenges and to solve problems appropriate to their level of work, which might involve communication, constructing service/products, or strategy. These become important in order to integrate fully into the system and 'own' their role in it.

It is therefore recommended, first, that fuel retailers adopt a systems view and see their businesses as part of an overall system – an open system that might be affected by numerous external variables, but also a system that has the power to influence the other systems around it. The retailers should then view their staff as key components in the system, and work on how they interact with and engage in the system, as this affects the overall retailer system. Second, the fuel retailer needs to strive to achieve the goal of becoming enterprising. This would help them to remain competitive and to adapt more rapidly to change. However, becoming enterprising requires working on those aspects that would enhance the retailer's problem-solving ability.

As most owners/managers are in a franchise model, in order to **improve communication**, fuel retailers need to have a stronger understanding of the franchise's goals, vision, and strategy. At the same time, the franchisor needs to engage in micro-level leadership and to be as involved and supportive as possible – offering more than merely fuel supply and marketing initiatives. The franchisee needs to regularly engage with the franchise and adapt its strategy and goals to fit the community where the retailer is located. Even though franchisees are often reliant on national initiatives, the franchisor is encouraged to assist the franchisee to customise wherever possible; communities differ greatly, and a fuel retailer plays a large part in being involved in the community where it operates.

The owner/manager must then take the time to communicate carefully and patiently, and to explain the strategy and goals to their staff. They need to make these ideas compelling, accessible, and understandable. They also need to focus on explaining the business process flow and the role and importance of each of the employees in reaching this goal, and to explain the business and profit model. It is important that employees make the connection between their role in the system and the greater impact on the business system. The owner/manager should emphasise the involvement of each staff member, welcome and listen to recommendations, and take the time to explain their implications and to provide feedback. They need to take the time to engage in both group and one-on-one communication.

The latter part of this report has focused closely on maintenance-related communication; so the next task would be to focus on adaptive communication. The world is changing fast, and employees should be encouraged to provide weekly feedback and ideas for improvement, whether they be related to customers' needs, management, or the store. The owner/manager should take the time to encourage such feedback and ideas, and offer their own feedback. Involving the employees and having regular engagements with customers would give them the opportunity to develop their services and to supply products that emerge from such value co-creation between all the parties.

The owner/manager should identify those employees with potential and invest in them, empower them, and grow them. It was evident from the interviewed sample that not many of the frontline employees wished to engage in more training or development; but there were some who were very eager to grow. Investing in a simple and understandable performance management system is also advisable, in order to help identify those who are eager and are performing well. The owner/manager should also engage with the W&R Seta and tap into the available resources to uplift and grow eager employees.

In order to improve and develop the **ability to construct products or services**, the owner/manager should engage in brainstorming sessions and obtain ideas; but it is also very important that they provide feedback about ideas, explain their viability, and try to generate collective solutions. They need to develop a culture of collective engagement and problem-solving in order to enhance the overall collective ability to construct products or services. They should appreciate that frontline employees are emotionally loaded; so frequent breaks and the ability to communicate with one another and with management should always be welcomed. Working hours are long in this industry, and should be managed innovatively. So staff could recommend and propose their own solutions for how they wish to work. Another option would be to empower highly able staff members with more than one responsibility, and to rotate them – for example, three hours of cashiering and three hours as an attendant.

In respect of **the ability to engage in strategy**, many of the components discussed in the section on improving communication apply. The main way to improve this element would be to understand the franchise plan, customise it for the fuel retailer, and drive the plan forward. In an agile world, planning becomes an even greater challenge; but setting six-month and one-year goals is more achievable. The key here is buy-in and a drive from and towards all employees. Resources should also be strategically allocated to support the short-term and long-term goals. Investing in employee skills development that meets these identified goals should be pursued. Regular engagement with the franchisor is also imperative to check alignment and to receive input and assistance.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The first limitation is that the sample in this study was limited to a particular fuel retail group, and so the findings reflected that group's organisational culture and specific systems. A quantitative study could be repeated with several retail groups to generalise the findings to other groups as well.

A second limitation of the study is that its focus and findings always need to be understood within the context of fuel retail; and so some of the recommendations might apply to certain levels of employees but not to all.

Third, in line with that context is the limitation of the study's understanding of the internal systems and the employees' experiences of these. The study therefore does not claim to offer an accurate report on the external factors and forces that might have influenced the context, but rather on how employees perceive or experience that context. The findings thus need to be considered with this in mind.

Future research on comparing the practical strategies of various fuel retail groups could be considered, as well as quantitative studies that identify best-practice models. Moreover, the success or effectiveness of transformation in this particular industry might be considered. Other studies that might enhance the understanding of the context would be how legislation influences the competitiveness of these retailers.

Finally, some practical elements of the congruence model could be considered when using quantitative instruments to devise suitable ways to measure the effectiveness of tasks, people, structures, and corporate culture. Some practical indicators are presented in the Appendix.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is apparent that communication is a powerful tool and strategy, and perhaps even a way to construct innovative solutions to problems in fuel retail systems – and perhaps it is the very thing to enhance systemic integration between managing employees and other employees. It would seem that excellent communication on all levels translates into high levels of trust. In high-trust environments, employees tend to feel more in control of their environment and, in turn, take responsibility for their tasks in the organisation. The implication is that organisational structures could become flatter, and that management, as well as other

employees who deal directly with customers, would have the space to share ideas and possible solutions to problems.

Such responsibility on various levels is important in order to create a congruent system or organisation that functions optimally because the problems are solved on every level. Such problem-solving could be more creative and agile if communication were optimal. This implies that:

- Not only do employees on lower levels communicate and understand customer needs, but they also have channels to share ideas; and
- From their top structures, management share their vision and ideals to enhance the culture of the entire organisation in practical ways with which employees can identify.

When the communication channels are accessible to all and all employees have an opportunity to relate to the vision, the strategy should enable ownership on the part of all the employees, because there would be something with which each employee could connect. Only when such 'ownership' of strategy is truly maintained could the strategy be optimal. Similarly, only when all buy into the strategy could it be agile, because individual employees who understand the larger vision (the big picture) are able to align themselves with it quickly because they have been motivated to do so. Recommendations were provided on how such motivation might be enhanced on various levels.

It is also apparent that construction is a problem-solving domain that could be explored and expanded further, particularly on the employee level. This is not separate from the previous point on the ownership of the organisation's vision. The ideal would be to stimulate creative thinking and product or service construction, even on simple levels, such as suggestions for special offers or ways to enhance a service. In this regard, employees' buy-in or their contributing their collective wisdom could be explored; and communication is yet another key to creating a culture that encourages such contributions.

The recommendations in this report could may enhance systemic integration, which is the ultimate goal in promoting enterprising individuals in retail systems. The enterprising element is ultimately important for agility – which, of course, is proposed as an outcome of a true competitive system that is congruent and in which each individual is a strongly enterprising element.

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APPENDIX

Some practical indicators to measure congruence for further studies, summarised from Lucidity (2022).

Element of congruence model	Possible indicators for measurement?
Tasks	What tasks or processes are being carried out regularly? What steps are being taken to maximise task efficiency and efficacy? Is the work meaningful or fulfilling? If not, what are the challenges in making it so?
People	Do the employees have the requisite skills or knowledge? Does the business tend to hire staff with a certain personality type? Are staff suitably compensated? These questions must be asked of every employee, from upper management to process workers.
Organisational structure	This encompassed the standardisation of policies, processes, procedures, and systems. How many levels of management are there between executives and employees? To what extent are decision-making capabilities assigned? Here it is also helpful to consider the physical structure: how many business units are there? Are divisions product-, region-, or function-based? Are they centrally located, or do they occupy several locations?
Culture	This is about values, vision, and leadership style. But it also includes the intangible aspects of employee-management relations. In other words, how much trust do the employees have in management? What level of engagement or support is offered to decision-makers? Are the ethics of management's expectations sound?