Autocratic leadership style and employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector Procurement Management Units (PMU): mediating role of Electronic Government Procurement (e-GP)

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Abstract

Procurement Management Units (PMUs) in Zimbabwe continually strive to enhance their performance to remain viable within an increasingly dynamic and complex environment. In line with Zimbabwe's Second Republic emphasis on improved performance to fulfil its economic blueprints, employee job performance has emerged as a critical success factor. Despite the formal adoption of e-GP in Zimbabwe's PMUs, inefficiencies and irregularities continue to persist, as consistently evidenced by the Auditor-General's Reports from 2017 to 2023. Among the numerous determinants of job performance, the autocratic leadership style has received considerable attention. Therefore, this study sets out to examine the impact of leadership styles on the performance of employees in Zimbabwe's PMUs with a particular focus on the mediating role of electronic Government Procurement (e-GP). A cross-sectional survey design was employed, targeting PMU professionals across Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) located in provincial centres, specifically Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Masvingo, Mutare and Chinhoyi. Five theoretical frameworks underpin the study: the Situational Leadership Theory, which posits that leadership effectiveness depends on contextual dynamics; Institutional Theory, which recognises institutional pressures in policy adoption; Stewardship Theory, which views managers as stewards of organisational interests; the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, explaining the adaptation to digital transformation; and the Path–Goal Theory, which explores how leaders facilitate employees in achieving performance goals. Systematic sampling was utilised to collect quantitative data between April and May 2025 through structured survey questionnaires. These questionnaires captured demographic variables and constructs relating to autocratic leadership styles, task and contextual performance, and the mediating effect of e-GP. Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), alongside descriptive statistics (mean, frequency), correlation analysis, and hypothesis testing. Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and inferential statistics employed p-values (<0.05) to test significance. The final sample comprised 67% male and 39% female respondents, with 4% unspecified. The modal age range for professional experience in PMUs was 41–45 years. Structural Equation Modelling Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) results indicated statistically significant relationships between autocratic leadership styles and employee performance in PMU. All hypotheses were supported, and the mediating role of e-GP constitutes a novel contribution to autocratic leadership and performance studies in the Zimbabwean context. In light of the findings and conclusions of the study, an integrated hybrid leadership style framework is recommended to enhance employee performance mediated by electronic Government Procurement. This framework should prioritise the institutionalisation of leadership training and participatory decision-making, with strategic autocratic enforcement skills necessary for ensuring compliance, discipline, and consistent execution of procurement reforms. This balanced approach is critical for optimising both employee engagement and accountability, particularly in the implementation of digital platforms such as electronic Government Procurement (e-GP).

Introduction

Leadership, which is an important aspect of every Procurement Management Unit (PMU), has in the past attracted considerable attention and extensive discussions regarding the success and results of organisations (Gans Morse et al., 2021). Leadership style is the unique approaches and tactics used to guide, implement plans, and motivate individuals (Alo et al., 2025). This aspect of leadership is crucial in shaping the culture within a PMU, guiding its strategic direction and having great impact on the behaviour, attitudes, empowerment, and motivation of employees (Hussein et al., 2020). Furthermore, the selection of a leadership style has a substantial impact on team dynamics, decision-making procedures and the ability of a public PMU to adjust to changing market conditions and challenges (Al Hammadi, 2021).

The main aim of the study is to investigate whether the autocratic leadership style influences employee performance. The specific objectives of the study are: to determine whether autocratic leadership style influences employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector PMU; to determine whether the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance is mediated by e-GP in Zimbabwe's public sector PMU, and to propose a leadership style framework that can enhance employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector PMUs. The significance of leadership in steering organisations cannot be overemphasized as it influences every aspect of the organization (Alsheikh et al., 2023). An autocratic leadership style would be appropriate, for example, in the face of new employees who join the PMU or when a new system is introduced as in this case, those who absent themselves occasionally, particularly after pay day or every Monday of the week, and where it is necessary to show command and control (Avolio, 1999; Li et al., 2021). In contrast, this style of leadership would not be appropriate for mature employees and those who have been with the PMU for too long (Li et al., 2021).

Electronic Government Procurement (e-GP) enables PMUs to harness technologies towards improved operations, decision-making, service delivery, and strategic objectives (Vial, 2021). Automation optimizes workflows, surfaces insights and personalized interactions, leveraging process integration, machine learning algorithms, and natural language programming (Gräfe et al., 2024). Recent public sector digital transformations are integrated along with examples demonstrating responsive e-GP capacities in data-driven decision analytics, automation, customer interface modernization, and work force enhancement (Ida, 2024). Employee performance is a multidimensional construct that encompasses both task performance and contextual performance (Sonnertang & Frese, 2002; Elsner et al., 2024). Task performance refers to the core technical duties undertaken by employees within PMUs, which directly contribute to the unit's functional efficiency. In contrast, contextual performance encompasses non-technical, discretionary behaviours that support the organisational environment, such as commitment, initiative, and citizenship behaviour (Elsner et al., 2024).

Literature Review: Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

According to Hersey and Blanchard (1974), Ahmed (2025), and Nasr et al. (2025), Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) posits that effective leadership depends on the maturity or readiness of followers, defined by their competence and commitment. Leaders must adjust their behaviour, ranging from directive to delegating, based on the needs of employees in specific contexts (Nasr et al., 2025). SLT informs the rationale that no single leadership style (autocratic) is universally

effective. According to Di Maggio & Powell (1983), Malik et al. (2025), and Khurshid et al. (2025), Institutional Theory (IT) explains how PMUs respond to external pressures through isomorphic change, coercive (legal mandates), mimetic (imitation), or normative (professional norms), to maintain legitimacy. Information Technology (IT) is pivotal for explaining leadership behaviour within the rigid structures of Zimbabwe's public procurement, governed by instruments such as the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets (PPDPA) Act and Statutory Instrument (SI 5 of 2018. Limitations: The theory tends to understate individual agency and may not adequately explain divergence in implementation outcomes across similar institutions. Stewardship Theory (ST) suggests that stewards are intrinsically motivated to serve PMU interests (Davis et al., 1997; Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Hafke & Erlend, 2024). Unlike Agency Theory, it sees leaders as trustworthy and aligned with PMU goals. ST is particularly relevant for public entities where leaders must demonstrate trust, transparency, and commitment to public value. A leadership style does not align with stewardship principles, where it fosters trust and engagement during e-GP implementation (Hafke & Erlend, 2024). However, ST has a limitation in that it may idealise leadership behaviour by assuming altruism, which is not always evident in highly politicised or resource-constrained public sectors.

Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) Theory (Rogers, 1962; 2003; Call & Herber, 2022; Shipra et al., 2024) explains how innovations like e-GP spread through organisations. Adoption is influenced by perceived attributes (such as relative advantage, compatibility, and complexity) and adopter categories (for example, early adopters and laggards). DOI Theory is instrumental in assessing how leadership styles influence the rate and effectiveness of e-GP adoption (Shipra et al., 2024). Autocratic leaders tell employees what to do in the face of DOI (Shipra et al., 2024). However, the theory has a limitation in that it focuses more on the adoption process than on sustained engagement or institutionalisation of innovations, especially in public bureaucracies.

Path-Goal Theory (PGT) posits that leaders improve performance by clarifying paths to goals and removing obstacles (House, 1971; Northouse, 2021). It supports adaptive leadership styles, which are directive, participative, supportive, achievement-oriented, and tailored to follower and task characteristics (Northouse, 2021). In PMUs, leaders navigating e-GP systems can use PGT principles to provide clarity and support. Autocratic styles offer structure. However, PGT has two major limitations. Firstly, PGT is challenging to operationalise due to the multiplicity of mediating variables. Secondly, it may be more descriptive than prescriptive.

Research hypotheses

> **H₁:** Autocratic leadership style has a significant influence on employee performance within Zimbabwe's public sector PMUs.

> **H₂:** The relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector PMUs is mediated by e-GP.

Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework hypothesized that leadership styles significantly predict employees' performance in PMUs, positively or negatively. In addition, it is hypothesized that e-GP mediates the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance.
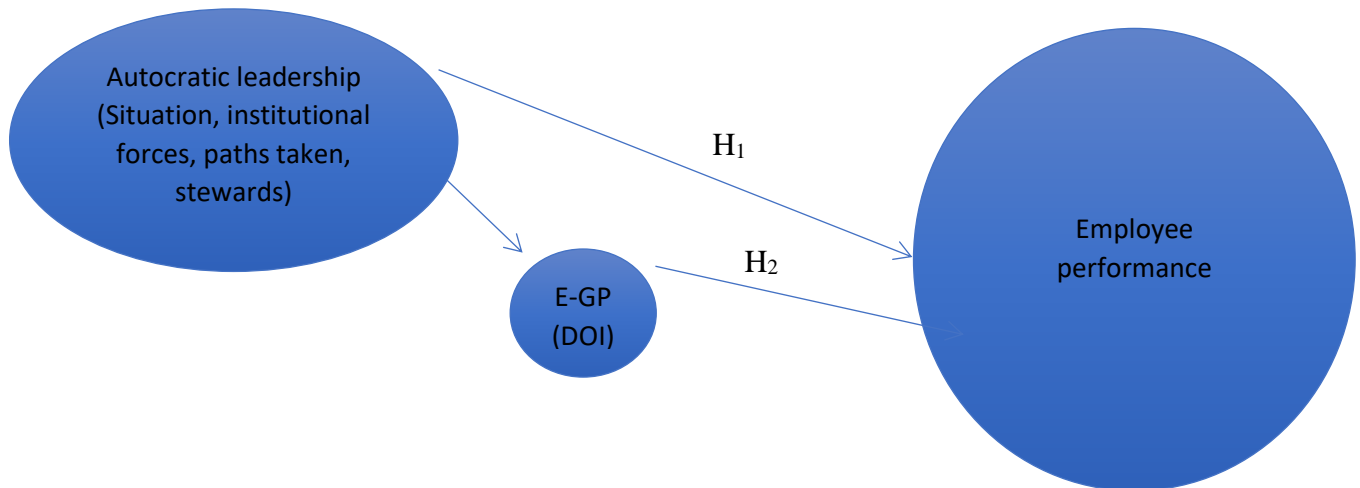

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual framework and the hypotheses of this study

Source: Researcher's conceptualisation, adapted from Mergel et al. (2019).

Gaps from the Reviewed Literature

Despite the growing body of literature on leadership styles, employee performance, and e-GP, critical gaps remain that warrant scholarly attention, particularly in public sector procurement contexts. Much of the extant research originates from the private sector, offering limited applicability to the highly regulated and politically influenced environment of public procurement (Northouse, 2023). Furthermore, existing studies tend to narrowly conceptualise employee performance, focusing predominantly on task efficiency while overlooking contextual aspects such as innovation, compliance, and ethical conduct (Bertot et al., 2020). Although e-GP is frequently cited for its role in enhancing transparency and operational efficiency, its broader implications for decision-making quality, job satisfaction, and inter-organisational collaboration remain underexplored (Thai, 2022).

Equally lacking is empirical evidence on the mediating role of e-GP between leadership styles and employee performance, particularly using robust methodologies like Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) (Judge & Piccolo, 2022). Moreover, few studies investigate the human and organisational barriers, such as resistance to change, inadequate training, lack of user buy-in, and digital skills gaps, that influence e-GP adoption success (Carter & Weigelt, 2020). Longitudinal analyses are scarce, with most research assessing short-term impacts and neglecting the evolving demands of digital procurement systems (Snellman et al., 2021). Contextual mediators, including institutional culture and procurement complexity, are also under-theorised (Esteve et al., 2022).

Finally, there is a notable absence of comparative and mixed-methods studies that examine the differential influence of autocratic leadership on e-GP effectiveness. This research addresses these gaps by focusing on Zimbabwe's public sector, integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches to provide a more holistic understanding of the autocratic leadership–technology–performance nexus within PMU employees (Somech, 2022).

Methodology

This research adopts a positivist philosophical framework to investigate the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance as well as the mediating role of e-GP (Cresswell, 1994). Positivism, as a philosophical stance, asserts that social reality is objective, singular, and can be understood through empirical observation and the application of the scientific method (Ma & Ma, 2022). This paradigm emphasises the importance of observable facts, quantifiable data, and the establishment of causal relationships through rigorous testing of pre-defined hypotheses (Park & Wang, 2025). Consistent with the positivist stance, a deductive research approach was adopted. Given the aim to examine relationships between variables and the mediating role of e-GP, SEM was employed (Cepeda et al., 2024; Harlow, 2023). A survey-based data collection strategy used standardised questionnaires as the method for gathering quantitative data from a representative sample of public sector employees (Mansour, 2024). According to Cresswell et al. (2025), a study population is a subset of the target population and is a well-defined collection of individuals or objects who are the focus of scientific inquiry. In this case study, the population refers to individuals who lead PMUs and the workers under them. In determining the sample size, Yamane's (1967) formula was used at a 95% confidence level and a precision level of 0.5, giving a sample size of three hundred and twenty. From the 150 Ministries, Departments, and Agencies, 10 staff members were chosen to provide a total population of 1,500.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size
- e = level of precision (0.05)

Applying this formula yields:

$$n = \frac{1500}{1 + 1500(0.05)^2} = \frac{1500}{1 + 1500(0.0025)} = \frac{1500}{4.75} = 316$$

An explanatory research design was used in the study, where the relationship among the variables of autocratic leadership style was viewed to influence employee performance through e-GP by asking why and how it happened. A survey-based data collection strategy was employed, utilising standardised questionnaires as the principal instrument for gathering quantitative data from a representative sample of public sector employees. This approach enabled the systematic collection of consistent data across multiple constructs such as leadership styles, e-GP implementation, and employee performance, thereby ensuring comparability and reliability of responses. The use of standardised instruments facilitated the efficient capture of data from a large and geographically dispersed sample, supporting robust statistical analysis and enhancing the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of interest (Mansour, 2024).

Employee performance was measured using validated scales encompassing both task and contextual performance dimensions, based on the short-form job performance measure (Koopmans et al., 2014; Elsner, 2024). A systematic probability sampling technique was also applied to ensure representativeness within the target population of Zimbabwean PMUs (Cochran, 1977; Cepeda, 2024). Sample size determination, however, followed statistical power analysis principles to ensure sufficient sensitivity for detecting hypothesised effects (Cohen, 1988; Samuel & Leonhard, 2025).

The data collection was conducted through online questionnaires, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to ethical protocols, including informed consent. Quantitative data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate the proposed relationships and mediation effects (Waqar & Paracha, 2024). This included descriptive statistics, path modelling, and statistical significance testing using p-values and t-statistics, enabling a rigorous examination of the influence of autocratic leadership style and e-GP on employee performance.

Ethical integrity was a cornerstone of this study, guided by the standards of responsible research conduct within a positivist paradigm. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through a detailed information sheet and a formal consent mechanism embedded in the questionnaire. This document (see A-The questionnaire) clarified the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, and was stored and used exclusively for academic purposes (Saunders et al., 2019). Anonymity was preserved by avoiding the collection of identifiable information and reporting results only in aggregate form. To further ensure confidentiality, both digital and paper data were stored securely, with access restricted solely to the principal researcher. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Data collection was conducted via a secure online platform with encrypted access, and rigorous data management protocols were followed, including password protection, access limitation, and time-bound retention aligned with ethical guidelines. The survey instrument was carefully worded to minimise discomfort, and reassurances were provided to encourage candid responses. To uphold objectivity and reduce researcher bias, the study employed validated scales, standardised instruments, and quantitative analysis techniques consistent with positivist research traditions. Accuracy was further enhanced through pilot testing, clear participant instructions, and systematic data cleaning. These ethical safeguards collectively ensured that the study was conducted in a transparent, secure, and professionally responsible manner, while protecting participants' rights and generating valid, generalisable knowledge. Ethical integrity was a cornerstone of this study, guided by the standards of responsible research conduct within a positivist paradigm. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the Midlands State University Research Ethics Committee, ensuring that all protocols conformed to institutional and disciplinary expectations (Creswell et al., 2025; Davis et al., 1991).

Findings

Prior to hypotheses testing, the validity and reliability of the measurement instrument were evaluated. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability scores were used to assess internal consistency. SEM-PLS was conducted using SmartPLS 4 software to examine hypothesised relationships. The model fit and R^2 (tables 2 and 3) values were analysed to assess the variance explained in the endogenous constructs, e-GP, and employee performance. The responses represent a comparative analysis of participant responses across core constructs, including autocratic leadership styles, employee performance, and the mediating role of e-GP, using the Likert scale categories (from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree").

The R-square measures the proportion of variance in the dependent variables that is explained by the independent variables in a regression model (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Table 1 summarises the results.

Table 1: Goodness of fit

R-Square Overview Table

	Construct	R-square	R-square Adjusted
1	E-GP	0.499	0.488
2	Employee performance	0.299	0.279

Fit model indices provide rich sources of information about the structural equation model's goodness-of-fit to the data.

Table 2: R-Square Overview

Fit Index	Value
SRMR	0.049
d_ULS	0.837
d_G	0.653
Chi-square	1023.45
NFI	0.912

Table 3: Model Fit Summary

Fit Index	Value
SRMR	0.049
d_ULS	0.837
d_G	0.653
Chi-square	1023.45
NFI	0.912

SRMR (Standardised root mean square residual): 0.099

The Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) assesses the discrepancy between the predicted and observed correlations; the lower the value, the better the model fit. An SRMR value below 0.08 is generally considered indicative of a good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 2020; Henseler et al., 2020). The SRMR value for this model is 0.099, which slightly exceeds this threshold, signifying a moderate fit. This suggests that although the model represents the data relatively well,

refinements, such as improved indicators or revised model specification, may enhance its overall fit and explanatory power.

D_ULS (Squared Euclidean Distance) and d_G (Geodesic Distance)

These are different indices applied in PLS-SEM to determine model fit. Low values are often signs of a good fit, but cut-off values for such indices are not well-consented to (Henseler et al., 2020). Their equal values between the estimated and saturated model mean no model misspecification between the two models.

Chi-square: 669.566

These indices are commonly employed in PLS-SEM to assess the model's goodness-of-fit. While lower values generally indicate a better fit, there is limited consensus on universal cut-off thresholds (Henseler et al., 2020). When the values for the estimated and saturated models are equal or nearly identical, this suggests that there is no significant model misspecification, indicating consistency and structural adequacy between the hypothesised and fully saturated models.

NFI (Normed Fit Index): 0.626

NFI ranges between 0 and 1, with higher values closer to 1 indicating better model fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). Generally, values above 0.90 are regarded as indicative of a good fit (Bentler, 1990). The model's NFI of 0.626 falls below this benchmark and thus suggests a limited fit between the observed data and the hypothesised structure. This may point to model complexity or potential issues in measurement specification. The overall fit indices indicate that the structural model demonstrates a moderate fit with the data. The SRMR slightly exceeds the recommended threshold, and the NFI remains low, implying that the model could benefit from further refinement. Nevertheless, since PLS-SEM prioritises predictive accuracy over model fit (Hair et al., 2022), these results may still be considered adequate for theory testing and exploratory analysis in complex models such as those examining leadership styles, e-Government procurement, and employee performance.

Construct reliability and validity.

Table 4: Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Autocratic leadership	0.750	0.758	0.838	0.564
E-GP	0.788	0.812	0.857	0.552
Employee performance	0.750	0.745	0.839	0.567

The findings confirm valid construct validity and reliability for measured constructs. Cronbach's alpha values are between 0.750 and 0.788, which is above the usual standard of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency of measurement items (Nunnally & Bernstein, 2021). Composite reliability (rho_a), (rho_c), and average variance extracted (AVE) were from 0.745 to 0.812, 0.838 to 0.857, and from 0.552 to 0.567, where rho assessed reliability (internal consistency) – how consistently the items measured the constructs. AVE assessed convergent validity – how well the items collectively represented the constructs. These measures were crucial for establishing the psychometric soundness of scales and constructs in quantitative research, particularly in techniques like SEM-PLS.

Analysis of outer loadings

Outer loadings signify the degree to which each measured indicator is linked with its latent construct, and they reflect reliability (Hair et al., 2022). In general, loadings of more than 0.70 are deemed strong and reflective of a reliable indicator.

Table 5: Outer loadings

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
AL2 <- Autocratic leadership	0.790	0.781	0.068	11.685	0.000
AL4 <- Autocratic leadership	0.701	0.689	0.084	8.378	0.000
AL5 <- Autocratic leadership	0.776	0.771	0.051	15.278	0.000
AL6 <- Autocratic leadership	0.735	0.736	0.054	13.698	0.000
E-GP1 <- E-GP	0.773	0.772	0.039	19.766	0.000
E-GP2 <- E-GP	0.831	0.831	0.030	27.423	0.000
E-GP3 <- E-GP	0.860	0.860	0.028	30.651	0.000
E-GP5 <- E-GP	0.541	0.535	0.090	6.003	0.000
E-GP6 <- E-GP	0.664	0.660	0.061	10.814	0.000
EP1 <- Employee performance	0.731	0.729	0.062	11.804	0.000
EP2 <- Employee performance	0.773	0.764	0.086	9.005	0.000
EP3 <- Employee performance	0.790	0.785	0.079	9.946	0.000
EP4 <- Employee performance	0.714	0.705	0.072	9.873	0.000

In the present study, all the indicators load strongly on their corresponding construct and outer loadings of 0.541 to 0.860 with corresponding T-statistics significantly larger than the critical value of 1.96, to determine statistical significance at the 0.001 level (p < 0.001 which suggests strong construct representation and reliability.

Path coefficient analysis

Path coefficients reflect the strength and direction of relationships among constructs in a model. Significance is tested with p-values and t-statistics, where a p-value of less than 0.05 suggests a statistically significant effect. Path coefficient of the model is given in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Path coefficient

	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Autocratic leadership -> E-GP	0.370	0.070	5.250	0.000
Autocratic leadership -> Employee performance	0.088	0.088	0.997	0.319
EGP- Employee performance	0.274	0.107	2.559	0.011

Autocratic Leadership → E-GP

The path coefficient is 0.370, the t-statistic is 5.250, and the p-value is 0.000, and it has a significant positive association (Abdullah, 2024). This indicates that the autocratic leadership style is positively related to the adoption or utilization of e-GP systems in public sector procurement units in Zimbabwe (Ali et al., 2021).

Autocratic Leadership → Employee Performance

The coefficient 0.088 is not significant but positive (t = 0.997, p = 0.319). This suggests that autocratic leadership has a direct impact on employees' performance in this case, as earlier noted that autocratic leadership could increase employees' freedom (Nguni et al., 2020).

E-GP- Employee Performance

0.274 is a big and significant positive coefficient (t = 2.559, p = 0.011). It means that the proper application and usage of e-GP systems improve employees' performance positively. This aligns with evidence showing how technology integration can improve efficiency and effectiveness in public purchasing (Gunasekaran et al., 2020).

Interpretation of Hypothesis Testing Results

The study aimed to examine the influence of autocratic leadership style on employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector procurement management units, with e-GP as a mediating variable. The hypotheses and results are shown in Table 7 below and are interpreted as follows.

Table 7: Interpretation of hypotheses

	Hypothesis	Sample mean (M)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Decision
Autocratic leadership -> Employee performance	H1	0.100	2.192	0.028	Accepted
Autocratic leadership -> E-GP -> Employee performance	H2	0.100	2.192	0.028	Accepted

Autocratic leadership style influences employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector procurement management units.

The results provide significant support for this hypothesis, with a sample mean indirect effect of 0.100, a t-statistic of 2.192, and a p-value of 0.028, indicating that autocratic leadership positively and significantly influences employee performance. This aligns with literature that suggests that autocratic leadership, despite its top-down approach, can enhance employee performance in structured and hierarchical environments like public sector procurement by ensuring clarity in roles, swift decision-making, and strict compliance with policies (Nguyen et al., 2021).

E-GP mediates the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector procurement management units.

This mediation hypothesis is supported (mean = 0.100, t = 2.192, p = 0.028), indicating that e-GP significantly mediates the relationship between autocratic leadership and employee performance. This suggests that the positive effect of autocratic leadership on employee performance occurs, at least partially, through the adoption and effective use of electronic government procurement systems (Adeyemi & Okunoye, 2023).

The proposed Structural equation model of the study (SEM)

The study's model hypothesized that leadership styles significantly predict employees' performance in PMU positively. In addition, it is hypothesized that e-GP mediates the relationship between leadership styles and staff performance. The model shown in Figure 2 below shows the path coefficient.
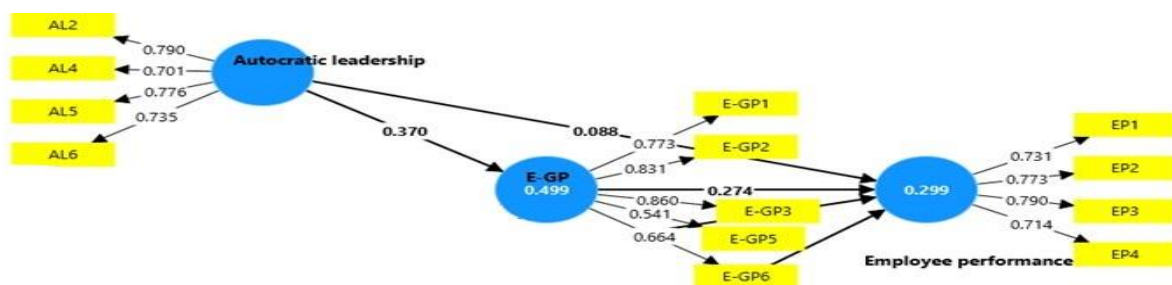

Figure 2: Structural Equation Model (SEM) of the study
Source: Primary data findings (2025)

Discussion of results/findings
Whether the autocratic leadership style influences employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector PMUs
Autocratic Leadership → E-GP

The path coefficient of 0.370, with a t-statistic of 5.250 and p-value of 0.000, indicates a statistically significant and positive relationship between autocratic leadership and e-GP utilisation. This suggests that autocratic leadership, which typically emphasises directive control and authority, positively influences the adoption of e-GP systems in Zimbabwe's public procurement units. These findings support prior evidence that hierarchical leadership styles can enforce conformity with structured technological systems (Avolio et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2021).

Autocratic Leadership → Employee Performance

With a coefficient of 0.088 (t = 0.997, p = 0.319), the relationship between autocratic leadership and employee performance is positive but statistically insignificant. This implies that autocratic leadership does not directly enhance employee performance. This aligns with research highlighting that restrictive leadership styles may suppress autonomy and intrinsic motivation, thereby diminishing employee output (Nguni et al., 2020).

Autocratic leadership style has a significant influence on employee performance within Zimbabwe's public sector PMUs employees.

The analysis yields strong empirical support for this hypothesis, with a statistically significant indirect effect (mean = 0.100, t = 2.192, p = 0.028). This suggests that autocratic leadership positively influences employee performance within the context of Zimbabwean public sector procurement. Despite its often-criticised top-down nature, autocratic leadership can enhance efficiency in bureaucratic environments by promoting clarity of roles, expediting decision-making, and enforcing compliance with standard operating procedures (Nguyen et al., 2021; Li & Sun, 2023). In contexts where operational rigidity is necessary and chain-of-command is critical, this leadership style can minimise ambiguity and heighten accountability, thereby supporting improved performance outcomes.

The relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance in Zimbabwe's public sector PMUs is mediated by e-GP.

There is significant support for this mediation effect (mean = 0.100, t = 2.192, p = 0.028). The results suggest that autocratic leaders, by enforcing discipline and structured processes, may drive effective implementation of e-GP systems, which in turn improves employee performance. This supports findings that effective leadership can shape the success of technological innovations in the public sector (Adeyemi & Okunoye, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021). Thus, e-GP serves as a crucial conduit through which autocratic leadership enhances procurement staff efficiency.

To propose a leadership style framework that can enhance employee performance in Zimbabwe's PMUs

Based on the study's findings, a hybrid leadership framework is recommended to optimize employee performance and support digital transformation in Zimbabwe's public procurement **sector.** Autocratic leadership, said to be inflexible, remained useful under this research when enforced through systematic mediation through e-GP. In some instances, such as mandating compliance in procurement, completing timely projects, or changing quickly throughout the system, autocratic tendencies can improve decisiveness and minimize ambiguity (Nguyen et al., 2021).

The framework, true to this, prescribes strategic investment in organizational development—leaders' training, change management, and infrastructure, towards ensuring incremental institutionalization of autocratic leadership. Over time, such investments can realize transformational leadership's potential in inspiring and sustaining high-achieving teams.

The suggested hybrid leadership model should be complemented by strong e-GP systems, which are a single mediating performance improvement tool.

Figure 3: Proposed Framework

First, institutionalize hybrid leadership training for all procurement managers in autocratic leadership skills like consultation, participation, and transparency, and obligatory enforcement skills, to ensure compliance and discipline. Second, invest in ongoing development and upkeep of the e-GP system to keep it stable, accessible, user-friendly, and properly integrated in all government ministries. This will enhance procurement efficiency and transparency. Third, encourage digital literacy and change management programs specific to leaders and employees. These programs should include streamlining transition into e-GP-based workflows, minimizing technology resistance, and developing confidence in using the system. Fourth, include leadership development modules in public administration training programs, emphasizing participatory approaches to leadership and technology-related skills appropriate for the digital age, such as flexibility, imagination, and the ability to harness technology properly. Finally, create performance-based incentives that incentivize leadership actions that promote innovation, cooperation, and productivity, particularly those that effectively utilize the e-GP system.

Suggestions for future research

To build upon the findings of this study and deepen understanding of leadership influences within digitally transforming public procurement systems, the following avenues for future research are proposed:

- Longitudinal Studies on Leadership Evolution and e-GP Performance: Future investigations should explore the *long-term effects* of shifts in leadership styles on the performance of e-GP systems. This would allow researchers to capture dynamic patterns over time and assess how leadership adaptation impacts system sustainability and institutional outcomes.

- Cross-National Comparative Analyses: Comparative studies involving *other developing nations* could offer valuable insights into the *transferability and scalability* of hybrid leadership frameworks. Understanding contextual differences and commonalities will help refine models suited for diverse socio-political and administrative environments.

- Qualitative Inquiry into Employee Perceptions: There is a need for *in-depth qualitative research*, such as interviews, case studies, and focus groups, to capture employees' lived experiences and perceptions of different leadership behaviours. This would provide richer explanations of how leadership style shapes *technology acceptance*, motivation, and performance on the ground.

- Exploring Moderating Variables: Subsequent studies should consider *moderating factors*, such as organisational culture, digital maturity, or *political influence*, which may shape or constrain the effectiveness of leadership styles. Such variables could significantly affect the relationship between leadership practices and procurement outcomes, especially in politically sensitive environments.

Collectively, these directions offer pathways for a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of public sector leadership and digital transformation in developing economies.

Practical Contribution

This research makes a practical contribution by deepening understanding of the interplay between leadership styles, e-GP, and employee performance in Zimbabwe's PMUs. The study offers empirical insights that could guide policymakers in designing more effective public sector digital transformation strategies. Specifically, it highlights how leadership approaches, such as autocratic, democratic, and transformational, facilitate or hinder the successful adoption and integration of e-GP systems.

The findings may inform legislative reforms and institutional capacity-building initiatives spearheaded by the Parliament of Zimbabwe. Such reforms could focus on enacting supportive legal frameworks and capacity development policies that bolster performance management systems and curb corruption in public procurement. Additionally, the study provides guidance for PMU managers and public sector administrators on aligning leadership development efforts with digital governance capabilities. This includes the introduction of training programmes, reskilling of staff, and change management processes to maximise e-GP returns on investment.

Beyond the national scope, the study carries global relevance. It supports progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) (Duan et al., 2022; Yildiz & Amin, 2020; Raghu et al., 2024). It also aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063, particularly Aspiration 1 (A prosperous Africa) and Goal 12 (Capable institutions and transformative leadership) (Hafke and Erlend, 2024). Consequently, the study may serve as a valuable reference for development agencies supporting digital reforms in public procurement within emerging economies.

Theoretical and Conceptual Contribution

From a theoretical perspective, the study integrates and extends existing frameworks by empirically analysing the mediating role of e-GP in the relationship between leadership styles and employee performance. It contributes to the ongoing discourse on the relevance of traditional leadership theories in digital public administration, while concurrently validating and updating core assumptions. The study draws upon and synthesises several conceptual frameworks, including:

- *Situational Leadership Theory* (Hersey & Blanchard, 1983; Hersey & Blanchard, 1996; Nasr et al., 2025)
- *Institutional Theory* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Malik et al., 2025)
- *Stewardship Theory* (Donaldson & Davis, 1991; Hafke & Erlend, 2024)
- *Path–Goal Theory* (House, 1971; Valamontes, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024)
- *Diffusion of Innovation Theory* (Rodgers, 1962; Call & Herber, 2022; Shipra et al., 2024)

In a context characterised by digital transformation and public sector reform, the above theories advance the theoretical dialogue on the role of leadership in innovation uptake and institutional effectiveness. The study also fills a knowledge gap by modelling e-GP as a mediating variable, a dimension seldom explored in existing literature (Singh & Slack, 2022). This conceptual contribution is reinforced by the study's empirical validation of the assertion that leadership styles significantly influence employee performance and that this relationship is substantially mediated by the effective utilisation of e-GP technologies.

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