Enhancing Professionalization of Human Resource Management in the Public Service in Africa

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PRESENTATION

Improving the Management of Human Resources in the Public Service through application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

by

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INTRODUCTION

We have now entered an era when almost every part of our existence is affected by technological innovations due to globalization and evolution of the knowledge economy. We are where Bill Gates was quoted saying in 1999 that:

… ‘the internet is a tidal wave. It will wash over nearly all industries, drowning those who do not learn to swim in its waves’

Human Resources occupy a strategic position in Africa. Their management is crucial to creation of wealth and to development which is what Africa needs most urgently. Experience from elsewhere in the world shows that Human resources must be managed effectively if they are to generate value from other resources.

The management of Human resources in Africa has not changed much since our countries attained their independence. The HR function is still a support function that provides services to its internal customers and which is constantly under challenge to improve its service quality and in turn nurture further organizational development (Heskett et al., 1994).

A lot of what the HR function does could be classified as transactional or administrative in nature. There is urgent need for them to also play the business partner role by focusing on the core mandates of the organizations and facilitating their customers to perform effectively. This focus on the internal market requires the HR function to make two basic shifts in orientation. The first from a production to a service orientation in which HR becomes committed to internal customer satisfaction. The second to balance a “technical merit” perspective with a “user reaction” one. This would mean that HRM adds internal customer satisfaction as a contribution to the list of criteria it uses to assess its effectiveness (Bowen, 1996).

When HR begins to meet the expectations of customers and stakeholders, it will gain legitimacy and acceptance in the organization and also in the eyes of external entities. The challenge for them is to address three, often competing aims. These are to make HR more cost effective though reducing the cost of the services it offers and headcount, improve its services to
increasingly demanding senior executives, line managers and employees; and to address the strategic objectives of the organization (Lepak & Snell, 1998). Technology is a handy tool for HRM to use in addressing these challenges.

Africa has been experimenting with Technology since the 1960’s; it is now time to fully embrace it with the rest of the world as a way of life and especially to manage our Human resources. Unfortunately, HR function in Africa has not been proactive in its use of technology to provide integrated services or to communicate more effectively. The few initiatives made have by and large originated from IT experts. There is need for HR to proactively embrace Technology to elicit responses and fulfill changing expectations within organizations (Elliott and Tevavichulada, 1999).

It is with these perspectives in mind that this paper explores literature and a case study to show how usage of internet technologies has improved HR functions and applications within organizations in the developed world with the insinuation that the same would happen if Africa promoted the use of Technology in HRM. Like in Europe and the Americas, HR in Africa needs to turn to the available information and communications technologies (ICT) and social media technologies to rationalize or even transform HR’s internal operations. This may lead to the “virtualization” and/or “leaning” of HR by reducing substantially the numbers of specialists required to deliver HR services whilst simultaneously improving the quality of these same services.

But to achieve any measure of success, there will be need to address challenges related to infrastructure, knowledge gaps; connectivity and resistance to change among others. Since technology is fast changing, the challenges facing Africa in this respect should be viewed as opportunities to develop/ adopt and assimilate only that technology suited for its purpose of rejuvenating HRM in the Public service to play its rightful role.

This paper draws examples from Kenya for obvious reasons but this is meant to be a pointer towards a rich Africa debate on how HRM can be made more meaningful in the Public service through the use of ICT.
CURRENT STATUS OF HRM IN AFRICA

An exploratory survey of HRM practices carried out by the Ministry of State for Public Service in Kenya (MSPS, 2007) found out that the day to day work of HRM practitioners in the civil service revolves round activities like; Commutation of leave; confirmation in appointment; preparation of the payroll, deployment of staff, attending meetings, verification of personnel data; pension matters, statutory deductions and arranging for staff training among others.

The same survey enumerated challenges they faced to include: not so cordial relationship with other departments; little interaction with other departments unless they wanted HR to do something for them; inadequate capacity; lack of a forum to address issues and exchange ideas or bond with other departments

These findings on the one hand revealed that the HRM function is still playing to the tune of the 1990’s models of clerk of works/ contract manager/ architect and were still preoccupied with transactional activities (Fell, 1996, Chondrey, 1998, Taylor, 1992). On the other hand, the findings revealed an urgent need to ‘Get HR role out of its ivory tower to get closer to business’ (Ulrich (1997). According to Ulrich, there is need for HRM to stop acting as administrative agents or clerk of works and to play a more direct role in the running of the organization. Not to watch from the sidelines but to join forces with operational managers to systematically assess the impact and importance of its activities. Huselid et al, (2005) argued that the future of HR function depends on its ability to acquire, assimilate, transform and exploit new knowledge in other areas to allow it to connect with strategic business drivers.

There is now no doubt about the strategic role Human Resource can play in organizations and it is now generally accepted that the more strategic the approach to human resource management (HRM), the greater the contribution of HRM to organizational performance. This is because HRM powerfully impacts on the policies, practices and systems that influence employees’ behavior, attitude and performance (Gloet and Berrell, 2003). Yet, there is more rhetoric than reality about the exact role HRM is being allowed to play in organizational performance in Africa. A casual look shows that though the HRM officer has
finally got a seat at the high table with top management in some countries like Kenya, there is still more to be done to empower them to enable them talk strategy, globalization and customers-issues that affect HR and the business (Ulrich, 1997)

The number one requirement for any HR function is to ensure it is continually adding value. They have to be able to reach out to all levels of the organization to let them know who HR are and what they can do for them and demonstrating their knowledge of the business in order to provide a credible reason for business to approach them. HR must define the value they create. The challenge to HR professionals is to meet three (3) often competing aims: make it more cost effective through reducing costs of its services and headcount; improve its services to increasingly demanding senior executives, line Managers and employees; and address the strategic objectives of the organization.

**ICT TREND IN (KENYA) PUBLIC SECTOR**

ICT has been widely used in Human Resource information systems from the late 1960’s. as shown in the drawing below. The technology has changed with time. In the 1960’s, it was the main frame type which was used in processing the payroll and Government accounts. In the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, it was the microcomputers which were used in word processing. Client servers came into use in the 1990’s and were used in information sharing and online transactions. Since the beginning of the twenty first century, the ICTs in use include internet, mobile and wireless communications.

**ICT TREND IN KENYA PUBLIC SECTOR**

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<td>Processing payroll&amp; Govt. Accounts</td>
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ICT has been used in organizations to add value in **Transactions** by improving the efficiency of transactional services, back office and the production time of staff and in offering choice of delivery channels from face-to-face, online or through telephone. It adds value in **interactions** by maximizing the use of ICT technologies such as internet, intranet, emails, telephones, teleconferencing etc. and in **Information sharing** through building IT systems with technology that enables information to be shared across departments which means citizens or customers can receive a faster and more transparent service - the so called “one stop shop”.

**PAST USE OF ICT IN HRM**

The ‘early bird’ areas of HRM adoption of IT were e-recruitment and e-learning. (Snell et al. 1995) with web based training and use of CD-Rom being flexible alternatives to classroom based learning to suit work patterns and dispersed workforce. Human Resource Information systems (HRIS) which has been quite widespread in the developed world since the 1980’s. The system concerned itself with automating systems such as payroll and personal information with little or no attempt to make such data interactive or available to staff outside the HR department. It was too expensive, unfriendly and lacking enough capacity to manage large amounts of information required by personnel activities. It was not sufficient to create the type of internal virtual chain required to add value. In the developed world, advances in ICT has enabled automation of literally any function of HR-staffing, training and development, compensation, pay and benefits, performance management and career development.
Use of a wide range of ICT technologies and social media technologies has now been used to rationalize or even transform HR. It has been used to transform internal operations in order to lead to the virtualization and or leaning of HR while simultaneously improving quality of services by transforming the traditional paper and pencil, labour intensive tasks into efficient fast response activities that enable organizations to anticipate and profit from change to create competitive advantage.

The term e-HRM was first used in the late 1990’s when e-commerce was sweeping the business world. e-HRM is internal application of e-business techniques to add value to the management through more effective and efficient information flow and is a way of doing HRM (Ruel et al, 2002).

It is application of technology enabling managers and employees to have direct access to HR and other workplace services for communication, performance, reporting, team management, knowledge management and learning as well as administration applications (Wyatt, 2002). e-HRM consists of HR functional application, extranet applications, intranet, wireless and mobile HR applications. Current literature distinguishes three (3) types of e-HRM: operational; relational; transformational e-HRM (Lepak&Snell, 1998, Wright &Dyer, 2000).

- **Operational e-HRM** amounts to asking employees to keep their own personal data update through a HR website or to have an administrative force in place to do this for them.
- **Relational e-HRM** amounts to a choice between supporting Recruitment and selection through a web-based application process and using manual application processes.
- **Transformational e-HRM** is an integrated web-based tools that enable the workforce to develop in line with the organizations strategic choices.
- The **Intranet** is a powerful tool which can encourage communication and collaboration in the firm, streamline procedures and provide staff with permanently updated information regardless of physical location. It may be used for collecting information, communication and sharing information with employees. It gives automatic access to and administration of databases. It simplifies distribution of complex information presenting it much more thoroughly and graphically.
HOW USE OF ICT IMPROVES HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICE.

According to Tsui (1987), technology helps the HR function to develop relationships with its constituency and provides it an opportunity for greater effectiveness and satisfaction of both parties. Documented evidence has shown that ICT can be effectively used in HRM to: reduce costs; improve services; re-define responsibilities in the organization and improve strategic orientation of HRM.

Cost reduction;

ICT enables HR to supply their services to customers more effectively and with little constraint on time, place or availability (Alleyne, 2003). It reduces HR transaction costs by supplying HR information to a large number of people on a virtual basis; substituting physical capability by leveraging law of digital assets to use the information flexibly at no or at marginal cost (Martin et. al, 2003). In this way it brings about a reduction in headcount since not many personnel are required to do the jobs.

Instead of a centralized personnel team handling transactional tasks like pay, training, holiday/leave entitlements which can be handled by employees themselves or by their supervisors using technology mediated processes. It lowers cost of doing HR; improves response time; and improves quality and consistency of HR information.

Improving HR services:

Use of ICT improves two way communication leading to higher levels of engagement and satisfaction with HR. it increases flexibility in work thus promoting innovation; individualizes labour relations and allowing for relocation of individual employees to increase development, motivation and enhances employability.

In addition, it reduces the number of times that answers to employees’ repetitive questions are given. It allows consultations at any time and place; provides reference materials
e.g. training packages, policy guidelines, procedures and manuals on demand. It can be used for announcing vacancies for jobs within the organization, for recruitment and announcing important events or giving memoranda.

This will allow HR more time that it can dedicate to important activities like improving responsiveness to needs of managers and employees for ‘real time’ information and tailored HR solutions on demand. This improves perception of management and employees on the HR function.

**Redefining employee responsibilities in HR**

The role of managers in the workplace has changed substantially in recent years, partly as a result of market developments, but also due to new technologies used by the organizations in which they work. As a result, there has been a radical re-distribution of work that HR managers used to do. Many of the reporting –type activities previously performed by HR Professionals are now performed by managers and employees (Ruel et al, 2004, Ruta, 2005, Martin, 2005). These include: performing appraisals, appraising employee costs, generating HR reports on turnover, absenteeism, processing training requests and overseeing competence management. Use of technology makes it easier for managers to be able to combine these roles with their other roles more effectively and also gives them greater accountability for people management.

Technology has resulted in increased individualism at the workplace and also in society. With increased education levels, the employment relationship is gradually shifting in the direction of employees. They want to set their own career paths; and have lost traditional royalty with any employer since they are guided by ‘what’s in it for me?’ A move towards e-HRM can help employees to manage their information, accessing it directly and updating no matter what it refers to: training, appraisal or even transfers. This is called employee self services. This increases motivation and contributes to their employability. It means that employees have access to anything they need to change and manage in their personal files. They can plan their development, process financial documents and even apply for new jobs (Roehling et al. 2005)
Transferring responsibility to employees means increased acceptance of employees to their development; improved talent management through self selection, self assessment and performance management.

**Improving HR strategic orientation:**

ICT has potential to generate a more strategic role for HR other than as administration clerks. It may provide the HR function opportunity to create new avenues for contributing to organizational effectiveness through such means as knowledge management and creation of intellectual and social capital and in facilitating flexible working.

Use of ICT can establish more virtual customer relationships within the organization thus enabling it to provide strategic value. Through social networking, it can improve employee voice (Martin et al. 2009). It frees HRM managers to become strategic members of the top management team (Strohmeir, 2006) and helps to connect HRM to business. It gives HR increased credibility and power through enabling them to generate more reliable data which improves decision making.

**CASE STUDY: The Public Service Commission of Kenya Recruitment & Selection Database System.**

The PSCK is an independent constitutional body established in 1954. Its mandate as stipulated in the constitution includes the appointment of persons to hold or act in offices in the Public service and in Local Authorities, power to exercise disciplinary control over people holding or acting in those offices and power to remove those persons from office.

**VISION**

*To be a world class constitutional body in the provision of a globally competitive human resource that serves the needs of Kenya*
MISSION

To enhance excellence in Public service delivery by providing the required human resource in the most effective manner.

Recruitment and Selection Process

Recruitment and Selection is one of the core functions of the Commissions. It involves ensuring that the Civil Service is staffed with the right people with the right skills at the right time.

This involves receiving Indents from ministries and departments through the Ministry of State for Public service; keying in the information; verifying information against the schemes of service; advertising in the local print media; receiving, sorting and filling applications; screening of applications; writing guiding notes; carrying out pre-selection; inviting candidates for interviews, carrying out final interviews and making appointments by the Commissions.

Over the years, the Commission relied on a legacy paper –based system in executing this function. as indicated in the diagram below

The Manual Applications Processing: Work Flow
In the year 2001 the Commission was linked to World Wide Web through the Treasury which aimed at enhancing communication across ministries and departments. The first batch of 10 commuters and two printers were purchased that year, the Local Area Network (LAN) was limited to administrative offices mainly the chairman’s and Secretary’s office. In the year 2004, through the Public Service Reforms program (CSRP) the Commission became one of the pilot departments for rolling out the Integrated Payroll Database System (IPPD) to deal with compliment control, establishment and personnel emoluments. This was followed by the introduction of the Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS) to assist in financial management. In 2007, the Public service commission of Kenya launched the
Recruitment and selection database system which allowed online job application for any of the jobs they advertise from Ministries/Departments.

**Development of the online Recruitment and Selection system.**

The R&S system was developed by ICT officers drawn from the Public Service Commission and from various other Ministries/Departments in the civil service. The development of the system entailed:

- Mapping the process to identify duplicating activities and redundancies;
- Benchmarking against best practices with countries and organizations that successfully automated similar process such as Singapore, Malaysia and India.
- Documenting the benchmark findings and recommendations
- Setting up a project implementation committee
- Identifying a technical team
- Designing, developing and implementing the system
- Sensitization and consensus building workshops
- Rollout and capacity building
- Developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

**System Infrastructure:**

Successful implementation of the system required the following infrastructure:

- Installation of Local Area Networks and wide Area Networks
- Procurement of dedicated Telkom leased line
- Enhancement of bandwidth to facilitate data transmission

**System hardware and software platforms:**

The choice and installation of the following enabling platforms was critical:

- system database server
- Procurement of workstations
- SQL server and windows 2000 server
- Back-up server and storage devices
Information Security:

In order to ensure the security of the information the following measures were necessary:

- Installation of firewalls and anti-virus software
- Assignment of user access controls and permissions
- Reinforcement of physical access and controls

The Online Interface

- Enables applicants to browse the advertised jobs
- Facilitates job application and submission online
- Creates a seamless interaction with the Commission’s website world wide
- Promotes accessibility of the Commission jobs 24/7.
- Personalised application status tracking
- Provides clients the opportunity to track the status of advertised jobs
- Enables officers in the Public Service to register their bio-data online
- The system enables the Commission to provide feedback to the applicants through; the Website, Mobile (SMS), Email, Postal Address, Telephone
The In-house Interface

- Caters for the technologically marginalised applicants
- Facilitates integration of the manual paper-based system and the online system (hand-delivered, postal or courier delivered application forms are captured into the system)

System Reports: The System has enhanced the Commission’s ability to generate and analyse reports on

- Applicant profile for use during Pre-Selection
- Short listed candidates
- Successful candidates with appointment details

System awareness creation: In order to introduce and prepare both our staff and other stakeholders, the Commission embarked on awareness creation campaigns through:

- Development of information and education and Communications publications
- Use of mass and print media
- Public service day forums and
- Public exhibitions
- Newsletters

System benefits

The benefits of the new Recruitment and Selection System include:

i) Enhanced efficiency and effectiveness
ii) Improved transparency and accountability
iii) Improved customer and employees satisfaction
iv) Regained Public Confidence in capacity to provide jobs quickly
v) The System has drastically reduced on lead time on recruitment and selection from one year to three and half months on average for.
vi) The System has facilitated personalized feedback to our clients.

vii) The system has transformed the way we interact internally and also with the general public.

viii) The System has reduced operational costs especially manpower requirements, and stationery and this is expected to reduce further in the future when we stop advertising in print media.
System Challenges
The above benefits notwithstanding, the design, development and the implementation of the automated recruitment and selection system had its own challenges.

a. ICT Infrastructure: It is expensive to build an infrastructure and to maintain the equipment update.

b. There is the challenge of low connectivity in Africa. The communication bandwidth to Public Service Commission house was slow and access to the web site, the job portal and downloading application forms was a problem. The overall Network connectivity country wide has continued to pose a challenge especially in the rural areas.

c. Information security: The challenge is to keep information protected all the time from being accessed by unauthorized persons, system hackers, web spam and document viruses.

d. Technology challenge: There is inadequate technical and operational skills within the Public service and levels of computer literacy of users is very low.

e. Accessibility and availability of relevant technology.

f. Levels of ICT expertise and understanding of potential applications of e-HRM among specialists is low.

g. How to integrate HRIS into an organization wide IT system. PSCK is yet to connect the Recruitment and Selection Department to other Departments. (A research in UK showed that less than 16% HRIS were integrated by 2005 (CIPD).

h. There is limited technological culture amongst Africans. Today, there are only three and a half (3.5m) million internet users in Kenya with daily internet use having risen from 2% in 1970’s to only 5% in 2009.

i. Literature on IT implementation has shown that participation and involvement of future users of IT in the design and implementation stages affect their latter adoption of the technology. Yet, the HR professionals have not been sufficiently ambitious in the use of IT. Most information about e-HRM originated from ICT specialists leading to problems of comprehension amongst HR specialists.
j. HR has not been proactive in its use of internet technology to provide integrated services or to communicate more effectively with its customers to elicit and fulfill their changing expectations.

k. Resistance to change: There is general resistance and fear by both the members of staff and the applicants in embracing the new technology. This is compounded by the fact that Kenya, like elsewhere in Africa, has an ageing civil service.

Conclusions

HRM in Africa should be concerned with application of internet and web-based systems and increasing mobile technologies to change the nature of interactions among HR staff, line managers, and employees.

HR departments using ICT will be liberated from administrative shackles in order to focus more on developing intellectual capital, social capital, and in managing knowledge to improve organizations' competitive advantage (Lengnick-Hall & Morris, 2003).

HR needs to empower line managers to carry out devolved responsibilities. To do so, they need to take a proactive communications role within the organization to establish and nurture productive relationships (Yate, 1992) and to harness the proven effects of communication on satisfaction, performance, and profits. The HR managers should use new Technologies such as intranet as a support tool in improving communication with other managers. It will enable them work remotely, hot desk etc. to provide needed information wherever they may be.

ICT is a resource with the potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization; improve communication and the overall performance. It can be a vehicle with the potential to transforms the way Public sector organizations delivers services to citizens and Public service organizations can save their Governments a lot of resources by making use of ICT.
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