Best Practices In Human Resources Management. Lessons From The Zimbabwe Open University.

by

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to assess the extent to which the Zimbabwe Open University was complying with international best practices in human resources management. The study used documentary evidence such as the Zimbabwe Open University Strategic Plans 2005-2009 and 2010-2014, the ZOU Act chapter 25:20, the Labour Act of Zimbabwe chapter 28:1, and the International Labour Law such as Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111). All these Conventions provided rules and regulations that provided invaluable benchmarks concerning the rights and duties of workers, employers, unions and governments in regulating the workplace and settlement of industrial disputes. The Human Resources personnel and other ZOU employees from various departments were interviewed to provide information on ZOU practices in human resources management. The thrust of this research was to describe a prevailing phenomenon, thus a descriptive survey design was the most appropriate tool to use.

In this study, best practices in human resources management were analysed under the following concepts: job analysis and design, recruitment and selection, staff training and development, performance management, compensation management, employee relations, fairness and equity, employee diversity and management values.

The study revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University was a people oriented organisation where management was concerned about upgrading the welfare of staff and ensuring vibrant stakeholder co-ordination and networking. The research concluded that to a larger extent the University was compliant with International best practices in human resources management. However, the study recommended that the University should improve on the coordination of its performance appraisal system, concurrently carry out staff training programmes to boost staff skills in Open and Distance Learning, implement psychometric tests during interviews of candidates for senior positions and urgent steps must be taken by ZOU to have a registered employee code of conduct.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY
The Zimbabwe Open University was the only Open and Distance Learning State University in Zimbabwe. ZOU had 11 Regional Centres and a staff capacity of 851.

The envisioned future of ZOU to become a World Class Open and Distance Learning University required the implementation of best practices in human resources management to promote the recruitment, development and retention of ethically and highly competent staff. This notion is supported by Pfeffer (1992) who observed that the five best performing firms from 1972 to 1992 in the USA relied not only on technological advancement or financial stamina alone but to a larger extent on human resources management.

There was no known study that was carried out at ZOU to investigate on the institution’s best practices in human resources management. This study, therefore, sought to clearly assess human resources management practices at ZOU against the convention of best practices in human resources management. It was expected that the research findings would assist ZOU and other ODL institutions to improve their human resources management practices.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
There was no known study on best practices in human resources management in Higher Education and more specifically at the Zimbabwe Open University. This study, therefore, sought to assess human resources management practices at ZOU and evaluate the institution’s compliance with international best practices in human resources management.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which the Zimbabwe Open University was complying with International best practices in human resources management.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the extent to which the Zimbabwe Open University was complying with International best practices in human resources management.
- To investigate best practices in human resources management which could be applicable and recommended for the Zimbabwe Open University?

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The study sought to address the following questions:

- Was the Zimbabwe Open University complying with International best practices in human resources management?
- Which best practices in human resources management could be recommended for the Zimbabwe Open University.
Human resources management had become an important source of competitive advantage for many organisations. Research relating specifically to human resources management in ODL was limited. This research paper was therefore expected to compile the “Best Practices in People Management” into a framework that could be easily understood and utilized by management. This would enable ZOU and other ODL institutions to realize the full potential of their human capital. This also had direct implications of reducing legal risks and costs that might be incurred when handling industrial relations issues. Best practices in human resources management enhanced a quality workforce, which in turn led to improved organisational performance.

**REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

**DEFINITION OF ‘BEST PRACTICES’**

Richardson & Thompson (1999) define best practices in human resources management as, “a set of guidelines, strategies, activities or approaches that have been proven through research and evaluation to be effective and are used as a benchmark such that, when implemented, they improve an organization’s performance and efficiency”.

According to the Wikipedia dictionary a best practice is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive, or reward that is believed to be more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, etc. when applied to a particular condition or circumstance.

In this study best practices is hereby defined as the most efficient and effective way of accomplishing a given task, basing on repeatable procedures that have proven themselves to be authentic and productive over time for large numbers of people or organisations.

Rubin (2003) propounds that best practices in human resources management are best analysed within the context of job analysis and design, recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, compensation management and employee relations, fairness and equity, employee diversity and management values.

**Recruitment and job designing**

Recruitment is the process of defining a job and attracting applicants for a vacant post. Kaye (1995) states that Human Resources personnel should ensure that job design concentrates on clarity and on conveying a professional image of the organisation. Chapman (2009) insists that job advertisements should provide enough information to trigger interest of qualified and competent candidates to apply and dissuade those who are not qualified from applying. An advert should include the brand of the organisation, a detailed summary of duties and responsibilities that comprise the job, as well as the skills, experience and qualifications that are necessary. The International Labour Organisation, Convention No. 111, (1988) on Discrimination, Employment and Occupation calls for a national policy to eliminate discrimination in access to employment, training and working conditions, on grounds of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, or social origin. To enhance best practices in human resources management, organisations are required to uphold the International Labour Law which promotes gender equality on recruitment and fair treatment of employees.

**Evaluation of Recruitment Practices**

An organisation should take time to evaluate its recruitment practices once a position is filled. For example, calculating the average cost of hiring an employee, the number of days it takes on average to fill a position, which advertisement techniques produce the best applicants. This information can help organisations to improve their recruitment practices and save time and money on their future recruitment exercises.

**Socialization and orientation of new employees**

Bartel (2005) states that the goal of orientation is to introduce new employees to the organisation’s policies, philosophy, mission, strategic goals, objectives and organisational culture. Best practices in new hire orientation include participation from employees at every level in the organization. Human Resources Staff members should provide information about compensation and benefits, employee relations and workplace safety as an overview of employment practices and policies. Having top management visiting orientation sessions to greet new employees creates enthusiasm and a sense of belonging to the new staff. Wang, Britton and Ganser (2005) argue that effective orientation should be comprehensive, rigorous and seriously monitored because employees who have been effectively socialized into an organization are much less likely to instantly leave that organisation. If the orientation is boring and is all about paperwork, rules and regulations, the employee may have a deflated view of the organisation and leaves instantly.

**Workers Committee**

The International Labour Organisation Convention (No. 87), (1948) advocates for the Freedom of Association and Protection and the right to organise which grant employers and workers the right to form and join organisations of their own choice. Employees’ entitlement to membership of trade unions and workers committees should be a fundamental right for workers. According to the Labour Act of Zimbabwe Chapter 28:01 a, “Workers Committee is there to represent employees in any matter affecting their rights and interests and workers are entitled to negotiate with employers for a collective bargaining agreement relating to the terms and conditions of employment of employees concerned.”
Information management

The Human Resources Department is responsible for enforcing an "open book management system", which refers to the practice of sharing company information with employees. Employees feel motivated and develop enthusiasm only when top management opens up to them and discusses the company policies, contracts, organisational goals and objectives. This encourages participative management and helps in building trust and motivating the employees. Workers should be given the information that they need to make informed choices about their work within the organisation.

Compensation

Compensation is a basic function of human resources management which involves the remuneration received by employees in return for their contribution to the organization. The Zimbabwe Labour Act [Chapter28:01] clause on the Protection of employees’ right to fair labour standards states that, “no employer shall pay an employee a wage which is lower than the specified for such an employee by law or by agreement made under this Act”. Best practices in compensation require understanding the value of jobs and their worth in the labour market. Hipolito (2002) observed that attention to best practices in an organization’s compensation and benefits structure improves job satisfaction, morale and employee retention, all of which have a positive effect on boosting organisational effectiveness.

Jenkins and Poole (1999) state that remuneration at public organizations should be based on performance evaluations and job evaluations, but not solely on a hierarchy and seniority criteria. Yeganeh & Su (2008) observe that at Campinas State University of Brazil, besides the seniority factor, salary levels are based on performance evaluations, qualifications and competence. The International Labour Organisation's Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No.100) also calls for equal pay for men and women for work of equal value. The Core Conventions of the ILO stipulate that all workers must be treated equally, receiving equal remuneration for the same work done (Convention No. 100 of 1951). This was ratified by the government of Zimbabwe in 1980, through the Labour Relations Act that stipulates that there shall be no discrimination based on sex in employment.

Training and Development

Bateman & Snell (1998) state that staff training and development is a critical factor required in maintaining best practice in human resources management. Bateman & Snell (1998) submit that staff training and development refer to organizational activity aimed at bettering the performance of employees. In staff training and development practices, Campinas State University has a specific department for managing training called the Professional Training Agency. This department promotes educational qualification programmes and managerial development programmes that aim at preparing people to work in leadership positions, (Bateman & Snell, 1998).

360 Degree Performance Management Feedback System

Chapman (2009) maintains that best practices in human resources management incorporate an effective performance appraisal system. Chapman (2009) argues that the 360 degree feedback appraisal system is a powerful developmental method which involves the relaying of both positive and negative information regarding the employee’s goals, achievements and areas for improvement. The 360 degree feedback system respondents can be the appraisee’s peers, line managers, subordinate staff, team members, other staff, customers, suppliers or anyone who comes into contact with the appraisee. The Human Resource professional receives a well-rounded perspective of the employee’s performance from which to base the performance discussion. The appraisee can also assess himself / herself using the same feedback instrument or form. The feedback is typically provided on a form showing job skills, abilities, attitudinal, behavioural criteria and some sort of scoring or value judgement system.

Participation in decision making

Participation has been defined as “a process which allows employees to exert some influence over their work and the conditions under which they work” (Heller, et al. 1998, p.15), or alternatively “a process in which influence on decision making is shared between superiors and their subordinates” (Heller, Heller, Frank, Pusic, Eugen, Strauss, George and Wilpert Bernhard, 1998). Employees can participate in decision making in a consultative or direct employee involvement mechanism where individual workers’ input is asked for during departmental meetings. Another participation mechanism involves representative structures where workers are major parties to these decisions (Hyman & Mason 1995). In the U.K. and the U.S.A., unitarist philosophies have emphasised the prerogative of managers in the control of organisational change and this has increased their capacity to introduce more individualistic types of consultative mechanisms. Thus, the emphasis has been on direct communications with workers rather than representative committees in these countries (Poole & Mansfield 1993).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study sought to analyse the best practice in human resources management at ZOU against International best practice. The research used the interpretivist paradigm to effectively capture data from all the participants. This study employed the qualitative research methodology which used documentary evidence. The qualitative approach focuses on the process of social interaction and is
holistic in that it attempts to provide conceptual basis for understanding complex issues (Cohen and Manion 1994). Human Resources practices at the Zimbabwe Open University were analyzed basing on face to face interviews with twenty five percent (25%) of the core managers in Human Resources and top management and thirty two percent (32%) of lower level employees. The study used random sampling to come up with the sample of interviewees which included core managers and lower level employees who were interviewed. This sampling technique gave all managers and top management an equal opportunity of being selected.

An extensive review of the human resources literature in various organisations was used. This was complemented by an analysis of documentary information from University documents, the Labour Act of Zimbabwe [Chapter:02:01] and International Labour Convention Act 1948 No/87; 1951 No/100; 1958 No/111. This study used purposive sampling to select University documents to be used for analyzing the University’s human resources practices. The qualitative method was used to analyse data in this study. A qualitative analysis of documentary evidence, statements and comments made during interviews was made. Leedy (1997) argues that a descriptive survey is most effective in collecting data because it clearly captures values and perceptions of participants. This was an appropriate research methodology to describe the best practices in human resources management. Chisaka (2001) argues that this approach seeks insight rather than statistical analysis.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.

The respondents highlighted that the Zimbabwe Open University has a Human Resources Strategic Plan and the Human Resources manual which ensure the advancement of employee well being. The Zimbabwe Open University’s human resources management practices are there to guide the institution’s efforts to maintain best practices in recruitment, staff retention, employee motivation and engagement. The major components of the human resources management practices at ZOU are discussed below;

Recruitment and selection

The study indicated that ZOU has an effective and transparent recruitment and selection system. The ZOU Act Chapter 25:20 and the Human Resources procedure manual emphasize impartiality and fairness thus prohibiting nepotism and cronyism to preserve the dignity of the individual. The Human Resources Unit has a Selection Board which is set up according to the ZOU Act chapter 25:20. The selection board is further guided by the Administrative and Support Staff Appointment, Grading and Promotion Ordinance. Members of the Selection Board assess candidates using the appropriate Interview Score Sheet so as to determine the ranking of the interviewees. A combination of the quantitative score and the qualitative analysis enable the Selection Board to identify the most suitable candidate for the job. This vibrant recruitment system enables ZOU to attain its organisational vision of recruiting competent staff. However, the respondents highlighted that the University should not only rely on oral interviews, but use other techniques such as written interviews and psychometric tests to assess candidate’s skills, attitude, aptitude and knowledge.

Induction Training

This is the final stage in the recruitment process and the first stage in staff development. The study revealed that the ZOU induction training covers two main areas. According to the ZOU’s Training and Staff Development Policy, there is Corporate Induction which provides a general introduction to the organisation, policies, services and knowing other staff members. The second part of the induction process is “on the job training” which involves a dialogue between the employee and his/her line manager in order to identify training needs. The respondents indicated that ZOU’s induction process is effective as it inculcates in the employees more confidence in their work performance. In addition, during the induction, the respondents indicated that employees at ZOU get to know about the organisation’s employment philosophy, physical work environment, employees’ rights, employee’s responsibilities and organisational culture.

Fair and competitive compensation

The human resources policy document revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University compensation system is based on job descriptions and job evaluation systems meaning that an employee is paid basing on the worth of his / her job and not on the employee’s performance. Most respondents indicated that for the institution to have a fair and effective compensation system it should reward outstanding employee performance rather than only basing on the job description and job evaluation systems. The interviewed employees highlighted that they were attracted to work at ZOU by the competitive salaries and the ZOU allowance. The institution with assistance from the Government of Zimbabwe is paying its workers competitive salaries and is offering strong benefits such as the ZOU allowance. The research revealed that paying higher wages has enabled the University to attract better quality people who in turn increase organisational effectiveness and performance.

Staff development and training

Most respondents revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University is a learning institution which recognizes the importance of continuously upgrading and developing employees’ skills as a means to ensure that they execute their duties in a way that will contribute to the attainment of the University vision of
becoming a World Class Open and Distance Learning Institution. The Staff Training and Development Policy document revealed that the University commits itself to the training and staff development of its academic and non-academic staff and, therefore encourages all members of staff to pursue academic studies in order to obtain higher qualifications. Whilst ZOU encourages staff to continuously develop themselves, it, however, operates within tightly constrained resources and training opportunities have to be in relation to the member of staff’s line of work. The Zimbabwe Open University introduced the Exemption from Payment of Fees Scheme. This programme is applicable to employees wishing to embark on the Zimbabwe Open University programmes.

Performance appraisal

The human resources policy document revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University has a performance appraisal system where every member of staff is assessed by his/her immediate supervisor bi-annually. The respondents highlighted that sometimes the superior or the supervisor, may not assess his/her subordinates fairly. Instead of basing the evaluation of an employee’s actual behaviour, the manager might give feedback on the basis of personal likings and disliking. In addition performance appraisals do not recognise individual performance by way of rewards. A Unit / Departmental analysis is done to check for inconsistencies. If the overall rating is poor, measures are taken against the individual or even against individual staff members. This could include disciplinary action against some members. The performance gaps could be an indicator of the need for training. The Human Resources Unit, through its training section, recommends appropriate training courses or workshops to improve performance. The Training Officer comes up with a training calendar in a bid to address the inadequacies. In some cases, eligible staff members can be sent for training outside the institution where necessary.

Organisational culture

The interviewed employees revealed that the ZOU culture is strong in terms of people orientation, teamwork and organisational planning. The respondents indicated that the people-oriented leadership at ZOU often motivates employees, encourages integration and collaboration of employees which, therefore, improves job satisfaction levels. The institution’s strategic plan values the advancement of human welfare and human capital development. The University ensured the establishment of a stakeholder-friendly environment which values quality service delivery to students. ZOU’s culture also values fairness, supportiveness and incentivisation of employees. However, respondents revealed that the ZOU culture is weak in terms of innovation and risk taking. Respondents were of the opinion that, management should ensure that the institution promotes flexibility and quick adoption of new and improved ways to facilitate organizational change.

Employee relations

The respondents confirmed that the Zimbabwe Open University significantly provides a convenient and conducive work environment which promotes the social well being and oneness of its employees. Team orientation at ZOU provides employees with a sense of belonging and the notion of a “ZOU family”. The University has a vibrant Legal Services Unit whose role is to offer legal advice to the University. The Human Resources Department with assistance from the Legal Services Unit participates, in staff and student disciplinary hearings to ensure that the “Audi alteram patern principle” of natural justice is adhered to. This rule states that a decision cannot stand unless the person directly affected by it was given a fair opportunity both to state his/her case and to know and answer the other side’s case. The Zimbabwe Open University observes the Public Service Occupational Health and Safety Policy to provide a safe working environment to its employees.

Disciplinary procedure

Disciplinary matters at ZOU are dealt with in accordance with the provisions of the Labour Act chapter 28:01 and the Statutory Instrument 15 of 2006. The Staff Disciplinary Committee affords everyone the chance to be heard. The offender is afforded the opportunity to be heard, call witnesses and cross-examine witnesses from the employer. If employees are aggrieved by the decision of the Staff Disciplinary Committee, they may appeal to the Zimbabwe Open University Appeals Committee. The Appeals Committee would decide on the case using the record of proceedings or may call for a hearing to clarify certain issues if there is need. Any aggrieved employee may appeal to the Ministry of Labour as provided for in the Labour Act (Chapter 28:01). The respondents revealed that, one major weakness of the ZOU disciplinary procedure is that there is no code of conduct agreed by workers and management at the moment.

Participation in decision making

The participants highlighted that ZOU has clearly defined structures that promote participation of employees in key decision making bodies. This is evidenced by employees’ involvement in key decision making bodies such as the Academic and Non Academic Staff Associations, Senate Committees, Council Committees, Disciplinary Committees, National Salary Negotiation Forum and through research papers, white papers and other advisory documents. The study revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University has got a Workers Committee which presents employees’ grievances to Senior Management. Employee participation at ZOU is most prevalent in union settings where there is a generally
cooperative environment between labour and management. However, most employees interviewed indicated that they were not aware of the committees which represent staff members in various platforms.

Employee diversity
The interviewed employees highlighted that employee diversity is highly valued at ZOU as the institution focuses on developing an organisational culture that values the contributions of a heterogeneous workforce with different cultures and religion. This is supported by Hernandez (2007) who states that employment diversity is a commitment to the recognition and appreciation of unique beliefs, values, skills, attributes, and characteristics of all employees. The respondents confirmed that, employee morale and employee retention at ZOU was positively influenced by having a workplace that accommodated different religious view points. The research participants indicated that the Zimbabwe Open University “family concept” had proved beyond doubt that recognizing and appreciating diverse perspectives in the workplace resulted in more flexibility, more productivity, more creative problem-solving, better decision-making, and an enhanced ability to meet the needs of a multi-faceted employee, student, and stakeholder population. However, the human resources personnel revealed that the University has eight hundred and twentyfour (824) employees where 822 employees are blacks, 1 employee is white and 1 employee is Indian. This evidence indicates that there is need for ZOU to improve on ensuring a diversified recruitment system which emphasizes on recruitment of other racial groups.

Equal Employment Opportunity
The respondents confirmed that there is equal employment opportunity at ZOU. The Human Resources Unit enforces impartiality, fairness and equity throughout the University. The study revealed that, Section 6.1 of the ZOU Act emphasizes on prohibiting discrimination in employment practices on the basis of nationality, race, religion, gender, physical ability and age. The Human Resources Strategic Plan document revealed that the University has taken a major step towards accomplishing gender equality on employment opportunities as statistical data confirm that there are 46% female employees as compared to 54% males. The Zimbabwe Open University ensures that men and women who perform equal work have the right to receive equal pay. The institution should ensure that there is a balanced gender representation of male vs. female employees as well.

Management values and ethics
The research participants revealed that the values and ethical conduct of senior management has proved to be very influential to employee ethical behaviour and engagement. The top leadership at ZOU has managed to create a work environment in which employees feel important and appreciated. In addition to providing a shared vision and direction, ZOU leadership has developed a symbiotic relationship with employees. The ZOU leadership has become role models, as most staff members are inspired to pursue higher academic qualifications.

The Zimbabwe Open University to a larger extent is complying with international best practices in people management. However, the University should improve in certain human resources functions as indicated in the conclusion to match international standards.

CONCLUSION
The Zimbabwe Open University has an effective human resources department which is compliant to international best practices in recruitment and selection. This is evidenced by the institution’s value of non-discrimination against gender, sex, race or religious background on employment related opportunities. The ZOU has a vibrant Workers Committee which promotes an open communication network between ZOU and its employees. It would seem that if the University’s human resources improve on the coordination of its performance evaluation system the institution would realize the full potential of performance appraisals in improving organisational performance. It is also hoped that when the institution has a registered employment code of conduct it would avoid unnecessary legal expenses in handling employees’ disciplinary cases. If the University implements the suggested recommendations, this may enhance the institution’s compliance with international best practices in people management.

RECOMMENDATIONS
On the basis of the above findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

• The institution should introduce performance evaluation training sessions. If performance appraisals are not conducted properly, they can give a false impression about the performance of the employees thereby affecting the overall performance of ZOU. Therefore, there is need to train the appraisers to ensure maximum effectiveness of the process.

• The Human Resources Unit should adopt other modern appraisal systems such as the 360 degree feedback system also known as the, “multi-rater feedback system” and this can be done on a yearly basis. It is one of the most comprehensive appraisal systems where feedback about the employees’ performance comes from all the sources that come in contact with the employee on his/her job and a self-evaluation of the employee.

• The University should not only rely on the traditional performance evaluation method which
involves only the manager’s evaluation of the employee’s performance which is prone to bias at times.

• The University should have a registered code of conduct. The aim of the code of conduct is to develop a common perspective towards a vision of ethical behaviour within the institution. Without a registered code of conduct, ZOU might incur unnecessary legal costs in handling employees’ disciplinary cases because the rules and regulations of the organization will not be legally authentic.

• The University should not only rely on oral interviews, but should also use other techniques such as written interviews and psychometric tests to assess candidate’s skills, attitude, aptitude and knowledge.

• This study should be complemented with future research so that the University is kept abreast of the latest best practices in people management.

REFERENCES


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