

Human Resource Management Practices Amid COVID-19 Crisis: A Case of Botswana Public Service

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Abstract: This paper seeks to study the challenges of public sector human resource management during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resultant opportunities as well as the implications these have on the directions of the organisations post pandemic. A desk top research was used, and data collection was carried out in different sources exploring the impact of the COVID-19 on human resource management. Organizations had to adapt very fast to disruptions caused by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in both the internal and external environment of organisations. That resulted in uncertainties amongst the workforce and posed immediate threats to organizations' performances and productivity while at the same time disrupting strategies, employee relations, staffing occupational health, training and career development, compensation management. However, organizations had to navigate through the unprecedented times and thereby find new solutions to challenges across the stated areas of the operations. This paper will unravel how most of the solutions became trends of the COVID-19 era for and glimpse how these HR trends will continue to drive transformation and which new trends are emerging to shape the future of work.

Keywords: Human Resource management practices, Pandemic, Public Service, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The global impact of COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overstated, it has severely affected economies, societies, employees, and organizations. At the height of the COVID-19 surge the government of Botswana just like most governments globally imposed some measures to try employed lockdown measures to try to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the population: travel restrictions, curfews and lockdowns were imposed; people were quarantined; schools, universities, nonessential businesses, government departments and non-governmental organisations were closed; there were restrictions in public gatherings and social events. With the measures deployed to mitigate against the effects of the pandemic becoming the new normal, the perceptions of how work is performed in the public service begun to change. The public sector began employing unconventional tactics like working from home and exploring technology to execute its mandates. Murphy, Markey, O' Donnell, Moloney and Doody (2021) postulate that some of the measures had serious consequences on the mental health of individuals, as a result there had been a movement towards incorporating physical, mental, and social health of the employee in the organisational culture.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled government to tackle multitudes of issues, like safeguarding public health and safety and easing adverse economic effects, as a result the public sector must steer through disruptions in established norms to do so (Sowa, 2020, as cited in Kim, Yang & Cho, 2021). Government employees generally are being asked to work in new ways and new contexts (OECD, 2021). The government's COVID-19 responses rely heavily on the competence and efforts of the public sector. As a result, astute human resource management (HRM) is indispensable for public servants to sustain the heightened work demands (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020, as cited in Kim, Yang & Cho, 2021). Kim, Yang & Cho (2021) further highlight that government Ministries and Departments have been hard-pressed to learn how to use new technology and tools on the job, often alongside old procedures and processes in other words public sector has become an accidental agile organization, with novel procedures and rules regulating working from home, fast-tracked hiring processes, and human resource management programs developed as need arises. The core of this paper will thus explore literature on implications, challenges, opportunities brought about by the advent of COVID-19 as well as draw future directions with regard to human

resource management in the public service in Botswana.

2. Background

Botswana is a Southern African country positioned between South Africa, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, well known for its tourism and natural beauty with a population of just over 2.3 million people (Bordering Africa's epicenter, 2021). Prior to the current COVID-19 the country was on its knees fighting another pandemic, the BBC reports that the country once had the world's highest rate of HIV-Aids infection. UN figures for 2004 suggest that for adults aged 15 to 49 the prevalence rate was 37.5% (Botswana country profile, 2021). Botswana devotes around BWP4660 per capita on health which allows universal access to health services devoid of substantial financial adversities bulk of the population. This has contributed to the country's reaction towards the COVID-19 pandemic, notwithstanding several challenges that persist (Bordering Africa's epicenter, 2021).

Botswana's response to COVID-19 is driven by the Public Health Act together with the Emergency Powers Act 2020. The Emergency Powers Act 2020 was decreed specifically to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, through establishment of the essential emergency legal framework for an extensive response (Bordering Africa's epicenter, 2021). In Botswana just like in other countries public servants have undertaken huge responsibilities in the response to the pandemic. Healthcare workers keep medical systems operational and families out of harm's way. Civil Servants are finding novel ways to design and channel unprecedented economic stimulus spending and manage human resources during these trying times (OECD, 2021).

The public sector plans, design and oversees the country's national development, in Botswana it is made up of the local authorities (councils), parastatal organizations and all ministries and independent departments of the central government ("Public-Sector HR: Resources & Learning", 2021). Public Sector management encompasses features of management such as productivity management, human resources management (HRM), and management of financial resources and other resources (NDP9, 2021). The Directorate of Public Service Management is mandated to formulate, guide, monitor and evaluate implementation of

human resource policies (Directorate of Public Service Management, 2021).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Human Resource Management in the Public Sector: The COVID-19 Implications and Challenges

Human resources management (HRM) aids organizations in attainment of competitive advantage by eliciting the most value out employee performance and productivity (Rakowska, 2014, as cited in Kumar & Kapoor, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the human resource management function of the public sector immensely by creating considerable challenges for human resource management practitioners as well as public sector management. In this chapter these challenges will be spelled out and investigated, with regards to strategic human resource management, working conditions, as well as the following human resource management functions:

- Staffing.
- Performance management.
- Training and development.
- Compensation management.
- Safety and health management.
- Employees' relations.

3.1.1 Strategic Human Resource Management During COVID-19

Strategic human resource management is an extensive organization of management activities and tasks linked to the development and sustenance of a competent workforce (Fottler, Hernandez & Joiner, 1994). According to Gifford (2021), it focuses on long term capacitating issues within the context of application of human resource to fulfil the strategic requirements of the organization.

About COVID-19, Liu *et al.* (2020, as cited in Hamouche, 2021) state that an organization need to attain strategic agility for it to guarantee accomplishment of organizational goals during periods of crisis. Hamouche (2021) further postulate that since it is imperative for organizations to attain capacity in organizing and apportioning resources with a view of coordinating the required system as well as being prudent with available resources and knowledge, the uniqueness and intricacies of COVID-19 present challenges that are likely to impede attainment of organizational goals.

Harney and Collings, as cited in Collings, McMackin, Nyberg & Wright (2021) highlight that strategic HRM research has been disparaged for its lack of capacity and failure to embrace novel and modern-day human resource issues. As a result, it is extremely difficult to make forecasts related to organizational undertakings during times of uncertainties (Hamouche, 2021). In fact, the pandemic has occasioned a host of contradictory priorities for organizational leaders with unparalleled intensities of uncertainty and conflict (Collings, Nyberg, Wright & McMackin, 2021). At the present moment, nobody can tell when the virus will end, and or whether effects on work arrangements will be short-term or long-term (Hamouche, 2021). Therefore, Elsafty & Ragheb (2020) add that this uncertainty increases employee stress and reduce motivation especially when workers can't get any information about the organization's management plan or their proposed responses with regards to the pandemic. However, Wong *et al.* (2020), as cited in Hamouche (2021), affirm that a strong communication strategy during the pandemic will put employees at ease and build strong relationships between employees and management towards the benefit of the organization. In a nutshell the response of the human resource management function towards the crisis and its part in planning the route of dealing with the crisis will bring about a more balanced, sustainable outcome for organization.

3.1.2 Working Conditions

According to Ali, Ali & Adan (2013), as cited in Ajala & Adediran (2021), the business dictionary defines working conditions as the work atmosphere and any other setting that has an influence in the workplace that is, hours' work, physical aspects, legal right and obligation, organizational culture amount of work and training. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered what must be the greatest disruptions in the workplace in decades, imposing unprecedented uncertainty in governments, societies, organizations, and workers. Totah (2021) accentuates that there has been a move away from the customary work model towards a more agile and employee centric, highlighted by approval of teleworking/remote working. While traditionally workers had to seek authorization to work from home, these days the default position is that all workers who can work from home ought to work from home (OECD, 2021). For example, a 2020 survey by the Korea Institute of Public Administration, shows that a large portion of civil servants were engaged in remote-working

(59.9%), video-conferencing (46.7%), and mobile VPN sign-off systems (8.9%) (Kim *et al.*, 2021). Where workers cannot work remotely some they are often required to observe physical distancing measures that interfere with social interactions and set fixed outlines and distance that influence employee behaviours within the organization, unfortunately this can have dire impact on employee mental health (Hamouche, 2021).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) warns that working from home can result in long working hours, as studies have shown that most teleworkers report longer working hours than office-based workers (International Labour Organization, 2021). Furthermore, according to Hamouche (2021) human resource practitioners have to contend with a challenge as a result of remote like ascertaining that is effective communication, supervision, support and performance management as well as ensuring that employees have tools that will enable them to remotely perform their job. Furthermore, Collings *et al.* (2021) specify that HR practitioners have to deal with fractures between employee groups who can work from home alongside those who have work in the office.

4. Staffing

Staffing refers to the process of locating, screening, and selection, hiring and retaining manpower within an organization, other roles which may fall under staffing are orientation, training, retention, and termination (Mighty Recruiter, 2021). The results of COVID-19 on staffing vary by industries and from organization to the other. According to Hamouche (2021) a lot of people have lost their jobs or remained unemployed as organizations faced with financial problems because of the pandemic opted for letting go of workers, down skilled by requiring less work experience and education and or cutting back all their recruitment. Staffing issues have deepened at the height of the pandemic due to government mandated restrictions (Chandler Macleod Group, 2021). The Sunday Reporter (2020) states that at the height of the pandemic, the government of Botswana, through a Cabinet directive, froze all new employment inside the public service.

Employee retention is another issue that can be a hot bed for HRM practitioners. There is evidence to suggest that due to fractures between employees and employers during the pandemic related lockdowns

and movement restrictions employees are looking to search for new employers as that phase passes and the economy is opened (Hamouche, 2021). According to Pimentel (2021) since some employers showed acute mistrust towards some employees' capacity to work without constant supervision, some employees are opting to job hunt over going back to where he has been mistrusted. In addition to that others were content working remotely as they were able to successfully pursue side businesses and they want to lose that opportunity by going back to the office. Mayer & Bravery (2021) advise employers to retain and attract top talent by being progressive and pursuing employee development as well as provide appropriate incentive systems in order to attain competitive advantage they have. Drawing from Przytuła (2020), Hamouche (2021) underscores the significance of heightening employee engagement and cultivate a sense of psychological ownership amongst the workforce during this period and beyond, to guarantee organizational success, and avert incurring recruitment costs.

5. Performance Management

Performance management is the continuous performance improvement process by which individual and team goals are aligned to the organization's strategic goals (Armstrong, 2009). Performance management take centre stage in organization and employee relationships because it's the basis of organizational survival because it is founded on organizational goals (Sembiring *et al.*, 2020). As stated, before one of the most significant changes that the impact of COVID-19 has had is remote working, unfortunately since organizations especially the public service uses systems and metrics that may be unsuitable for performance management as far as full-time teleworking is concerned (How COVID-19 Has Changed Performance Management, 2021). Wigert & Barrett (2021) postulate that traditional performance metrics may be misrepresentative and or even impracticable in a period where employees had to contend with numerous trials inside and outside of the workplace. Employees had to up-skill in virtual communications, novel work procedures and engagement channels 'on-the-go', as well as at finding the right balance for home and work life instantaneously which might also impinge on efficiency (How COVID-19 Has Changed Performance Management, 2021). The new standards of performance may need to be more collaborative, adaptive, and tailored according to circumstances on the ground (Wigert & Barrett, 2021).

6. Training and Career Development

Career development is a continuous process of skills development, defining new goals and job transitions (Medicine Hat College, 2021). During this pandemic, it is apparent that a lot of employers have ignored career development (Nagem, 2021). Falcone (2021) asserts that though to an extent it might be understandable that training and career development may have been sacrificed over emergency challenges at the height of the pandemic however, since there is no end in sight about the COVID-19 crisis, restocking career and professional development is critical. Training and career development is especially essential than ever before during the pandemic (Nagem, 2021). Organizations have to re-skill and up-skill their employees so as they are competent to deal to the current transformative employment alterations across the globe (Przytuła *et al.*, 2020, as cited in Hamouche, 2021).

7. Compensation Management

Compensation management is associated with the preparation and application of strategies and programs geared towards consistent fair and equitable compensation of employees (Armstrong & Brown, 1998). Scroggins, Thomas & Morris (2009) assert that strategic compensation infers support to business strategy and sensitivity to predictable environmental demands. Unfortunately, the unpredictability of the COVID-19 environment has upended compensation management much like other traditional HR structures (Starner, 2020). According to Hamouche (2021) after imposed travel restrictions and lockdowns some countries provided financial relief to support workers and organizations. The government of Botswana established the COVID-19 relief fund, which had provision for the wage subsidy for use by the private sector (Selatlhwa, 2020). The public sector was spared problems associated with compensation for the best part, and according to International Labour Organization (2021) the public sector employment has been a safe place during COVID-19 jobs crisis.

8. Safety and Health Management

Hamouche (2021) affirms that employee wellbeing in the workplace is the responsibility of the employer, since employers are duty bound to guarantee that the place of work doesn't pose a health hazard, either mentally or physically. Hecker (2020)

underscores that the COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a workplace crisis. Human resource management (HRM) is thus principally placed to deal with the effect COVID-19 has on the workforce as well as to guarantee and prioritize their health and safety (Sulaiman, Ahmed & Shabbir, 2020). The World Health Organization has distributed guidelines for employee health and safety during the pandemic (WHO, 2020, as cited in Hamouche, 2021). HRM practitioners can leverage on these guidelines to maintain employee safety and health.

The alterations in social and working settings *viz* teleworking static physical distancing, and dynamic physical distancing (Hamouche, 2021) consequent to the pandemic do not only affect physical health but mental health as well (Giorgi *et al.*, 2020). Hamouche (2021) asserts that even employees who do not work remotely might develop mental issues because of the general fear of contracting the virus at work and spreading to family members. Giorgi *et al.* (2020) advise employers to be proactive and monitor mental health symptoms at an early stage and try to cater for diverse needs of different groups of workers.

9. Employment Relationship

Employee relations' (ER) explains the connections between organization and its workers by highlighting individual and collective relationships in the workplace with much prominence placed on the relationship between managers and their team members (Verlinden, n.d.). The pandemic has had a profound impact on the traditional relationship between the employee and employer in fact lockdowns and restrictions placed on trading affected the execution of contractual obligations by either party (Hamouche, 2021). According to Staniec (2021), during the advent of pandemic, organizations were in either of the two positions:

- The employer and employees had previous experience of teleworking and as a result the employer had the tools and administrative systems in place for remote working.
- The employer and employees were novices in remote working as a result the employer had to place an unparalleled amount of faith in staff and appreciate that this adjustment had to be tolerated and competently managed. Both sides had to adapt to the new conditions,

and clearly define the parameters of remote work and methods of reporting and monitoring 'on-the-go'.

Hamouche (2021) stresses that countries had to amend laws promptly in order to deal with the COVID-19 disruption period. For instance, in Botswana the Emergency Powers Act 2020 was used to prohibit organizations from initiating a collective layoff procedure during the state of public emergency (SOPE) (Bordering Africa's epicenter, 2021). Not knowing when the pandemic will end made it difficult for deciding on definitive period for protection of employees, which complicated the relationship between employer and worker (Biasi, 2020). The development of COVID-19 vaccines also presented another burning regarding employee relations governments making COVID-19 shots mandatory for some workers in the public sector especially health workers (Mahlaka, 2021). This however provokes issues concerning the legality of the employer to enforce the COVID-19 job on their employees (Rothstein, Parmet & Reiss, 2021). According to Rothstein *et al.* (2021), the implementation of severe and strong-armed tactics could achieve negative results as individuals could rebel against such measures (Osborne, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) also warned against imposition of Mandatory COVID-19 vaccination specifying that it should be thought of as a last resort and when all practicable routes to advance vaccination acceptance have failed. The (WHO) further highlighted that usefulness of directives are very context-specific and as a result public confidence and faith in authorities have to be taken into consideration.

9.1 Opportunities, Future Organizational Directions, and Insights into HRM Interventions

Dayal, Thakur & Asamoah-Appiah (2021) assert that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a host of complications globally, and the field of HRM was not spared the misery either, however, Dayal *et al.* (2021) highlight that where is problem there is an opportunity masquerading as a solution. This section seeks to illuminate these opportunities and their connections to the prospective future trends in HRM. Human resources management practitioners had to contend with unprecedented challenges since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic than at any other point in the past *viz* global health crisis, downsizings, psychological wellness crises, societal discontent and an economic downturn are just a

few of the key issues keeping HR professionals up at night (Friedman, 2021). According to Hamouche (2021), the pandemic has forced organizations to reconsider their HRM strategies and to go outside the realms of classic human resources management models, by fast-tracking the adoption of disruptive technologies as a means of survival and guarantying organizational efficiency. Using digital technology and virtual work meant organizations gradually relied more on tools to measure personnel involved, efficient and effectiveness (Dayal *et al.*, 2021), and in so doing had to turn to data discernments for direction, and this underscores the importance Data holds in the future of HR (Totah, 2021). The use of information technology-based systems such as applicant tracking software as well as cloud-computing underpin the importance of data in assisting HR practitioners in recruitment and workflow streamlining (Amery, 2021).

Hamouche (2021) highlights that albeit at a lesser intensity than at the height of the pandemic, teleworking and virtual meetings are here to stay. Furthermore, Amery (2021) advances that HR professionals must be conscious of the fact that the upcoming workforce favour a work-life balance with flexible schedules and teleworking. Despite its challenges, telecommuting gives workers flexibility in work hours and provokes a feeling of job control (Hamouche, 2021). Amery (2021) further posits that workers opt out of the traditional work schedule in favour jobs that allows them to pursue their side hustles. As a result, HR practitioners and managers must consider innovative ways to be efficient and agile as per the current trends. As organizations scrambled to react to a crisis that was beyond their control, it should come as no surprise telecommuting, physical distancing and other measures adopted might have contributed to employees' mental health problems (Amery, 2021). Dayal *et al.* (2021) highlight that it is imperative that employers put in place appropriate organizational actions to support employees, to ease their acclimatization to workplace disruptions and to safeguard their mental health.

10. Results and Discussion

The main problem the study has unearthed is that most of the literature on the research problem is based on the private sector. Furthermore, where there is some literature relating to the public sector human resource it is remotely connected to the

research question. However, since to a larger extent there is a common goal of public and private-sector HR management, the research study has found that during the pandemic remote working and the use of technology was a necessity as physical distancing protocols were unavoidable. However, in some cases it gave rise to mental health issue, because of the absence of societal connections or work vs family time clashes resultant from working from home. Furthermore COVID-19 protocols highlighted the importance of occupational health and safety in the workplace.

Because of the limited research specifically directed towards human resource management COVID-19 implications, challenges, opportunities, and future organizational directions in the public sector, the findings are based to a greater extent on data about the private sector human resource management. Despite the common goals of public sector and private sector human resource management, it has been evident that some of the experiences during this pandemic were not the same. For instance, where the private sector laid-off employees or couldn't pay salaries because of lack of economic activity over extended periods, public sector organizations did not experience any of that because they are tax funded. Besides this, the other measures like telecommuting and physical distancing were common in the two sectors. However, where there is likelihood that the private sector will continue working like that the bureaucratic nature doesn't give confidence that the public servants will continue with remote working when unless there is another disaster.

11. Conclusion and Recommendations

During the height of COVID-19 the public sector in Botswana explored the same avenues as the private sector to deal with the challenges. Working from home and the use of technology protected workers from the risk of infection, while they keep on working for the organization. However, that gave rise to mental health problems as individuals adjusted to spending extended periods of time at home while lacking societal connections. On a positive note, this challenge brought mental health and the attention it deserves. Since there is no end in sight of COVID-19 virus there must be further investment in areas of virtual work, and mental health, literature prove that skills in remote working attained by employees and organizations during the pandemic will be used in the future. However, because the study is based

on exploring available literature, and since there is shortage of literature on the specific topic a resolute inference regarding public sector human resource cannot be made with confidence. The study therefore recommends the following:

- The public sector must do more to assimilate employee health to work designs rather than trying to address health with occasionally wellness program (that includes physical, mental, financial, and social health).
- The increasing prominence in the use of technology to hold meetings means that virtual work is here to stay, as a result the public service must invest more on technology.
- The public sector must leverage on the prominence of usage of technology to do online training and career development
- There must be more exploratory research regarding the public sector.

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