

Perspectives of human resource practitioners in two urban local authorities in Zimbabwe



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Orientation: This study examines the experiences of human resource (HR) practitioners in two urban local authorities (ULAs) in Zimbabwe.

Research purpose: The research aimed to understand the human resource management (HRM)-oriented strategies and the extent to which HR practitioners' experiences could enable effective implementation.

Motivation for the study: There is a need to understand the challenges HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe face in delivering effective HRM.

Research approach/design and method: The study adopted a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews with 17 purposively selected HR practitioners. Thematic analysis was used to extract themes from the interviews.

Main findings: The findings revealed five themes of HRM challenges in Zimbabwean ULAs, including political interference, resource constraints, bureaucracy and the impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Human resource management delivery is hindered by stakeholder involvement, performance management gaps, technology gaps and limited interaction with line management. Additionally, traditional HRM approaches committee-focused procedures, and inadequate investment in employee education limit HRM capabilities and procedures.

Practical/managerial implications: The study suggests that policymakers and HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe should pay attention to the identified HRM challenges and proposed solutions to enhance HRM delivery and HR performance. The proposed conceptual model can serve as a guide to overcoming HRM challenges.

Contribution/value-add: This study adds to the limited research on public sector HRM in Africa, and stakeholders and HR practitioners can benefit from the conceptual model and recommendations for streamlining HRM procedures in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: urban local authority; human resource management; HR practitioners; lived experience; public sector; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Policymakers and stakeholders have embarked on varying human resource management (HRM)-oriented strategies, such as performance-based bonus, to improve employee performance and public sector services (Bradley, 2019; Poperwi, 2018). Subsequently, to achieve organisational objectives and to enhance performance in urban local authorities (ULAs) in Zimbabwe, researchers have recommended linking HRM objectives and organisational objectives (Muchadenyika, 2014; Poperwi, 2018).

The government of Zimbabwe introduced the Integrated Results-Based Management (IRBM) programme (Zvavahera, 2014) in 2005 to improve the performance and service delivery of human resources (HRs) in the public sector (Chikwariro, Bussin & De Braine, 2021). Nevertheless, subsequent improvement in the performance of HRs was slow, with the major reason suggested as being the lack of alignment between organisational and HRM objectives (Ngwenyama, 2014; Sixpence, 2021). Other findings showed that employee performance had no link to salaries and benefits, which lowered job satisfaction and institutional performance (Ngwenyama, 2014; Sixpence, 2021). Also, Poperwi's (2018) study expressed concern that implementing the IRBM system was counterproductive because it concentrated on HRM at the expense of broader service delivery issues. However, there is no documentation of the

knowledge of HR practitioners on the existing gaps between employee performance and their salaries and benefits. In addition, the lived experiences and the opinions of HR practitioners on their role, if any, in the implementation of the IRBM system were not discussed (Ngwenyama, 2014; Poperwi, 2018). Such experiences may affect their understanding of the barriers they face in fulfilling their roles and how they solve them.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of HR practitioners in fulfilling their roles in ULAs in Zimbabwe, focusing on confronting the challenges that prevent them from fulfilling their roles. Attempts to enhance ULA performance and their achievement of objectives through people-oriented strategies have proven futile (Ngwenyama, 2014; Poperwi, 2018). However, the perspectives of HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe on what they think are the hindrances to fulfilling their roles were undetermined despite the implication of HRM as a crucial factor in improving ULAs' performance and their achievement of objectives. The broad objective of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe, with a focus on the hindrances that prevent them from fulfilling their roles. This includes exploring their perspectives on their roles and identifying the specific challenges they face in carrying out their duties. Ultimately, the objective is to generate practical suggestions for overcoming these hindrances and improving the effectiveness of HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

Literature review

Across organisations in the corporate and public sectors alike, HRs are considered the backbone, contributing to the organisation's competitive advantage (Leisink et al., 2021). To usher more clarity on HRM and the HRM-public sector relationship, this section will discuss local authorities, HRM theory, role of HR practitioners, HRM delivery and HRM challenges.

Local authorities

As important institutions in a country's local government system, local authorities are characterised by their mandate to provide various obligatory services that affect the quality of life of people living in their area of jurisdiction (Galang & Osman, 2016; Sixpence, 2021). Cloete (2016) maintained that an effective local authority promotes various socio-economic development efforts towards sustainable community development.

Human resource management in effective local authorities

Effective local authorities have a high-performance team culture and actively encourage employees to contribute to

this culture (Garavan et al., 2019; Nyauchi & Jagero, 2014). These work teams obtain a better understanding of departmental goals owing to their involvement in the planning processes (Nyauchi & Jagero, 2014). Also, successful local authorities adopt a progressive relationship between their HRM and trade unions. In their role as agents, trade unions may increase the effectiveness of HRM on employee well-being and performance through the enforcement and monitoring of employment contracts (Meardi et al., 2021). Besides these HRM instruments (teamworking and positive HRM-trade union relationship), there is a need for clarity regarding HRM theory and the roles of HRM in the public sector.

Role of human resource practitioners in the public sector

Training and development

A vital role of HR departments in public institutions is to provide employee training and development opportunities (Knies et al., 2022). For practical training and development to occur in local authorities, HR practitioners must initially identify operational needs based on their current resources and staff (Nyauchi & Jagero, 2014). In this changing digital world, progressive city councils implement media-based training programmes that ensure stakeholder satisfaction (Bradley, 2019).

Strategic partnership

In their role as strategic partners, HR practitioners should proactively recruit talented individuals who add value to the local authority's short-, medium- and long-term activities (Popperwi, 2018). To strengthen recruitment practices, Thistlethwaite et al. (2019) suggested formulating a workforce plan that integrates specific activities. These activities involve talent inventories to analyse the available skills, action plans to increase qualified employees, thorough selection and onboarding programmes, workforce forecasting to enable the prediction of future personnel needs and control and evaluation to monitor the achievement of goals and provide feedback (Thistlethwaite et al., 2019).

While there are several other roles played by HR, this section discusses some primary roles of concern to this study. Nevertheless, there may be differences between the design and the practice of HRM. Thus, the next section will bridge the gap by discussing the delivery of HRM in various organisations.

Human resource management delivery

Human resource information system

Human resource information system (HRIS) refers to an information system utilised to record, analyse and manage HR-related data (Andry & Chakir, 2020). Global organisations have increased interest in HRIS driven by external trends, such as slow financial growth and the emergence of sophisticated competition that employs advanced technologies (Bilgic, 2020; Bradley, 2019).

Comprehensive implementation of HRIS integrates HR knowledge and technological skills for the enhancement of personnel services, ultimately enabling HR practitioners to become complete business partners (Bradley, 2019). Accordingly, informative models such as the one proposed by Dhanpat et al. (2020) may assist HR practitioners to focus on technology-related competencies and better navigate their role in Industry 4.0.

Strategic management

Strategic management involves setting organisational objectives, analysing the internal organisation, analysing the external environment and evaluating the current strategy (Hejase et al., 2016). As a means of HRM delivery, strategic management effectively enables HR practitioners to encourage management support and promote planned personnel activities (Poperwi, 2018). More specifically, to benefit strategic management, the HRM department in public institutions should assist heads of policy in their oversight role (Brunetto & Beattie, 2020).

Performance management

Performance management (PM) is the integration of employee contribution with the organisations' strategic goals. In a well-managed institution, a performance management system (PMS) is designed to hold management accountable for implementing the organisation's values (Meyer, 2017). It follows that the government of Zimbabwe's implementation of the IRBM system (Sixpence, 2021) intended to produce accountability for performance outcomes and to realise exceptional service in Zimbabwe's local authorities. However, the status of the implementation of the PMS in relation to HRM and HR practitioners is unknown.

It is important to note that some HRM strategies are challenging to implement in large, complex institutions such as the government as organisational stakeholders may want different processes and be pulling in different directions (Maatman & Meijerink, 2017).

Human resource management challenges

Government regulations

Often, government regulations restrict the ability of an organisation to exercise autonomous HRM (Ahmed & Dantata, 2016). For instance, government legislation can, at any time, affect an organisation's labour force policy through the gazetting of minimum compensation and stipulation of working hours (Galang & Osman, 2016). Such regulations significantly impact an organisation's productivity, the cost of labour and employee satisfaction. Therefore, organisations are expected to align their HR policies with organisational objectives while promoting social justice and employment equity (Knies et al., 2022).

Lack of top management support

Numerous executives in large institutions regard the HR function solely as a support function without strategic

importance, which can be overlooked when formulating the firm's strategy (Gasela, 2021). Subsequently, HR practitioners tend to 'administer' HR rather than strategically manage it, focusing exclusively on transactional activities and neglecting transformational activities (Yusliza et al., 2019). Furthermore, HRM departments struggle to make colleagues and top management acknowledge the value of HR operations (Rogozinska-Pawelczyk & Gadowska-Lila, 2022). Thus, to earn executive support, HR practitioners can highlight the reduced costs and low turnaround time achieved through the implementation of HRIS in payroll operations (Bradley, 2019).

Human resource management challenges in the public sector

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy refers to a complicated operational procedure characterised by multi-layered systems, strict chains of command and predefined channels for decision-making (Malay & Fairholm, 2020). Owing to this operational procedure, HR and line managers experience numerous rules and do not have discretionary powers (McDonnell, 2017). The lack of such discretionary powers limits the scope of roles HR departments can perform. For instance, extended waiting periods when dealing with employee issues reduce trust in the ability of employee champions.

Corruption

Corruption represents a law-breaking vehicle that demonstrates greed and complete disregard for ethics while destroying an organisation's internal functions (Saha & Sen, 2021). The efficiency of an organisation is affected by the possibility of external corruption when key individuals are corrupt, and internal corruption when the organisation's procurement processes are abused (Jancsics, 2019). In the first instance, practices such as recruitment and selection may suffer the most as personnel will be recruited based on individual interests. In the second instance, training and outsourcing initiatives may be compromised as the selection of vendors is motivated by financial favours (Jancsics, 2019).

Political interference

Political interference has a profound negative influence on effective HRM, distorting public-sector organisations' functions and their ability to maintain efficiency (Ahmed & Dantata, 2016). Some politicians in local government deliberately slow down institutional operations and perpetuate a continual culture of public-office abuse in the name of service to the party (Mapuva & Takabika, 2020). The associated problems include cadre deployment, incompetent staff and gross corruption (Makapela & Mtshelwane, 2021).

Technology gap

Noviyanti et al. (2019) argued that public-sector employees do not receive adequate training on the use of technology, and their interaction with its tools is not measured against performance. It can be assumed that the implementation

and competencies concerning technology realise slow improvement owing to the prevailing absence of performance measurement and reporting, which is necessary for analysing faults and feedback. Accordingly, this technology knowledge gap hinders HR practitioners' role as change agents on account of lacking the competencies that effectively lead public organisations towards Industry 4.0 (Joseph, Thomas & Abbot, 2021; Noviyanti et al., 2019).

Research method

Research approach

This study followed a qualitative research approach, which proved valuable in investigating the lived experiences of HR practitioners. This approach was deemed suitable as it allowed for investigating the phenomenon from different perspectives, finding out what is taking place and pursuing new insights (Quick & Hall, 2015). This study employed a phenomenological research strategy. Phenomenology outlines the researcher's effort to understand and describe occurrences as experienced by people who lived through them (Swanson & Wojnar, 2004). Accordingly, great emphasis was placed on gaining knowledge from the lived experiences of the HR practitioners themselves.

Research philosophy

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy. The study emphasises two assumptions, namely, ontology and epistemology, which guided the investigation of the lived experiences harboured by HR practitioners in ULAs, the challenges they face when fulfilling their roles and establishing ways to overcome these challenges.

Population and sample

The sample consisted of 17 HR practitioners working in the two ULAs in Zimbabwe that accepted to participate in the study. These two ULAs provided convenient access to an adequate number of HR practitioners from which to obtain a sample of participants. Purposive sampling was used to reach participants from varying job roles to discover the lived experiences of public-sector HR practitioners at different stages of their careers. A total of 17 participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to gain insight into their experiences. Saturation was reached at the 14th participant onwards, indicating that new data were no longer being generated. The sample comprised two top managers, six senior managers, three middle managers, three HR generalists (operational) and three entry-level HR clerks. Table 1 shows the full participant profile. To validate the findings and ensure that data saturation had indeed been achieved, the researcher considered interviewing three additional participants. However, after conducting the 17th interview, it was confirmed that no new information was being generated, and data saturation had indeed been achieved. As such, the sample size of 17 was deemed sufficient for the study, as data saturation had been achieved, and further data collection would not have contributed to the findings.

TABLE 1: Participant profile.

Participant	Job level	Years in current job level	Gender
Participant 1	Top management	1–5	Male
Participant 2	Top management	5–10	Male
Participant 3	Senior management	> 10	Male
Participant 4	Senior management	> 10	Female
Participant 5	Senior management	> 10	Female
Participant 6	Senior management	> 10	Female
Participant 7	Senior management	5–10	Male
Participant 8	Senior management	5–10	Male
Participant 9	Middle management	> 10	Female
Participant 10	Middle management	> 10	Female
Participant 11	Middle management	1–5	Male
Participant 12	Operational level	> 10	Female
Participant 13	Operational level	5–10	Female
Participant 14	Operational level	> 10	Female
Participant 15	Entry level	1–5	Female
Participant 16	Entry level	1–5	Female
Participant 17	Entry level	1–5	Female

Research instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. This strategy allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of HR practitioners in fulfilling their roles, to identify the hindrances they face and to detail their views on ways in which the hindrances could be overcome. A consistent interview guide was used for all participants thereby sustaining dependability of the study. Questions such as 'What are the hindrances you face in fulfilling your role in the workplace?' and 'Please describe how you conduct HRM procedures in your role' were posed to participants. Probing questions were used to clarify participant responses.

Data collection

Gatekeepers of the organisations provided a list of departmental heads and employees within the HR division, to whom interview invitations were sent. Interviews were conducted in an environment chosen by participants, where they were comfortable sharing their ideas, which proved conducive to forthright discussion and feelings of security. Zimbabwe was under Level 3 lockdown at the time of the interviews, which prompted strict adherence to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) protocols. Face-to-face interviews enabled the researcher to observe the participants' nonverbal behaviour and other potentially valuable information for the study (Van Zyl, 2014). Each interview lasted for an average of 45 min with the longest lasting 65 min. Some interviews were affected by changes in COVID-19 protocols and were rescheduled for a mutually agreed-upon date. Participant responses were audio recorded and manually captured through the use of field notes.

Data analysis and interpretation

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis was used to identify themes and analyse the data. The six phases followed were (1) familiarising oneself with one's data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming

themes and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher was aware of the complexity of thematic analysis and conducted each phase of the process diligently.

Ensuring data quality

Trustworthiness was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility entails to what extent research instruments can measure what they are supposed to measure (Kramar, 2014). Dependability is achieved when a different researcher applies the same research techniques and obtains the same research findings (Shenton, 2004). Credibility and dependability were achieved in the present study by using a consistent interview guide, which maintained the accuracy and consistency of the information being sought. Transferability relates to qualitative research findings' being applicable in another setting, despite different beliefs that researchers may have (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In the present study, transferability was achieved by retrieving data from two different organisations with different groups of individuals. Confirmability is defined as scientific objectivity related to applying qualitative research techniques, which do not prioritise individual perception (Bricki & Green, 2007). Confirmability was ensured in this study by presenting outcomes that resulted from participants' thoughts and understandings instead of inclinations of the researcher's own.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics exist primarily to guide the researcher's conduct and protect participants' rights, well-being and dignity, regardless of any setbacks or expenses it may present to the study (Quick & Hall, 2015). The researcher informed ULA gatekeepers and participants of the study objectives in advance. All interviews were conducted after receiving ethical clearance (ethical clearance number: 2020-413[M]) from the University of Johannesburg Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management's Research Ethics Committee. Consent for interview participation was requested from participants on an entirely voluntary basis. Also, files containing participant information and responses were anonymised by assigning pseudonyms to participants to enhance confidentiality and protect the identity of participants. All participants were informed that the interviews were audio-recorded for the purposes of the research. Appropriate referencing techniques will be utilised to credit any information that does not belong to the researcher.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of HR practitioners in fulfilling their roles in ULAs in Zimbabwe, focusing on confronting the challenges that prevent them from fulfilling their roles. Five major themes and a number of sub-themes were identified as essential issues in ULAs in Zimbabwe through an inductive process of thematic analysis. The major themes were: (1) HRM challenges, (2) HRM delivery and line management support, (3) HRM capabilities and procedures in ULAs in Zimbabwe, (4) employee

TABLE 2: Summary of themes.

Theme	Sub-themes
HRM challenges	
Theme 1 refers to the challenges faced by HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources • Politics • Bureaucracy • COVID-19
HRM delivery and line management support	
Theme 2 refers to the execution of HRM and the status of line management support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology gap • Stakeholder involvement • Gaps in performance management • Selective interaction with line management
HRM capabilities and procedures in ULAs in Zimbabwe	
Theme 3 entails the extent of HRM roles and the processes followed to conduct them in ULAs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional HRM approach • Committee based HRM procedures
Employee perceptions of HRM in ULAs	
Theme 4 refers to how other employees perceive the HR department in ULAs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low regard for HRM
Measures to overcome HRM challenges	
Theme 5 is concerned with the measures suggested by participants to address the challenges they face.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved rewards • Efficient approaches to technology • Increased stakeholder oversight

HR, human resource; HRM, human resource management; ULAs, urban local authorities; COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

perceptions of HRM in ULAs and (5) measures to overcome HRM challenges. The themes are listed in Table 2 according to which came up the most to which came up the least.

Theme 1: Human resource management challenges

The findings related to HRM challenges incorporated four sub-themes, namely, lack of resources, political interference, bureaucracy and COVID-19.

Lack of resources

Lack of resources was identified as a common concern in both ULAs, spanning from shortages in stationery, fuel and technology. Participants stated the following:

'We don't have the computers or electronic systems to do administration ... like now other people use HRM systems to put leave forms ... we are still doing everything from files.' (Participant 9/ULA 2/Middle management)

'We don't have internet and computers. We need these things ... Because we do paperwork every day.' (Participant 15/ULA 2/Entry-level)

'[M]y desktop is very slow; I don't even use it. I use my personal tablet for council business ... what it means is when I go, I will go with the council information.' (Participant 10/ULA 1/Middle management)

Political interference

Political interference seemed to be a major hindrance to the success of HRM initiatives because it affected decision-making within ULAs in Zimbabwe as these comments serve to confirm:

'Councillors, by virtue of being like a board of directors ... there is political interference during recruitment ... They will be saying, "oh maybe ... Put this guy." When it's higher posts ... they can decide before the interview that we will give a certain person higher marks.' (Participant 3/ULA 2/Senior management)

'Sometimes you don't agree with city councillors and as the executive they wait for when you also want something, and they decline. It becomes a tit-for-tat ... It is as if there is a division between elected officials and those appointed.' (Participant 1/ULA 1/Top management)

'When recruiting casual employees, councillors want to put people from their wards. At the same time, we have our parent ministry, Local Government, they say ... take people from labour [department] ... The moment I want to take people from there, the councillors complain, and they see that if they don't put people from their wards, they are losing political mileage.' (Participant 2/ULA 2/Top management)

Bureaucracy

Here, participants could not seamlessly deliver their duties, were compromised on time, and, in some instances, employees suffered delays in filing injury claims. Exhibits of participants explaining their experiences are given below:

'[T]raining officers generate reports, I check, it goes to my superior and he also checks ... then ... it goes to the director's office, and he signs ... From there it goes to the finance director's office and gets signed and then it goes to the town clerk's office for signature again ... from the person who prepared it to me to the people signing there is no value addition ... its wasting time for mahala [nothing].' (Participant 5/ULA 1/Senior management)

'[I]f you are injured ... report to your immediate supervisor ... Some supervisors by just having ignorance ... they just don't report their subordinate's case ... you even dig out the information ... And then you see the supervisor just filled in a report on their department and keeps quiet. Because of the structures, I can't just go there, there [are] rules for reporting it.' (Participant 9/ULA 2/Middle management)

'[W]hen I write a letter today and I sign it and the manager signs it ... because of bureaucracy, it can just sit here ... It can even sit at the directors' because he doesn't want people to go [for a workshop]. The meeting will even pass, the council HR central meeting ... they are the ones who approve everything. If it passes ... the person won't go ... you won't go because of delaying tactics.' (Participant 4/ULA 1/Senior management)

Coronavirus disease 2019

Some participants noted how the pandemic negatively affected their work as shown in the following quotations:

'Especially now with Covid, it's not everybody in the office so it's hard to share resources.' (Participant 14/ULA 2/Operational level)

'[W]hen Covid-19 started ... we lost some time before our new entrants could appreciate the nitty-gritties of the job.' (Participant 1/ULA 1/Top management)

Theme 2: Human resource management delivery and line management support

The findings concerned with HRM delivery and line management support included three sub-themes, namely, technology gap, stakeholder involvement and disengaged PM.

Technology gap

This sub-theme describes the technological shortcomings HR practitioners experience while attempting to deliver HRM within ULAs. Participants explained:

'[W]e have internet, but it does not work well. You might have it ... but the person you are interacting with might not ... when you want to do webinars and virtual meetings ... We struggle to all be available because of connectivity issues.' (Participant 11/ULA 1/Middle management)

'We use this other system called PROMAN and PROMAN is just confusing, we don't have enough training ... because you don't have enough training ... you just go back to the paperwork you are used to.' (Participant 9/ULA 2/Middle management)

Stakeholder involvement

Participants explained that there are stakeholders to consider when delivering HRM in ULAs, namely, government, councillors, town clerks, the mayor and top management. Participant 6 (ULA 1/Senior management) explained, 'Everything we do has to go through the town clerk and council and get agreed. Our executive has both top managers and councillors to help run the local authority', and Participant 2 (ULA 2/Top management) added, 'At the same time, we have our parent ministry, Local Government'.

Participant 5 stated a unique point that in some instances, they use their legal acumen and experience in ULAs to overcome hurdles that may hinder or slow down HRM delivery and decision-making. Her contribution was:

'[I]f you bring your request just after the committee has sat it means you wait for a month for the next one. We end up doing shortcuts ... that the person goes before council sits, because some of these things will be time sensitive and we can't wait a month.' (Participant 5/ULA 1/Senior management)

Gaps in performance management

This sub-theme highlights participant experiences regarding the existence of gaps in PM. Participants stated:

'[W]e are using IRBM management, but it has been implemented at executive only ... So they were supposed to be on performance bonus ... there has been a lot of resistance from the executive to implement it.' (Participant 5/ULA 1/Senior management)

'They do give feedback reports but not all. If I request feedback from a director, he doesn't even have the time to give me ...' (Participant 4/ULA 1/Senior management)

Some participants pointed out that IRBM is difficult to grasp and implement. Participant 2 (ULA 1/Top management) stated, 'Yes IRBM, it's there. IRBM is difficult and the model we are using is a bit complicated'.

Selective interaction with line management

A fourth sub-theme elaborated on the status of participant interaction with line managers in their roles. Participant accounts on the matter are presented below:

'I give them [line managers] support when they have issues for management. I supervise some of them ... We have job grades

that are just the same but sometimes the experience and duties are different.' (Participant 6/ULA 1/Senior management)

'They come to me when they need help with employment relations and I go to them when I need help in their different departments. just here and there.' (Participant 11/ULA 1/ Middle management)

Theme 3: Human resource management capabilities and procedures in urban local authorities in Zimbabwe

The findings related to this theme incorporated two sub-themes, namely, traditional HRM approach and committee-focused HRM procedures.

Traditional human resource management approach

This sub-theme presented a notable set of traditional HRM activities fulfilled by HR practitioners involved in this study. Participant 2 (ULA 2/Top Management) listed the duties considered standard for an HR practitioner: 'recruitment and selection, labour relations, industrial relations, salary administration, counselling employees, training and development ... pension claims, N SSA claims', while Participant 7 (ULA 1/Senior management) added 'supervising people in the department, creating human capital reports, drafting needs analysis, monitoring administration requirements in the department, [and] employee welfare' to this list.

Participant 11 concurred with the existence of similar HR processes stating, 'Everyone here is from HR no matter which department, the division is the same, so you follow the same process' (Participant 11/ULA 1/Middle management).

Committee-based human resource management procedures

This sub-theme highlights the distinct focus on the use of committees in conducting HRM procedures. 'Decisions in a local authority work through committees which makes plans harder to make than it seems because there are timelines and meetings to follow', stated Participant 7 (ULA 1/Senior management):

'[W]e use workers committees ... Let's say we are having policy formulation ... Workers' committee take these policies to the employees and also bring employee grievances.' (Participant 9/ ULA 2/Middle management)

Theme 4: Employee perceptions of human resource management in urban local authorities

The findings related to employee perceptions of HRM in ULAs largely highlighted 'low regard for HRM' as a contentious issue that affected HR practitioners' execution of duties.

Low regard for human resource management

This sub-theme outlined how HRM is not prioritised in the organisation, and the department receives low recognition:

'[R]espect in local authority is very low ... some employees view HR as small ... they want to voice their control because they

have political presence ... The environment is not conducive for professionals. Like even a car ... If you go to any private company, you won't find an HR manager walking.' (Participant 2/ULA 2/Top management)

Participant 2 expressed strong feelings for this matter, especially indicated by his comparison of HRM professionals in the private and public sectors. In addition, the participant demonstrated his disappointment using gestures and sighing. The researcher gained first-hand observations from the face-to-face interview, which added practically to the richness of the findings.

Theme 5: Measures to overcome human resource management challenges

The findings relating to measures to overcome HRM challenges incorporated three sub-themes, namely, an improved reward system, increased oversight and efficient approaches to technology.

Improved reward system

Participants believed that improving rewards would significantly motivate employees to perform better with their current resources as proposed in the following comments:

'Employees should be incentivised for bettering their skills. They have the mentality ... "if I get another qualification, I should get an allowance," but it doesn't happen that way here' (Participant 8/ULA 1/Senior management)

'There are no rewards when you do your job ... But you must be rewarded. The same things apply to everyone, whether you are in HR or anywhere else, everyone should be rewarded. That's the first motivation, reward.' (Participant 4/ULA 1/Senior management)

Participant 9 (ULA 2/Middle management) simply stated: 'People go because of small pay, we should fix that'.

Improved stakeholder oversight

Some participants stated that increasing the level of stakeholder oversight in ULAs would ease the challenges they encountered. Below are some of the statements in support of this claim:

'We should have ministerial interventions to protect local authorities because if these things are not done, these guys will run down the council.' (Participant 3/ULA 2/Senior management)

'We need support from government to put laws that improve the policies in local authorities.' (Participant 1/ULA 1/Top management)

Efficient approaches to technology

Some participants noted the need to improve the organisation's approach to technology to realise the potential of HRM, as noted by the participants: '... the manual challenge, maybe it's about innovation, we should go totally paperless, we should go green because there are a lot of files'. opined Participant 6 (ULA 1/Senior management). 'Our admin should be electronic, we should be having computers to write

minutes properly and to keep records on Google Drive', suggested Participant 12 (ULA 2/Operational level), while Participant 17 (ULA 1/Entry level) stated, '... they should just give every office a computer and the printer because most of the work needs me to print things and file them'.

Discussion

Theme 1: Human resource management challenges

Despite the extensive challenges found in both ULAs, the findings suggested four sub-themes related to HRM challenges, namely, *political interference, lack of resources, bureaucracy and COVID-19*. The challenge of political interference profoundly affects HRM in ULAs as it promotes cadre deployment, distorts HRM procedures and cripples decision-making (Ahmed & Dantata, 2016; Mapuva & Takabika, 2020). The findings of this research confirm that the lack of technological tools poses an information-security risk as employees can store confidential information on their personal device, which creates the potential for sharing of sensitive information and fraud. The research findings highlight that bureaucracy reduces the discretionary power of HR practitioners and causes extended delays in dealing with employee issues (McDonnell, 2017). Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic invoked anxiety among professionals and exacerbated already-existing HRM challenges, in particular, regarding deficiencies in technology (Coombs, 2020). Therefore, decision-makers in ULAs in Zimbabwe should consider engaging HR practitioners on how to effectively apply the measures to overcome HRM challenges suggested in this study as they may imply demoralised employees and unrealised organisational goals.

Theme 2: Human resource management delivery and line management support

Human resource is delivered through the HR function, HR's architecture of systems and information and communications technology (ICT), which line managers aim to support (Surette et al., 2018). The findings suggest four sub-themes, namely, *stakeholder involvement, PM gaps, technology gaps and selective interaction with line management*. The present study's findings outlined that the implementation of HR policies is a challenge as ULA stakeholders usually pull in different directions (Maatman & Meijerink, 2017). Consequently, stakeholder considerations involved in HR decisions can be restrictive and contradictory in a way that delays HRM delivery in ULAs. Therefore, the findings indicated that HRM delivery in the present study is articulated by the Harvard model as the perception, direction and overall mission for organisational performance are determined by the ULA's context (i.e. Zimbabwean public sector) and its stakeholders (Boselie et al., 2019).

Participants highlighted PM gaps as the IRBM system is not fully utilised because of its technical and complicated nature. The value of HRM increases when technology is used to automate and swiftly complete administrative duties that

would have otherwise been delayed by manual processes (Bilgic, 2020). Despite Bilgic's (2020) support for technology, participants still defaulted to using manual processes because of insufficient technological skills. Participants also emphasised that there is limited interaction between line managers and the HR department, which delays employee requests, such as injury claims. Dhanpat (2015) asserts the need to devolve HR capabilities to line managers. Therefore, continual delays in addressing welfare matters weaken the employment relationship in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

Theme 3: Human resource management capabilities and procedures in urban local authorities in Zimbabwe

Human resource management capabilities and procedures are drivers of HRM in various organisations operating in any sector. The findings proposed two sub-themes, namely, *traditional HRM approach and committee-focused HRM procedures*. As corroborated by the findings, Gasela (2021) and Yusliza et al. (2019) stated that large institutions regard the HR function solely as a support function without strategic importance, which can be overlooked when formulating institutional strategy. Moreover, the findings showed that HR practitioners were inclined to administer HR rather than strategically manage it, emphasising exclusively traditional activities and neglecting transformational activities (Yusliza et al., 2019).

Also, the findings indicate that top management in ULAs does not prioritise training programmes and is reluctant to invest in employee education, which indicates a fragmented approach to the HCT (Garavan et al., 2019; Marginson, 2017). The findings, therefore, imply that the lack of SHRM and the focus on traditional HRM will make the transformation from traditional HRM to SHRM difficult in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

The findings explained that committee-focused ULA procedures necessitate organisation-wide consultation and regular involvement of employees in developing HR policies (Knies et al., 2022). In contrast, management committees sometimes create bottlenecks that delay HRM procedures thereby driving HR practitioners to implement shortcuts to fulfil their objectives. Thus, HR practitioners in the public sector should avoid unprocedural means of fulfilling HR duties as they are not a sustainable means of prolonged ULA competitive advantage.

Theme 4: Employee perceptions of human resource management in urban local authorities in Zimbabwe

In various instances, the value of HR operations in an organisation is dependent on the perceptions of top management and colleagues (Rogozinska-Pawelczyk & Gadomska-Lila, 2022). The findings linked to employee perceptions suggested one sub-theme, namely, *the HR department is of limited importance and that HR practitioners are merely supporting staff*. In the findings, participants in management roles categorically stated that HR initiatives are

not viewed as priorities, rather as minuscule ‘issues’, and HR function heads are undermined, excluded from the board and operate predominantly in support roles (Yusliza et al., 2019). Therefore, HR practitioners experience limited respect, difficulties in communicating HRM programmes and incessant demotivation, which compromises the performance and quality of work produced by HR departments in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

Theme 5: Measures to overcome human resource management challenges

This theme presented participants’ opinions on what they believed were measures to overcome the prevailing HRM challenges. Despite the numerous suggestions, the findings related to measures to overcome HRM challenges, including three sub-themes, namely, *an improved reward system, increased stakeholder oversight and efficient approaches to technology*. The findings proved that participants desired to receive economically sustainable salaries and impartial benefits for everyone, such as residential stands. Consequently, an improved reward system will enable HR departments to champion HCT, improve employee motivation and reduce employee turnover in ULAs in Zimbabwe (Leisink et al., 2021; Meardi et al., 2021).

Increased stakeholder oversight must prevail to combat some HRM challenges such as cadre deployment (Makapela & Mtshelwane, 2021). In addition, increasing HR managers’ autonomy implies an improved rules framework and a higher job grade for HR managers that deters stakeholders from abusing their power (Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018). The findings of this study outlined that ULAs require contemporary ICT tools, reliable computers and suitable HRM software packages for HR practitioners to optimally fulfil their roles through HRIS (Sari, 2016). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic emphasised the need for more efficient approaches to technology in ULAs as manual HR processes are obsolete in the face of unprecedented challenges such as pandemics. Subsequently, the implication is that introducing efficient approaches to technology should be accompanied by the respective training to enhance the abilities and performance of HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

Practical implications

Findings from this study can be used to enhance the HR profession, both in general and with regard to ULAs, more specifically to the practice of HR in Zimbabwe. By dealing with the HR challenges arising from lack of resources, technological gaps and disengaged PM, ULAs and their stakeholders can optimise the way that HR practitioners carry out their duties and improve personnel performance. Further, understanding how key stakeholders, politics and bureaucracy affect HRM delivery in local authorities can provide insight to policymakers. Such insight can aid in creating a consultative and robust legislative framework delineating stakeholders’ duties, roles and authority in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

Figure 1 shows a conceptual model outlining the reality of the lived experiences of HR practitioners in ULAs in Zimbabwe, encompassing the way in which they encounter their role, the HRM challenges they face and how to overcome them. The challenges are indicated as forces acting on the HR department from the left side of the diagram. Bureaucracy and political interference are indicated as forces acting on the HR department from the top as they are primarily caused by stakeholders. Possible solutions, namely, improved reward system, increased stakeholder oversight, efficient approaches to technology and training and development are still yet to be realised to overcome the depicted challenges.

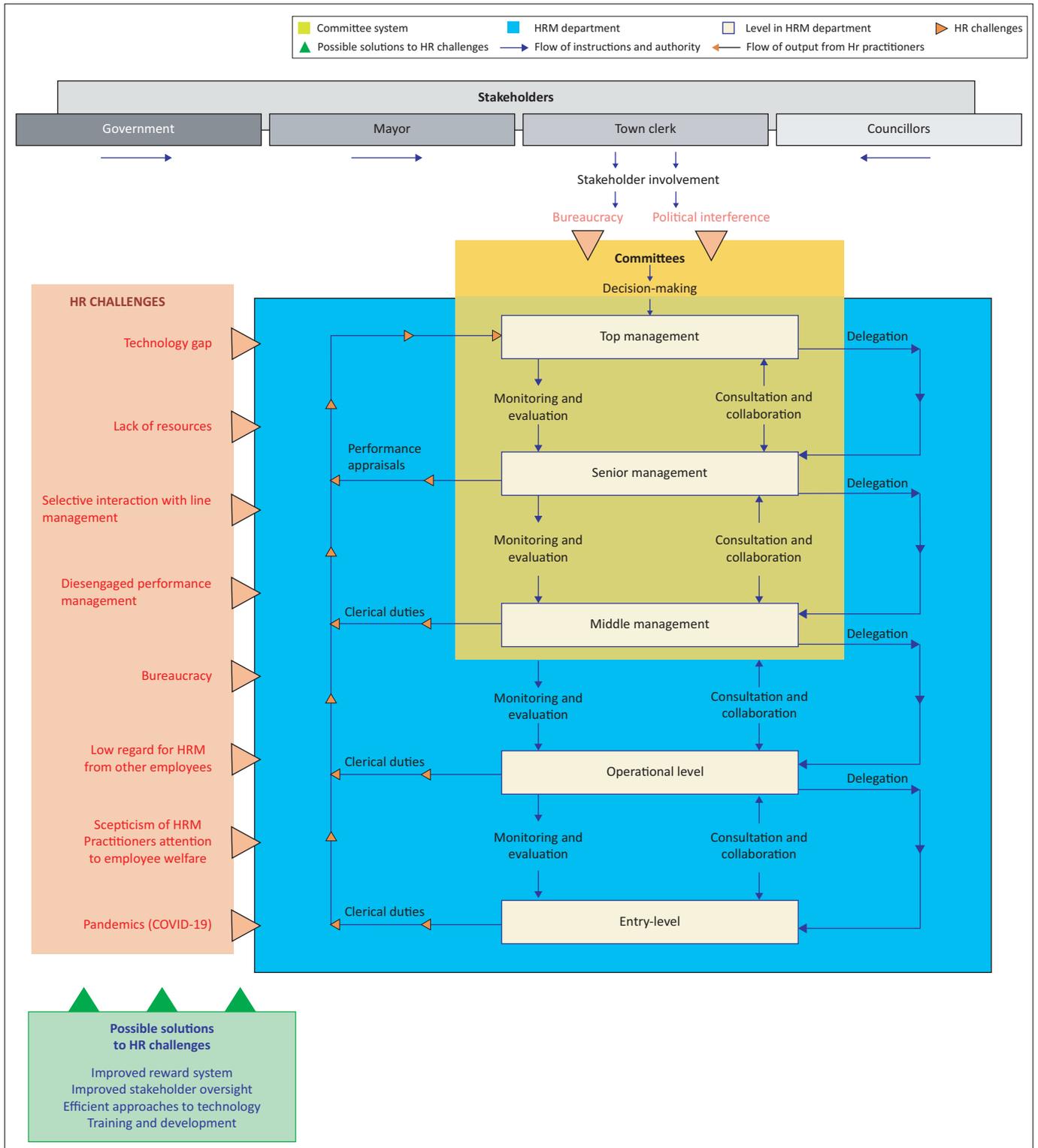
Limitations and recommendations

Although this study took a unique perspective on studying HRM by considering the actual lived experiences of HR practitioners, the information obtained was based on participants’ subjective views. Probing questions aided in overcoming this limitation. The study was conducted in ULAs in the public sector in Zimbabwe. Therefore, findings from the study cannot be generalised to other industries or the private sector and should be interpreted with caution. For future research, it is recommended that studies focus on the comparison of similarities and differences in HR practices in the public sector between Zimbabwe and other Southern African countries. Also, future research could seek to replicate this study in different settings, for example, in other local authorities, a different country or with a larger sample size that includes all ULAs in the chosen country.

Recommendations for practice

It is recommended that decision-making in ULAs should be decentralised. Decentralisation and granting the HRM department a higher level of autonomy means that HR practitioners in ULAs can fulfil their roles quicker, thereby creating capacity for time-demanding tasks such as monitoring and needs-assessment visits (McDonnell, 2017). Human resource management duties should undergo a digitisation programme where intranet networks are established to improve internal ULA communication, while reliable internet connections should be provided to enable virtual work among HR practitioners and interaction with external stakeholders (Bradley, 2019; Sari, 2016). It is also recommended that ULAs initiate an improved rewards system that includes opportunities for career development and economically sustainable remuneration and benefits across all job grades. An improved reward system, inclusive of the benefits mentioned by HR participants themselves, will motivate employees and reduce human capital turnover.

Furthermore, ULAs should increase stakeholder oversight while operating under an enforced rules framework to deter them from abusing power (Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018).



HR, human resource; HRM, human resource management.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual model: Addressing human resource management challenges affecting human resource practitioners in urban local authorities.

More specifically, there should be a consultative and robust legislative framework delineating stakeholders’ duties, roles and authority in ULAs in Zimbabwe. This recommendation for practice can help solve the problems associated with stakeholder involvement and political interference. It is recommended that efforts must be made to build the HR function’s reputation as a contributor as there is an urgent

need for the HR department to champion a more proactive and critical role within ULAs, especially regarding the formulation, structure and implementation of organisational strategy (Surette et al., 2018). In summary, advice from the HR function should be accepted and respected, regardless of whether it meets the preferences of a particular group of stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of HR practitioners in Zimbabwe. It showed that although there is a potential for efficient HRM delivery in ULAs, HR practitioners face multiple challenges, namely, technology gaps, lack of resources, political interference, disengaged PM, selective interaction with line management, bureaucracy, low regard for HRM and the threat of pandemics (COVID-19). Nevertheless, as presented in the conceptual model, the findings allude to the notion that if an improved rewards system, efficient approaches to technology, holistic training and development, and more stakeholder oversight were to exist, HRM delivery in ULAs could become swift, more efficient and less complicated. In closing, initiating the recommendations for practice identified in this study will optimise the HR departments in ULAs in Zimbabwe.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exist.

Authors' contributions

N.D. supervised the study. R.J. co-supervised the study. A.G. was responsible for the initial writing, the collection and transcribing of data and data analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the IPPM Research Ethics Committee, University of Johannesburg (IPPM-2020-413[M]).

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Disclaimer

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