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CASE STUDY 5

ZIMBABWE

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PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND THEIR EVOLUTION

The Zimbabwe HRIS Project had its origins in a project by the Ministry of Public Service to computerise its personnel records. By 1989 a pilot project had been carried out which involved establishing three main computer files:

- a biographical data file, e.g. age
- an education file, including academic and professional qualifications
- an experience history file, covering pre-service and in-service postings, progression and incremental dates.¹

The 1989 Public Service Commission Review recognised the potential of this database to:

- assist in manpower planning
- assist in organisation analysis
- assist in recruitment
- assist in deployment
- assist in staff development and training
- provide information for salaries
- provide information for pensions
- provide information of other employee services and benefits
- provide information of communications to staff.

The PSCR recommended that the user specification be reviewed in greater detail, and this was accepted

The project was incorporated into the UNDP Civil Service Reform Programme under the Economic Management Concentration Area of the Third UNDP/Zimbabwe Country programme for the period 1992-96. External consultants worked in the Public Service Commission on the project from the spring of 1993. The project ran into difficulties. Counterparts were not assigned with the relevant technical skills to supervise the consultants or set appropriate performance benchmarks. On the other hand the consultancy team suffered a rapid turnover of staff, including three replacements of team leader. As a consequence the team lost its understanding of the project objectives and user needs and the project lost direction. By 1996 the work of the consultants was deemed to be unsatisfactory and the contract terminated.

¹Report of the Public Service Review Commission of Zimbabwe, May, 1989, Main Report, Volume 1, p122.

By October 1996 a new set of consultants were being selected. The revised terms of reference reflected a subtle shift in objectives and rationale for the Human Resource Information System. The new rationale stressed the alleviation of problems with the existing manual system:

- delays in obtaining relevant information
- out-of-date information
- inaccurate information
- documents or files going missing
- expense of storing files
- lack of direct access to information kept by the Salary Service Bureau, forcing the PSC to rely heavily upon information supplied by the ministries.²

It is implicit in this rationale that the existing manual records would in many cases be replaced by the computerised system. Essentially this is a description of negative objectives. A more positive statement can be found in the success criteria for the project:

- The PSC will have access to a system that can record on computerised files all relevant data from which candidates applying to government jobs can be selected.
- The ministries can have access to these databases via modems so that the whole system of recruitment and selection is transparent.
- The PSC will have computerised data on candidates for promotion, including associated background information on each candidate's history of promotions (this system will be linked to pertinent data drawn from candidates' performance appraisals).
- The performance appraisal system will yield data that will be computerised -- e.g. on the value of the assessment for bonus purposes as well as the training required by all civil servants (which will in turn provide training institutions with knowledge about what courses Government needs).
- A system will be introduced of recording on computer files all discipline cases from which precedence (by category) can be reviewed.
- A computerised record will be available of all retrenchments by category (including all relevant details that were associated with a particular retrenchment).
- Elements of the HRIS will be interfaced with the soon-to-be-completed information system at the Salary Service Bureau.

²Terms of Reference UNDP Assisted Programme ZIM/90/008;508, Project to Install a Human Resource Information System and a Management Information System In the Government of Zimbabwe, Public Service Commission', 30 January 1996, Section B.1.

- The project will develop the human resource capability to sustain/execute the HRI [human resource information] and MI [management information] systems.³

The document *The Zimbabwe Public Service Reform* also described the desired personnel database:

- The database will contain basic personnel information on all civil servants and those who have passed entry and promotion examinations.
- The data contained in the system will include promotion and appointment dates; academic and professional qualifications; experience and employment history; training received; and career profile information.
- The system will contain information on skills gaps in the service, so that these can be matched with gaps with the candidates against job descriptions for entry and promotion purposes. This should result in better deployment and utilisation of personnel in the service.

These criteria raise a number of issues. The first is the capacity to maintain modem links between the participating ministries.

The second is the capturing of the data to be maintained by the system. Some information, such as data about candidates applying for recruitment to the public service, would be supplied by the candidates themselves. The performance appraisal system was expected to supply data on a candidate's history of promotions and on training needs. There would be an incentive for the line ministries to complete the appraisals and send the forms to PSC if the contribution of data to HRIS could be linked to the payment of performance data related bonuses. Under the old performance appraisal system, where there was no such linkage, only a proportion of the performance appraisals was sent to the PSC.

The project objectives (especially the version outlined by *The Zimbabwe Public Service Reform* document) placed emphasis on storing data covering the entire career of civil servants while in the public service. Inevitably would be dependent upon the accuracy and completeness of the personnel files already maintained by the public service on employees.

User Expectations for the HRIS System

Very few of the public servants interviewed in 1996 had much knowledge of the HRIS Project nor a clear picture of what it would do for them. However, virtually all the people interviewed expressed frustration with the information systems they were using. The problems can be categorised in four groups:

- Files are incomplete.
- Information takes too long to arrive.
- Information is in an inconvenient form.

³'Terms of Reference', UNDP Assisted Programme ZIM/90/008;508, Section D.1.1.

- Information is difficult to process or systems do not exist to process the data.

Officers in line ministries felt that information problems were exacerbated by excessive centralisation of decision-making. In particular, they felt the PSC sometimes set deadlines for the delivery of returns which failed to take into account the logistical realities of gathering information from remote stations across the country. It was felt that the PSC was too inclined to issue instructions without adequate consultation. They welcomed the policy of decentralisation of decision-making to the ministries, but argued that it could be taken further – for example, in the areas of promotions and study leave. Decentralisation would shorten communications chains and speed up decision-making.

Automation was also seen as a means of presenting information in a more convenient form. For example, there was a widespread desire (both at PSC and in line ministries) to have basic information about an individual public servant available, in summary form accessible from a desktop terminal. This would be a big improvement on the time-consuming process of requesting the file from the registry and then reading through a bulky file to extract the relevant information. This was thought to be of use in a wide variety of situations.

DATA SOURCES FOR HRIS

Local Human Resources Databases

The HRIS Project was mooted in 1989 but by 1996 had not progressed beyond the consultation stage. In the absence of concrete results, it is not surprising that individual ministries took the initiative to create their own human resources databases. Because of limited time, no attempt was made during the 1996 study to carry out a comprehensive survey of these databases. Those that are described below were encountered in the process of interviewing officials in ministries or public service agencies selected either for their size or their particular role in gathering or processing human resource-related information. It is quite possible that there are other human resources databases maintained by the public service which were not surveyed.

Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General

This is a small department of 233 established posts in 1996. Owing to an active policy of seeking donor funding for projects, the department was found to be unusually well supplied with computer equipment (87 laptops and 40 desktop PC at the time of the visit).

The department had created a human resources database using Microsoft Access software housed on a laptop PC. The database was kept secure by locking the laptop in a desk drawer when not in use. The small number of staff on the establishment made it possible to create and maintain a large number of fields on each individual (see Figure 1). The main purpose of the database was to support the personnel function by providing an overview of the staff in the department. Some fields are clearly of value for providing reports for personnel management (e.g. lists of staff arranged by grade or academic qualification). On the other hand some of the information recorded on the database appears to be of little benefit. For example, the cost of entering details of the telephone numbers and addresses of next of kin of

employees is probably not justified. On the rare occasions the information is needed it can be easily retrieved from the individual's personnel file.

The staff with daily responsibility for maintaining the database did not understand the difference between 'saving' a file on the internal 'hard disk' and backing up a file onto a diskette. As a result there was no up-to-date backup of the database for use in the event of a system crash.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's Department suffering from a high turnover in staff with IT expertise owing to the superior salaries offered by the private sector.

Ministry of Health

The Ministry of Health Personnel Information System (PIS) was the largest and best designed and maintained personnel database examined. It was funded by DANIDA through the World Bank as part of the family health project. Consultants were used to design the system. Work started on the system in 1989/90 and the ministry did not consult other parts of the public service. The system went live in 1993. Officials were of the opinion that because the PIS system was already established and operating, and because of the likely disruption, the ministry would be reluctant to change the PIS to make it compatible with a public service-wide Human Resources Information System run by the PSC.

The PIS was created because the existing CARDEX manual system for recording key personnel and establishment details was cumbersome to maintain and because computerised data available elsewhere (mainly the SSB payroll system) did not meet all the needs of the Ministry of Health. Thus SSB could provide lists of staff and salaries for the entire ministry, but it could not break down the information at the level of the cost unit (e.g. hospital and patient bed). To do this it would need accurately to relate staff salary costs to cost units. The original manual CARDEX system was not organised to provide easily some of the required kinds of information, e.g. lists of vacant posts or lists of posts or individuals by job category. To do this would require checking the establishment cards for each hospital and noting the relevant information and then typing it up as a report. A computerised database has the flexibility to provide this information with little difficulty.

The PIS database was maintained by the Establishment Control Unit. It kept information on the establishment of the Ministry of Health (23,000 established posts of which 21,000 posts are filled). It covered the entire health sector, excluding mission hospitals.

The database used Dbase 3+ software and resided on three personal computers. Each PC held an identical copy of the database. Access to the database was password controlled. The system was planned to be replicated at the provincial level. The PIS database was capable of producing basic information about individuals and about staffing/establishment details. It could also provide statistical reports. Several of the reports was designed to allow the personnel staff to plan their work efficiently and to be proactive. For example, there were reports on staff on probationary status for more than two years, staff whose contracts expire within one year, staff due to retire within one year, staff due for advancements and posts due for vacancy. The statistical reports included national in-post/vacancy statistics by category and in-post statistics sorted by station.

The PIS screen for keying-in information about an individual essentially replicated the CARDEX employee record card. Most of the data on PIS was found to be up-to-date except salary details, which tended to be obsolete because the Ministry of Health had difficulty obtaining timely information from the PSC. Information for the 'Station Details' screen was taken from a separate Medical Stores database. However, the main source of data for PIS was the staff files.

The main problems encountered with operating the system centred around the availability of resources rather than the design of the system or the procedures used to support it. In particular, there were difficulties in retaining trained staff because the level of compensation for staff with IT expertise was low compared to the private sector. The ministry reported losing three staff in one month out of a team of seven. Also there had been shortages of consumables (diskettes, computer paper, printer ribbons) and shortages of funds to pay for equipment maintenance. The provinces reverted to using the manual system because there was insufficient capacity to run both the new accounts system and PIS on the same PC. The accounts system was considered the priority and so the PIS was removed from the computers used by the provinces.

Ministry of Education

In about 1984-85 a human resources database was created in the Ministry of Education, with technical support from the Central Computing Services, using customised Wang VHS software. It was used to produce statistics about schools and to hold information about personnel such as date of birth, date of joining the public service, qualifications, etc. It was not judged to be a success. The failure has been attributed variously to:

- unrealistically ambitious objectives
- insufficient attention to user needs
- insufficient attention to the way information would be fed into the system.

The result was that it was difficult to gain access to the data or to produce useful reports from the database. The database thus became a data store rather than an actively used database.

In 1988 the Ministry of Education was divided to create two new ministries: Education and Higher Education. The assets and equipment were split between the two ministries, which undermined the operation of the database. Finally, when the Wang company encountered financial difficulties the account went to IBM Bedford Investments. Unfortunately the new company showed little enthusiasm for supporting the software.

Public Service Commission

The PSC relies principally on manual systems to maintain information about employees. The main focus of planning for its future IT systems is the HRIS Project. However, the human resources area does maintain a number of small databases to facilitate its work. These are in areas where the PSC has particular needs for information to track and plan activities: a

recruitment database, study leave database (officers on study leave) and an expatriate database (to manage expatriate staff working in the public service on fixed-term contracts).

It is understood that in 2000, the Public Service Commission embarked on a manpower audit which involved head counts. Public Service Commission personnel appeared unannounced armed with the official establishment list. Since this was done when civil servants were on strike, it is not clear whether this was an establishment control measure or to identify absentees. It is also unclear whether all ministries and work stations were visited in this manner.

Comparison of data structures

The fields in the databases described above are compared in Figure 1 in order to identify points of similarity and difference. There is a high level of similarity between the kinds of fields on each database. This includes particulars such as appointment dates, work unit and qualification. This is not surprising given that the parent organisations are all part of the same public service which has standardised terms and conditions and which remains to a large degree centralised in the management of personnel.

Nonetheless, no one field was common to all the databases. There were sufficient differences of structure and coding of the data to pose an obstacle to eventual harmonising of the data on to a single database, or series of databases sharing the same data structure. For example the databases of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Ministry of Health and the PSC Expatriate database all had a separate field for Surname. The Comptroller and Auditor General and the PSC Expatriate databases had a field for Forenames, but the Ministry of Health had a field for Initial instead. In contrast, the PSC Recruitment Register, PSC Officers Study Leave and the Salary Service Bureau had fields which combine Surname and Initials. Moreover, sometimes the field label was the same, but the values were different. Thus the Ministry of Health expresses the date of birth as dd/mm/yyyy whereas the PSC Expatriate database used dd/mm/yy.

There were some surprising omissions. Only the Ministry of Health database had a field for the gender of the staff. This would suggest either that the other databases are being used for a very limited set of tasks, or that information relating to gender is seldom required for human resource planning. This is interesting because the Public Service Review Commission report of 1989 specifically complained that it had not been able to obtain statistics on age, grade and gender and stated that it believed that this information would be essential for proactive human resource management in the public service. Moreover, greater efforts to ensure a provincial and gender balance in promotion were an explicit objective of the reforms of the personnel function. This requirement did not appear to have permeated down to the operational level in the design of information systems.

It is not clear why the Ministry of Health had a field for gender, but an official interviewed said that the design of the system was influenced by external examples and that relatively little attention had been paid to similar projects within the public service. It is tempting to suppose that the database project (which was funded by the World Bank using external consultants) might be influenced by the World Bank's interest in gathering statistics relating to gender, particularly to measure the impact of programmes on women.

Sharing of Information Between Public Service Databases

The proliferation of databases in the public service of Zimbabwe continues. The Ministry of Health and Child Welfare has recently (2001) recommended the design of a new computerised personnel information system to hold details of all establishment posts by station, details of all staff in post (giving name, sex, nationality, date of birth, identification numbers, dates of appointment, advancement and gaining of new qualifications, date and reason for leaving public service or date of transfer to another Ministry. The programme is expected to provide reports of the data in detail (e.g. listings) and summary, statistical information (e.g. numbers employed by posit title, grade and location).

This system is intended to be the source of all staffing information in the ministry superseding all existing requests to the districts for staffing returns. Increasing decentralisation will provide the need and also the opportunity for more databases, because ever more powerful personal computers and software make it comparatively cheap and easy. Moreover external consultants working on donor-assisted projects tend to advocate using information technology to address personnel management problems.

The survey reported above illustrates that even databases using common source material and operating in the same procedural and organisational context can be designed in ways that are an obstacle to sharing information between them. A standard, identifying core fields and data coding structures for information about individuals, would greatly facilitate sharing of information between databases maintained both within and outside the public service. The Salary Services Bureau has made a start by drawing up a standard which has been accepted by all private sector banks for transfer of salaries payments. A comparison of the standard against the personnel databases used in the public service (Figure 1) indicates that it may not be entirely suitable for the needs of other users in the public service because very few fields needed for human resources management purposes are specified in the standard. At the very least it would need to be expanded. Nonetheless this initiative by SSB illustrates the potential of standardisation.

Figure 1: Comparison of Human Resource Database

Field	Comptroller & Auditor General	Ministry of Health	PSC: Recruitment Register	PSC: Officers on Study Leave	PSC: Expatriate Appointment/ Renewal/ Extension	SSB Standard ¹
National ID Number						✓[num]
Recruitment Register Reference			✓[alpha/num eg RB/ADM/ 2.2/]			
Surname	✓[alpha]	✓[alpha]			✓[alpha]	
Initial		✓[alpha]				
Surname and Initials			✓[alpha]	✓[alpha]		✓[alpha]
Forenames	✓[alpha]				✓[alpha]	
Sex		✓[M/F]				
Zimbabwean		✓[Y/N]				
Nationality					✓[alpha]	
Date of Birth	✓[no sample]	✓[dd/mm/yyyy]			✓[dd/mm/yy]	
Employee Code Number	✓[alpha/num]	✓[alpha/num -eg 1623757C]		✓[alpha/num]		
Class			✓[num eg 2.2]			
Qualification		✓[sample blank]	✓[alpha eg Btech Mgt (UZ)]		✓[alpha/num eg B A ECONOMICS]	
Academic Qualification	✓[alpha eg A LEVELS]					
Professional Qualification	✓[alpha/num eg CISA, 3/4B]					
Date of Appointment to Public Service	✓[num eg 1/7/96]	✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				

Field	Comptroller & Auditor General	Ministry of Health	PSC: Recruitment Register	PSC: Officers on Study Leave	PSC: Expatriate Appointment/ Renewal/ Extension	SSB Standard¹
Grade on Appointment	✓no sample					
Date of Appointment to Ministry of Health		✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				
Date of Appointment to Current Grade	✓[num eg 1/7/96]	✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				
Current Status		✓[alpha eg EMP] ⁴				
Dated [Date of current employee status]		✓				
Contract Expiry		✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				
Date of Termination with Ministry of Health		✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				
Telephone Extension	✓[num]					
Office Room Number	✓[num]					
Courses Attended	✓no sample			✓[alpha eg AD DIP VET TECHNOLOGY]		
Dates of Courses Attended	✓no sample					
Course Date From				✓[dd/mm/yy]		
Course Date To				✓[dd/mm/yy]		
Home Telephone Number	✓[num]		✓[num]	✓[num]		
Home Address	✓‘Street’ [alpha/num]		✓[alpha/num]	✓[alpha/num]		

⁴employee, established officer, probation, expatriate.

Field	Comptroller & Auditor General	Ministry of Health	PSC: Recruitment Register	PSC: Officers on Study Leave	PSC: Expatriate Appointment/Renewal/Extension	SSB Standard ¹
Comments		✓[alpha eg EX Min of IND & COM]				
Station Code		✓[alpha/num eg 10000G]				
Station Name		✓[alpha]				
Sub-Vote		✓[num eg 2] ⁵				
Ministry				✓[alpha]	✓{alpha]	
Dept				✓[alpha]		
Section	✓[alph/num eg VFM, D9]					
Last Update		✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				
Time		✓[hh/mm/ss]				
Post Code		✓[alpha/num eg A010]				
Grade	✓[alpha eg AUDITOR, or DRIVER III]	✓‘Title’[alpha eg DEPUTY SECRETARY]		✓[alpha eg AUDITOR]		
Position ⁶	✓[num eg 06]					
Salary		✓[num]				
Salary Code						✓[num]
Allowances		✓[num]				
Gross Salary	✓[num]					

⁵Sub vote codes: 1 = headquarters, 2 = hospitals/clinics, 3 = provincial medical district offices, 4 = laboratories.

⁶A numeric code designed to allow ordering of reports in a hierarchy representing order of seniority in the administrative structure].

Field	Comptroller & Auditor General	Ministry of Health	PSC: Recruitment Register	PSC: Officers on Study Leave	PSC: Expatriate Appointment/ Renewal/ Extension	SSB Standard¹
Last Update		✓[dd/mm/yyyy]				
Date when salary commenced	✓[num eg 7/9/66]					
Annual Leave	✓no sample					
Sick Leave	✓no sample					
Special Leave	✓no sample					
Marital Status	✓no sample				✓[M/S]	
Next of Kin	✓no sample					
Address of Next of Kin	✓no sample					
Home Telephone Number of Next of Kin	✓no sample					
Work Telephone Number of Next of Kin	✓no sample					
Area of work of Next of Kin	✓no sample					
City of Work of Next of Kin	✓no sample					
Additional Information on Next of kin	✓no sample					
Father/Mother	✓no sample					
Home Address Father/Mother	✓no sample					
Home Telephone Number Father/Mother	✓no sample					
Other	✓no sample					

Field	Comptroller & Auditor General	Ministry of Health	PSC: Recruitment Register	PSC: Officers on Study Leave	PSC: Expatriate Appointment/Renewal/Extension	SSB Standard¹
Name	✓no sample					
Relationship	✓no sample					
Home Telephone Number	✓no sample					
Business Telephone Number	✓no sample					
Number of Posts		✓[num]				
Number of Posts Filled		✓[num]				
Station Address Field 1		✓[alpha/num eg BOX 95]				
Station Address Field 2		✓[alpha eg KARIBA]				
Station Address Field PO Box		✓[sample left blank]				
Station Address Field Town		✓[sample left blank]				
Station Address Province		✓[alpha eg MASH WEST]				

