

Internal Marketing Strategies in State Universities in Zimbabwe: A case of Midlands State University

¹Mupemhi Shepherd, ²Mupemhi Ronicah

^{1,2}Dept. of Marketing, Midlands State University, Graduate School Of Business, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Abstract

The Midlands State University (MSU) was established in 1999 through an Act of the Parliament of Zimbabwe. It is one of the nine state universities in Zimbabwe. In 2000, the number of academic staff was 87, and then reached 320 in 2005 against a projected number of 223. This number increased to 434 in 2010 against a projection of 430. This rise in the number of the academic staff was against the background of the brain drain as a result of the economic meltdown which the whole country experienced between 2005 and 2009. This paper, therefore, explores the talent and skills attraction and retention strategies employed by MSU during the decade of its existence. A documentary analysis in which the MSU Strategic and Business plans, Human Resource (HR) plans and payrolls were analyzed is used. This was coupled with unstructured interviews with the university Registrars and staff representatives. The results showed that there was a conscientious effort by the university to attract and retain the required skills. Above all, the open door policy of engaging management and the clearly defined promotion and tenure policies made the stay at MSU for the academic staff pleasant.

Keywords

Internal marketing; universities; higher education; employee attraction; employee retention.

I. Introduction

Since 1993 when the concept of human capital was coined by Becker there have been a lot of studies on the issue, for example, human capital development [2]; human capital as a source of competitive advantage [4] effect of training on productivity [21] and human resource metrics [22]. Although some great work has been done on the role of the human resource or human capital in higher education in countries like the UK [15,16], Mexico [10] and Turkey [1] to mention but a few, there is dearth of literature on the same subject in Zimbabwe. According to [19], the human capital is the most critical source of organisational capability. Therefore, any sustainable competitive advantage for universities is via the staff. The Midlands State University (MSU) is a public institution of higher learning that was established in 1999 in Zimbabwe through an Act of Parliament. It opened doors in year 2000 as a sixth university in Zimbabwe and started with a student enrolment of 400 and staff compliment of 87. To date, it has more than 10 000 students and 900 staff. MSU is now the third largest university in the country out of 13 universities and is the most preferred university by students and staff. According to Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) 2010 report, universities in Zimbabwe experienced a very high labour turnover between 2005 and 2009 due to brain drain as the human capital fled from the harsh economic conditions Zimbabwe was going through. However, at MSU the statistics show that the vacancy rate during the same period remained low. It is against this background that this paper will explore the internal marketing factors or initiatives which were employed by the Midlands State University to attract and retain its internal

customers or employees.

II. Literature Review

Higher education institutions are labour intensive [14] and therefore, of late there has been growing interest to increase job satisfaction [1]. In the UK, for example, since 2001 there was a concerted and coordinated strategy pursued by universities to modernise the human resource management (HRM) practice and increase job satisfaction. This comes after the realisation that employee satisfaction improves productivity, influences turnover and enhances creativity and commitment, [8]. The antecedents of job satisfaction in universities have been studied over the last twenty years. These include compensation, opportunity for development, organisational structure and climate [13, 20, 24]. The Worldat Work total rewards model in [5] identifies organisational culture, business strategy and human resource (HR) strategy as determinants of the organisation's reward strategy. This reward strategy has remuneration, benefits, work-life, development and career opportunities and performance and recognition as the key driving internal marketing variables. The Worldat work total rewards model therefore identifies organisational culture, business strategy, HR strategy and reward strategy as antecedents of employee attraction, motivation and retention. For the purpose of this study, the Worldat Work total rewards model shall be used as a conceptual framework to determine the internal marketing factors influencing attraction, motivation and retention of employees at MSU. This model allows producing a link between job satisfaction and employee attraction and retention.

III. Methodology

A cross-sectional study using mainly a qualitative approach was used in this study. A documentary analysis was used to ascertain the statistics of the staff; remuneration packages and documented strategic human resources initiatives from year 2005 to 2011. The documents assessed included the university's strategic and business plans; the human resource strategic plans, monthly staff submissions by departments to HR, monthly payrolls and staff union subscription lists. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted with the Deputy Registrar (human resources), Deputy Registrar (academic), the Registrar, the Bursar, and one representative each from the teaching and non-teaching groups. Dick in [9] suggests that for in-depth interviews, a small heterogeneous selection of people should be interviewed. Furthermore, [7] postulate that in-depth interviews can occur with as few as six interviewees as "beyond this stability number, increases in understanding are small and not worth the cost of the time spent in further interviewing". The interview guides for the Registrars had three main sections. The first section focused on issues to do with attraction of the right people to the posts that existed. The researchers wanted to know the pool of the human capital and how they ensured that it remained wide. The second part focused on motivation of the staff. The researchers wanted to know how the university socialised the new employees, the remuneration structure, career progression routes and the

forms of training the employees would go through. Finally, the third part dealt with development programmes and performance measures. The interview guide for the teaching and non-teaching representatives had open-ended structured questions. However, unstructured questions were also asked as follow up to the structured questions. The questions focused on why as teaching or non-teaching staff they joined MSU, how they fitted into the MSU organisational culture, their opinions on the current remuneration structures, benefits, the balance of work and life, development and career opportunities and performance evaluation and procedures. The guide also had questions requesting the interviewees to explain their likelihood of leaving MSU should opportunities emerge elsewhere.

IV. Results

Four themes were used as the unit of analysis in this study. These are the organisational culture, organisational business strategy, the HR strategy and the rewards strategy.

A. Organisational culture

All the six respondents echoed the same feeling that MSU had a unique organisational culture entrenched in its vision, mission and values. MSU's vision is "to be a unique, development-oriented, pace-setting and stakeholder-driven university that produces innovative and enterprising graduates". Respondents felt that the university has not diverted any ray of light from this vision. According to the Registrar, "the programmes have remained unique and are stakeholder-driven". The inertia that characterises most universities was said to be non-existent at MSU where quality was described as "no longer an achievement but way of life". Initiatives that adapt the university to changes in the environment seem to be quickly adopted at MSU. The Deputy Registrar Academic says, "We have to remain innovative to produce innovative and enterprising graduates. This is what makes MSU unique". It seems all employees want to be associated with the success story of MSU. The respondents expressed that there is a place of the employees in the university's mission and that the university cared for them. A part of the mission statement reads, "Commitment to the recruitment, motivation and retention of staff in an environment of a caring institution. Commitment to gender equality and equity in student admissions and staff recruitment policies". The teaching and non-teaching representatives were quick to point out the role the university played during the 2007-2008 period when there was scarcity of basic commodities on the market and how the university helped them to source these even from outside the country. They said they were now socially and emotionally attached to the university. It seems by staying at MSU they are only saying that, 'a good turn deserves another'.

B. Business Strategy

While MSU has a clearly crafted business plan, it emerged that both teaching and non-teaching staff representatives are not aware of it. The Registrar, Bursar and the two Deputy Registrars are well educated about the university business strategy as they are its architects. It seems for the teaching and non-teaching staff, the past and the present is what mostly bound them to MSU and not the future as the future of the university is articulated in the business strategy.

C. HR strategy

The university's HR strategy was well articulated at the first

two layers of respondents. However, this was not the same for the third layer of teaching and non-teaching staff. In the case of the last layer, the respondents did not know what to expect from HR apart from what is in their letters of appointment. They cited the absence of an HR handbook. It then remains unclear whether the knowledge of the HR strategy was going to enhance their stay at MSU or was going to push them to move away if that strategy was not in their favour.

D. Reward strategy

Although the reward strategy can be viewed as part of the HR strategy, for the purpose of this study, it has been separated to allow finer interrogation. The elements of the reward strategy which were examined were remuneration, benefits, work-life, development and career opportunities and performance and recognition.

1. Remuneration

Results from document analysis and the interviews revealed the following:

- That there is an equitable pay grade system at MSU
- MSU awards the highest incentive allowances in the country
- Part-time teaching allowances are paid fortnightly and appear separately on payslips
- All employees are on medical and funeral cover to which the employer contributes 80%.
- Segment specific perks such as car, housing, cell phone, etc do exist.

According to the Registrar, the university's unique programmes coupled with the policy of flexible packaging have made MSU's programmes very attractive. The high demand of the programmes by students has led to the establishment of three entry modes: conventional, parallel and visiting school. The last two modes of entry are for students who pay full fees and do not receive any grants from the government. These have become the university's cash cows and hence the university's ability to pay incentive allowances as 40 % of the fees goes to incentives and 60 % to part-time teaching allowances. Both the teaching and non-teaching staff representatives recognised the level of incentive allowances as good and critical in attracting and retaining staff at MSU.

2. Benefits

The benefits that are given to employees at MSU are segment specific. These include cars, housing and cell phones for the top segments and transport allowance, housing allowance, medical and funeral cover contribution from employer, educational benefits, and car and housing schemes for all the segments. The staff representatives seem not to be very happy with the benefits as some of the contractual benefits such as Contact and Sabbatical leave have not been fully honoured. The last time these were honoured was when the university courted the Central bank to support the institution.

3. Work-life

The need to balance work and social life is real critical in life. Documentary evidence shows that a high number of employees are not balancing work and life as they are not even taking leave. This was evidenced by a high number of leave days that had been accrued. A call by the Registrar posted on the university website reminded the staff to take leave during the short inter-semester break. The staff representatives indicated that

semesterisation system made it difficult to take leave as there were very few days between semesters. They said sometimes the university calendar was changed without being informed making planning difficult. These results seem to show that there is no balance between work and social life at MSU.

4. Development and career opportunity

The university has clearly defined development and career opportunity strategies. The acceptable minimum teaching qualification is a relevant Masters degree. Departments which do not have a full complement of staff may identify candidates with good passes at Bachelors level and recruit them for staff development. Those with Masters Degrees are encouraged to enrol for PhD programmes which are fully sponsored by the university. There is a staff development committee which reports to the Academic Board and coordinates the recruitment and supervision of the staff development fellows.

The interviews showed that academic departments have been able to identify committed, well groomed and intelligent students from their classes for staff development. This has helped produce dedicated staff that is likely to stay at MSU due to the 'umbilical attachment' to the university.

Newly recruited members of staff are required to go through an induction programme run by experienced educationists. They are exposed to new teaching methodologies; socialised to MSU's organisational purpose by reframing its vision, mission and values; taught how to access the university's e-resources and are taken through the general induction by departments. This also has aided in strengthening the attachment of staff to the university.

5. Performance and recognition

MSU operates on committee systems. There are 72 committees in the entire university. Members of the teaching staff are required to belong to at least a committee. These committees are assigned tasks and given responsibilities and in turn they devise strategies and make decisions. For example, the university planning follows the Result-Based Management (RBM) model. Ten key result areas (KRA) have been identified. Committees work on specific KRAs assigned to them. This means that every staff is involved in decision making. Interviews with the staff representatives showed that the committee system gives them a sense of belonging, empowers them and engenders trust. Outstanding committees are then recognised at various levels such as department, faculty or university-wide level.

Tenure and promotion policies clearly show that these are performance based. The criteria for tenure and promotion are outstanding research, teaching and community/university service. The minimum research papers one has to publish in refereed journals for tenure is one; 8 papers for promotion to senior lecturer; 12 for Associate professor and 16 for full professor. The interviews revealed that the staff is satisfied with the tenure and promotion policy as it is clear and well communicated to them.

6. Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the internal marketing factors or initiatives at MSU which have given it a competitive advantage in attracting, motivating and retaining the desired human capital. The proposed factors that contribute to the attraction, motivation and retention of employees are organisational culture, business strategy, HR strategy and

the reward strategy. The study reveals that organisational culture and reward strategy were critical factors in attracting and retaining employees at MSU. These results are consistent with literature on other sectors, particularly the findings by [5,12,18,25]. Their studies showed that there is a link between remuneration and employee commitment, job satisfaction and retention.

V. Conclusion

Universities all over the world are experiencing high staff mobility. It is believed that the university culture, business strategy, HR strategy and reward strategy are key in attracting, motivating and retaining the staff. However, the findings of this study showed that in Zimbabwe and MSU in particular, the organisational culture and reward strategy are the driving forces of employee attraction, motivation and retention.

5.1 Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study had a cross-sectional design and did not focus on demographic segments. It would be interesting to repeat the study and assess the effect of reward strategy and organisational culture on staff in different demographic segments defined by variables such as gender, age and educational qualifications.

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Shepherd Mupemhi holds an Med, Postgraduate Diploma in Marketing and an MBA (Marketing Strategy) from Cuba, South Africa and Cyprus respectively. He worked as teaching assistant and lecturer in the Department of Marketing Management at the Midlands State University, Zimbabwe from 2001 to 2009. Currently is Director of the Graduate School of Business Leadership at the same university.



Ronicah Mupemhi holds B.Com (Hon) Marketing degree and Master of Commerce in Marketing Strategy degree from the Midlands State University, Zimbabwe. Ronicah is a lecturer at the Midlands State University and teaches International Marketing.