

# The role of strategic human resources in cultivating a culture of good Industrial Relations in the SADC region. A case of XYZ Open University

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## **Abstract**

*Industrial relations is an important discipline in modern day University governance and administration. In that endeavour the human resources function becomes the key driver to ensure that the relations between the employer and the employees are maintained. This is where strategic orientation and thinking comes in from a human resources perspective. The purpose of this study was to interrogate the role played by the human resources function in ensuring best industrial relations practices at XYZ Open University. The major findings were that –a clear role needed to be defined for the human resources function in terms of strategic focus and that there was room for improvement in building good industrial relations practice. The major recommendation is that a culture of good employee relations needed to be perpetuated in the interest of all stakeholders-employees, employer and external stakeholders.*

## **Key words**

Strategic Human Resources, Industrial Relations, Hard and Soft Human Resources, Employee Relations Management

## **1.1 Introduction**

Successful Universities facilitate the attainment of their visions through embracing strategic human resources management systems that are dynamic and environment sensitive. Strategic Human Resources Management (SHRM) is an approach to making decisions on the intentions and plans of the organisation in the shape of the policies, programmes and practices concerning the employment relationship,

resourcing, learning and development, performance management, reward, and employee relations. The area of industrial relations seems to have received little attention as an integral part of strategic human resources orientation and this study is entirely devoted to meta-interrogation of the practices at one of the major Open Universities in the SADC region in terms of the degree to which focus of strategic human resources has not neglected the industrial relations aspect.

## 1.2 Background of the Study

The tertiary education system in the SADC region has thrived over the years in what one would want to call –vibrant leadership of institutions of high learning. While success can be attributed to various factors, it is important to ,for the purposes of this study narrow and water the focus down to specifics-in this case focusing on the strategic human resources function and the role it plays in enhancing industrial relations. While they are many universities in the SADC region, as researchers we chose to look at one (*name concealed for ethical reasons and will use acronym XYZ to represent the case university for reference purposes in this paper*) and how it has embraced the discipline of strategy with regard to human resources management and the integral aspect of enhancing industrial relations as a component of strategic orientation. As a distant learning institution in Sub-Sahara, and one of the biggest open institutions, XZY systems of human resources management are contextually different from those of the conventional universities such as University of Botswana, National University of Science and Technology, National University of Lesotho, University of Pretoria or University of Zambia and many others. Strategic human resources is a well practiced phenomena at XYZ but the challenge that peripherally is prevailing is that of the degree of inclusion of industrial aspects as integral part of the role of soft approach to human resources management.

XYZ is a distance education university in the SADC region established about two decades ago and it is one of the major universities in the region. Student enrolment at XYZ has been growing steadily from the time of its formation. XYZ has five faculties under which the academic programmes are conducted. The core ideology of the university is "to develop a best-practice enterprise-culture-based on open and distance learning -focused on influencing development and change in socio-economic development". XYZ states its mission as (paraphrased) “empowering people within and without the region through lifelong learning, thereby enabling them to realise their full potential in an affordable and flexible and systematic manner

while executing their various endeavours". In order to increase its accessibility for students, the university rapidly established regional centres in each of the countries provinces and some parts of the region. Each regional centre serves as the hub for all the learning activities for students in that province: from registration to face-to-face tutoring and counselling and from assignment administration to a venue for invigilated examinations. These centres obviate the need for students to travel to the university's headquarters, thus substantially cutting travelling costs. The dotted model of the universities in which it has offices and branches all over the country and region provide challenges in providing an all encompassing integral system that takes into account employer –employee relations which are what constitutes good industrial relations. Given these challenges, and absence of a sizeable number of studies in this area in the SADC region, we got inspired as researchers to carry out a study to see how the University embraces this function (phenomenon) in tandem with the dictates of best practices in Industrial relations.

### 1.3 Problem Statement

Despite the strategic nature of industrial relations, there has been very little research on how strategic human resource management impact on good industrial relations. There is generally lack of recognition of good industrial relations practices in today's tertiary education industry-a cause for concern .This emerged during the socio-economic global changes experienced during the past two decades.

### 1.4 Research questions

Given the stated research problem, the study posits the following research questions:

- What is the role of strategic human resources in enhancing best practices in industrial relations at XYZ?
- Could there be challenges in implementing an integral human resources planning model that captures the component of industrial relations at XYZ?
- Are they any benefits of adopting an integral human resources model?

### 1.5 Significance of the study

This study is being carried out against a number of backgrounds.

- Firstly, the importance of this study rests on the need to explore an area in Strategic Human Resources Management that has not been given enough focus- that is, its impact on industrial relations. There has been little research undertaken to find the profound effect that the prescribed Strategic HR roles can have on employee relations in local universities. Thus we strongly feel the need to further conscientise society about the necessity of the HR roles and their values and usefulness is critical to the development of employee relations as an instrumental tool to gain competitive advantage.
- Thirdly, this study lays a platform for further studies in the areas of strategic human resources and industrial relations.
- Fourthly, from a scholarly perspective the study adds to the body of theories and knowledge on the validity of strategic human resources and industrial relations in a way.

### 1.6 Theoretical and conceptual framework

The field of strategic human resources is a fairly new field in human resources discipline. The current body of knowledge on strategic human resources is embedded in philosophical aspects of both soft and hard human resources management and the theoretical grounding that provide pointers to the discipline. The roots of HRM go back as far as the 1950s, when writers like Drucker and McGregor stressed the need for visionary goal-directed leadership and management of business integration (Armstrong, 1987). This was succeeded by the 'behavioural science movement' in the 1960s, headed by Maslow, Argyris and Herzberg. These scholars emphasised the 'value' aspect of human resources (HR) in organisations and argued for a better quality of working life for workers. This formed the basis of the 'organisational development movement' initiated by Bennis in the 1970s. The 'human resource accounting' (HRA) theory developed by Flamholtz (1974) was an outcome of these sequential developments in the field of HRM and is considered to be the origin of HRM as a defined school of thought. The literature contains many theoretical models that highlight the nature of linkage between HRM strategies and organisational strategies. Fombrun et al.'s (1984) 'matching model' highlights the 'resource' aspect of HRM and

emphasises the efficient utilisation of human resources to meet organisational objectives best practices in Industrial relations.

Indeed, for some, the very idea of 'tight fit' makes the organisation inflexible, incapable of adapting to required changes and hence 'misfitted' to today's dynamic business environment. The matching model also misses the 'human' aspect of human resources and has been called a 'hard' model of HRM (Guest, 1987; Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995). Despite the many criticisms, however, the matching model deserves credit for providing an initial framework for subsequent theory development in the field of strategic HRM. The soft variant of HRM The 'Harvard model' of strategic HRM is another analytical framework, which is premised on the view that if general managers develop a viewpoint of '*how they wish to see employees involved in and developed by the enterprise*' then some of the criticisms of historical personnel management can be overcome.

The ontological and epistemological issues attached to the discipline of strategy in human resources and industrial relations are a critical ingredient and components of successful performance of organisations. For the purpose of the study we focused on the two main concepts that are strategic HR roles and industrial relations. The study used the strategic roles as cited in Armstrong (2010) and the approaches to industrial relations (the Human Relations Approach and The Human Resource Management Approach as cited in Salomon (1992). The conceptual framework of this study is squarely depended on the alluded ontological and epistemological dimensions of the discipline of strategic human resources and the tenets of industrial relations as embedded in the hard and soft approaches to human resources management.

## 1.7 Literature Review

The section below explores the literature available on human resources issues and industrial relations in particular.

### 1.7.1 Definition of Key terms

The following terms underlines key definitions usefully contextualised to meet the objective of this study.

- **Strategy** : The origin of this concept can be traced in its military orientation, going back to the Greek word 'strategos', for a general who organises, leads and directs his forces to the most advantageous position (Bracker, 1980; Legge, 1995; Lundy and Cowling, 1996). In the world of

business it mainly denotes how top management is leading the organisation in a particular direction in order to achieve its specific goals, objectives, vision and overall purpose in the society in a given context / environment. The main emphasis of strategy is thus to enable an organisation to achieve competitive advantage with its unique capabilities by focusing on present and future direction of the organisation (also see Miller, 1991; Kay 1993).

- **Strategic Human resources management:** SHRM is about systematically linking people with the organisation; more specifically, it is about the integration of HRM strategies into corporate strategies. HR strategies are essentially plans and programmes that address and solve fundamental strategic issues related to the management of human resources in an organisation (Schuler, 1992). They focus is on alignment of the organisation's HR practices, policies and programmes with corporate and strategic business unit plans (Greer, 1995).
- **Industrial relations:** Employer-employee relationships that are covered specifically under collective bargaining and industrial relation laws. Professor Barnash (1954) defined IR as "*Area of study and practice concerned with the administration of the employment function in modern public and private enterprise. This function involves workers, unions, managers, government and various publics*". Professor Margerison (1969) defined it as "*The study of people in a situation, organization or system interacting in the doing of work in relation to some form of contract, written or unwritten... the essential element in all industrial relations is conflict.... The nature and development conflict itself.*" Hyman (1975) has defined IR as "Industrial Relation is the study of process of control over work relations". Flanders (1975) defined IR as "The relations between the enterprise and its employees and among those employees themselves... the study of industrial relations may therefore be described as a study of the institutions of job regulation".

For the purposes of this study the following key tenets will be borrowed from various scholars' definitions and explanation of industrial relations-administrations of the employment function, employer employee relations, job regulation, conflict dilution and resolution and tripartite arrangements.

- **Employment Relationship** is "Behaviour and communication between an employee and their employer, especially relating to employees' rights and their happiness in their jobs.(Cambridge

dictionary).The program is aimed at providing managers with the knowledge and skills they need to maintain good employment relations." For the purposes of this study, this definition will be totally embraced as is.

### **1.7.2 Emergence of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)**

The developments in the field of HRM highlight the contribution it can make towards business success and an emphasis on HRM to become an integral part of business strategy (Lengnick-Hall and Lengnick-Hall, 1988; Brewster and Larsen, 1992; Bamberger and Meshoulam, 2000; Schuler and Jackson, 2007). The emergence of the term 'strategic human resource management' (SHRM) is an outcome of such efforts. It is largely concerned with 'integration' of HRM into the business strategy and 'adaptation' of HRM at all levels of the organisation (Guest, 1987; Schuler, 1992).

Broadly speaking, SHRM is about systematically linking people with the organisation; more specifically, it is about the integration of HRM strategies into corporate strategies. HR strategies are essentially plans and programmes that address and solve fundamental strategic issues related to the management of human resources in an organisation (Schuler, 1992). They focus is on alignment of the organisation's HR practices, policies and programmes with corporate and strategic business unit plans (Greer, 1995). Strategic HRM thus links corporate strategy and HRM, and emphasises the integration of HR with the business and its environment. It is believed that integration between HRM and business strategy contributes to effective management of human resources, improvement in organisational performance and finally the success of a particular business (see Holbeche, 1999; Schuler and Jackson, 1999). It can also help organisations achieve competitive advantage by creating unique HRM systems that cannot be imitated by others (Barney, 1991; Huselid et al., 1997). In order for this to happen, HR departments should be forward-thinking (future-oriented) and the HR strategies should operate consistently as an integral part of the overall business plan (Stroh and Caligiuri, 1998). The HR-related future-orientation approach of organisations forces them to regularly conduct analysis regarding the kind of HR competencies needed in the future, and accordingly core HR functions (of procurement, development and compensation) are activated to meet such needs (see Holbeche, 1999).

### 1.7.3 Industrial Relations

There is no unanimity on the meaning and scope of industrial relations since different terms, such as labour-management relations, employer-employee relations, union-management relations, personnel relations, human relations, are in use and are used synonymously. In its stricter sense, the term “industrial relations” means relationship between management and workmen in a unit or an industry. In its wider connotation, it means the organisation and practice of multi-pronged relationships between workers and management, unions and workers, and the unions and managements in an industry. Dale Yoder defines it as a “whole field of relationship that exists because of the necessary collaboration of men and women in the employment process of an industry.”

Tead and Metcalfe observed that “industrial relations are the composite result of the attitudes and approaches of employers and employees towards each other with regard to planning, supervision, direction and coordination of the activities of an organization with a minimum of human efforts and frictions with an animating spirit of cooperation and with proper regard for the genuine well-being of all members of the organization.” According to Allan Flanders, “the subject of industrial relations deals with certain regulated or institutionalized relationships in industry. Professor Clegg defines industrial relations in the broadest terms as encompassing the rules governing employment together with the ways in which the rules are made and changed and their interpretation and administration.”

Put simply, industrial relations is that part of management which is concerned with the manpower of the enterprise. It is, thus, the relation created at different levels of the organisation by the diverse, complex and composite needs and aspirations and attitudes and approaches among the participants. It is a highly complex and dynamic process of relationships involving not only employees and managements, but also their collective forums and the State. In an organisation, these relationships may be personal and informal at one end, and may be highly institutional with legally prescribed structures and procedures, at the other end.

The four main parties who are actively associated with any industrial relations system are the workers, the managements, the organisations of workers and managements, and the State. Fundamentally, the term industrial relations refers to an organised relationship between two organised parties representing



employers and employees regarding matters of collective interest. With the growth of professional management, the industrial relations scene is being represented by the representatives of both the employers and the employees. But the scope of industrial relations cannot merely be confined to common labour-management relations or employer-employee relations. It is a comprehensive and total concept embracing the sum total of relationships that exists at various levels of the organisational structure. More specifically, it connotes relations among workers themselves within the class of employees, relations among the managements within the managerial class, and relations between the two distinct classes of workers and management.

It remains to consider some of the basic objectives of IR, which could be said to include the following:

- The efficient production of goods and services and, at the same time, determination of adequate terms and conditions of employment, in the interests of the employer, employees and society as a whole, through a consensus achieved through negotiation
- The establishment of mechanisms for communication, consultation and cooperation in order to resolve workplace issues at enterprise and industry level, and to achieve through a tripartite process, consensus on labour policy at national level
- Avoidance and settlement of disputes and differences between employers, employees and their representatives, where possible through negotiation and dispute settlement mechanisms
- To provide social protection where needed e.g. in the areas of social security, safety and health, child labour, etc
- Establishment of stable and harmonious relations between employers and employees and their organizations, and between them and the State

#### **1.7.4 Approaches to Industrial Relations**

They are quite number of approaches to industrial relations. The study has explored on the subsequent approaches as outplayed in the subsequent sections.

##### **Marxist Approach**

The class conflict analysis of industrial relations derives its impetus from Marxist social thinking and interpretation. Marxism is essentially a method of social enquiry into the power relationships of society and a way of interpreting social reality. The application of Marxian theory as it relates to industrial relations derives indirectly from later Marxist scholars rather than directly from the works of Marx himself.

Industrial relations, according to Marxists, are in the first instance, market-relations. To Marxists, industrial relations are essentially politicized and part of the class struggle. For Marxists industrial and employee relations can only be understood as part of a broader analysis of capitalist society in particular the social relations of production and the dynamics of capital accumulation. As Marx himself put it, “the mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life.”The Marxist approach is primarily oriented towards the historical development of the power relationship between capital and labour. It is also characterised by the struggle of these classes to consolidate and strengthen their respective positions with a view to exerting greater influence on each other. In this approach, industrial relations is equated with a power-struggle. The price payable for labour is determined by a confrontation between conflicting interests. The capitalist ownership of the enterprise endeavours to purchase labour at the lowest possible price in order to maximise their profits. The lower the price paid by the owner of the means of production for the labour he employs, the greater is his profit. The Marxist analysis of industrial relations, however, is not a comprehensive approach as it only takes into account the relations between capital and labour. It is rather, a general theory of society and of social change, which has implications for the analysis of industrial relations within what Marxists would describe as capitalist societies.

## Pluralist Approach

Pluralism is a major theory in labour-management relations, which has many powerful advocates. The focus is on the resolution of conflict rather than its generation, or, in the words of the pluralist, on 'the institutions of job regulation.' Kerr is one of the important exponents of pluralism. According to him, the social environment is an important factor in industrial conflicts. The isolated masses of workers are more strike-prone as compared to dispersed groups. When industrial jobs become more pleasant and employees' get more integrated into the wider society, strikes will become less frequent. Ross and Hartman's cross national comparison of strikes postulates the declining incidents of strikes as societies industrialise and develop appropriate institutional framework. They claim that there has been a decline in strike activity all over the world in spite of an increase in union membership. The theories on pluralism were evolved in the mid-sixties and early seventies when England witnessed a dramatic resurgence of industrial conflicts. However, the recent theories of pluralism emanate from British scholars, and in particular from Flanders and Fox. According to Flanders, conflict is inherent in the industrial system. He highlighted the need for a formal system of collective bargaining as a method of conflict resolution.

Fox distinguishes between two distinct aspects of relationship between workers and management. The first is the market relationship, which concerns with the terms and conditions on which labour is hired. This relationship is essentially economic in character and based on contracts executed between the parties. The second aspect relates to the management's dealing with labour, the nature of their interaction, negotiations between the union and management, distribution of power in the organisation, and participation of the union in joint decision-making. The major critics of the pluralist approach are the Marxists according to whom exploitation and slavery will continue unabated in the institutional structure of pluralism. The only difference is that in such a social structure, the worker will be deemed to be a better-paid wage slave.

## Weberian Approach

The social action approach of Weber has laid considerable importance to the question of control in the context of increasing rationalisation and bureaucratisation. Closely related to Weber's concern related to control in organisations was his concern with "power of control and dispersal". Thus a trade union in the Weber's scheme of things has both economic purposes as well as the goal of involvement in political and power struggles. Some of the major orientations in the Weberian approach have been to analyse the

impact of techno-economic and politico-organisational changes on trade union structure and processes, the subjective interpretation of workers' approaches to trade unionism and finally the power of various components of the industrial relations environment – government, employers, trade unions and political parties. Thus the Weberian approach gives the theoretical and operational importance to “control” as well as to the power struggle to control work organisations – a power struggle in which all the actors in the industrial relations drama are caught up.

### **Human Relations Approach**

In the words of Keith Davies, human relations are “the integration of people into a work situation that motivates them to work together productively, cooperatively and with economic, psychological and social satisfactions.” According to him, the goals of human relations are: (a) to get people to produce, (b) to cooperate through mutuality of interest, and (c) to gain satisfaction from their relationships. The human relations school founded by Elton Mayo and later propagated by Roethlisberger, Whitehead, W.F. Whyte, and Homans offers a coherent view of the nature of industrial conflict and harmony. The human relations approach highlights certain policies and techniques to improve employee morale, efficiency and job satisfaction. It encourages the small work group to exercise considerable control over its environment and in the process helps to remove a major irritant in labour-management relations.

#### **1.7.5 The Relationship between HRM and Industrial Relations**

Human Resource Management and industrial relations are two distinct concepts. There are clear differences between their various emphases of workplace interest, such that it would not be hard to reach the conclusion that there are likely to be significant problems in trying to meld them together. Indeed, on face value, the distinctions identified may even seem irreconcilable. One could conceivably choose one or the other as a guide to, or mode of, labour management practice, but not both. Much of the HRM literature reflects this problem, typically devoting one or two chapters to industrial relations institutions and rules without saying much about how these fit into its overall vision (see, for example: Stone, 2002). The industrial relations literature is similarly inclined, saying little about HRM programmes or how they might be expected to operate within the institutional machinery that regulate the rules of workplace relations (see, for example: Petzall, Abbott & Timo, 2003). What comment has been passed has typically regarded HRM as a threat to industrial relations, the assumption being that its individualist and unitarist

orientations are inimitable to the collectivist rule-making processes and the pluralist institutions set up to govern such processes (see, for example: Hamberger, 1995). In other words, you can apply one (i.e. HRM) to replace the other (i.e., industrial relations), but you cannot have both.

From a theoretical point of view such an argument seems coherent. Industrial relations are based on the assumption that there is an ever-present potential for conflict between competing workplace groups, and therefore rules and institutions for its regulation are necessary. HRM, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that conflict is not an inherent part of workplace relations and therefore such rules and institutions are not needed. Indeed, from an HRM standpoint, they are often conceived to be the actual cause of conflict, such that their removal is fundamentally necessary for the proper operation of HRM practices. As a basis for action two competing claims flow from this rationale. The first is that the less pervasive are the rules and in situations of industrial relation, the more HRM practices will prosper to the benefit of all. Hence the action to be taken is to seek the reduction or elimination of such rules and institutions. The second is that the more properly HRM practices perform to the benefit of all, the less need there will be for the rules and institutions of industrial relations the action in this instance being to persist with HRM practices until this end is achieved. Firms in the industrial west have generally followed one or the other of these advocacies, some lobbying government for measures to limit the powers and prerogatives of such things as trade unions and industrial tribunals, others introducing HRM practices as a means of weaning employees away from such things as collective agreements and union affiliation.

### **1.7.6 Approaches to Managing Management-Union Relations**

Since the possible coexistence of HRM and industrial relations practices is very much predicated upon how an organisation chooses to relate with trade unions it is important to look at approaches an organisation might take in its management-union relations.

The first approach identified by Fells (2003) involves managing trade union relations externally by referring industrial relations issues to employer associations or labour lawyers, thus providing the organisation with representation in negotiations conducted with trade unions and on matters brought before industrial tribunals. The advantage of this approach is that management can draw on outside industrial relations expertise, which can be cost effective, particularly for small organisations. It also allows organisations to resist trade union demands by making reference to industry standards and

tribunal decisions. The major disadvantage is that any settlements reached will be less tailored to the particular circumstances of the organisation, and they may also not get to the root cause of the issue in dispute. This approach broadly reflects management-union relations under the centrally negotiated collective bargaining system. It is antithetical to the possibility of HRM practices as the wages and conditions of work are externally determined and imposed on the organisation from 'outside'. In short, the 'on-the-job' co-existence of HRM and industrial relations practices is difficult to contemplate under this type of approach.

The second approach involves managing trade unions relations internally through a specialist Department (e.g. HRM). The third approach identified by Fells (2003) involves managing trade union relations internally through line managers. In this instance, line managers are given the responsibility for dealing with industrial relations issues, negotiating directly with trade unions and providing representation in the proceedings of industrial tribunals. They may call on advice from an internal specialist department or externally from an employer association or labour lawyer, but the ultimate responsibility for any outcomes resulting from such negotiations and representations rests with them. Because of the closeness of line managers to the source of industrial relations problems, one advantage of this approach is that it encourages the early resolution of industrial relations issues. The final approach involves managing trade union relations, either externally through employer associations and labour lawyers and/or internally through line managers or specialist departments, but in this instance the aim is not to accommodate trade unions and industrial relations issues but to seek their elimination altogether from the workplace. To this end, it seeks to encourage employees away from trade union affiliation and thereby dispense with industrial relations issues by having line managers deal directly with employees on an individual and exclusive basis. It further more involves resisting or limiting workplace access to trade unions and strongly opposing their claims and demands in industrial tribunals. The main advantages and disadvantages of this approach extend upon those listed in the previous approach, the only difference being that the importance placed on the competency of line managers to deal with industrial relations issues, trade unions and industrial tribunals is dependent upon the success or otherwise of the approach.

## 1.8 Research Methodology

The research incorporated both qualitative (phenomenology) and quantitative (positivism) research approaches. Phenomenology is a fact or occurrence that appears when the cause in question. It is an approach that focuses on how life is experienced (Weiner & Ferber, 1983). Positivism conforms to the principle of natural science experimentation, that works with an observable social reality and that the end product of such research can be law like generalisation similar to those produced by physical and natural scientists (Bowen and Rubenstein, 1992). Phenomenology deals with people's emotions and feelings. In this study, we used it to establish whether the prescribed Strategic HR roles had a positive or negative impact on IR (Saunders et al, 2000). Secondly, phenomenology emphasis on interpretation rather than measurement (Moser and Kalton, 1996). In this study, it was difficult to measure the perceptions of people with regard to the role of strategic HR and its impact on industrial relations; but it was a lot easier to interpret these feelings in relationships to what is happening on the ground.

In this study, given the nature of the problem that was being investigated, and based on the general literature to be reviewed, a case study methodology was the most appropriate in terms of generating the kind of information that would best explain the phenomena of prescribed strategic HR roles and their consequent impact on industrial relations. We used semi-structured interviews for senior management and managerial staff as a data collection while questionnaires were administered to the rest of the employees. According to Bradley M.A and Harrell M.C (2009) semi-structured interviews are usually used in policy research. In semi-structured interviewing, a guide is used, with questions and topics that must be covered. The interviewer has some discretion about the order in which questions are asked, but the questions are standardized, and probes may be provided to ensure that the researcher covers the correct material. This kind of interview collects detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational. Semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided.

A questionnaire was also developed and used to gather data from employees of XYZ. Questionnaires should always have a definite purpose that is related to the objectives of the research, and it needs to be clear from the outset how the findings will be used. Respondents also need to be made aware of the purpose of the research wherever possible, and should be told how and when they will receive feedback

on the findings. The population herein was divided according to the XYZ National centre Units for example, the Human Resources, Marketing, and Finance unit and so on. We used random stratified sampling procedure because given the nature of this study this method ensured that we minimised bias by just picking respondents randomly from specified strata. A sample frame which had a total of 438 was used while XYZ has a total of 851 employees (at the time of the study) according to the approved organo-gram by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education. These are drawn from the 11 Regional Centres including the National Centre which is the head office.

The sample size was drawn from the various departments and units as shown in the table below:

**Table 1.1 Sample size**

UNIT	POPULATION	SAMPLE
Human Resources	21	5
Academic Registry	48	
Head Office	50	10
Commerce and Law	22	4
Legal Services	3	
Sciences	18	
Faculty of ICT	5	2
Information Communication Technology	27	5
Finance	19	5
Applied Social Sciences	30	4
Arts and Education	9	5
Corporate Services	4	
PVC Academic	3	
PVC Strategic Planning	6	
Internal Audit	6	
Marketing	12	
Research and Scholarship	5	
Registrar's Office	9	
Security	43	8
Centre for professional Development	4	
Higher Degrees	5	



Centre for Student Management	6	
Library and Information Science	11	
Agriculture	10	2
Quality Assurance	4	
Materials Development Unit	26	5
Virtual Centre	3	
Planning	6	
Records	13	
<b>Total</b>	<b>438</b>	<b>55</b>

### 1.9 Delimitations

The study was restricted to XYZ and its Regional Centres in all the country's political provinces. However, the sample that was drawn was representative of the entire organisation. The study limited itself to issues of industrial relations in the context of the strategic role played by the Human resources department.

### 1.9 Findings

This section presents findings from the data collected to assess the impact of strategic human resources roles on industrial relations. The data was analysed and interpreted to address the research questions raised earlier own. The Number of Questionnaires Distributed (NQD) was 55 and the Number of Questionnaires Responses (NQR) that were received was 45. The response rate for the semi-structured interviews was 100% as the targeted respondents were able to be interviewed given the time frame of the study. According to the statistics presented 45 out of 55 questionnaires distributed were responded to, this constitutes 82% response rate which is a fair representation of the sample size which the researcher had targeted. Further, the 18% of the chosen sample which were not received back by the researcher could have been due to other organizational activities that could have hindered them to respond timorously such as board meeting, vacation leave and any other such unforeseen circumstances. On the other hand we managed to interview all targeted respondents and this further enriched the research in that diverse views were obtained at 100% levels.

The gender distribution of the respondents was fair given that 28 were male while 20 were female. On the age distribution the strata which had 21-29 years of age recorded low numbers with a total of 5 respondents out of 25 indicating that organization did not have many young employees the level of education was encouraging as only 6 respondents did have tertiary education qualifications. The length of service of respondents shows that XYZ has been in existence for +or- 20 years.

The main aim of this research was to analyze the impact of HR strategic roles on industrial relations; therefore, more emphasis of analysis will be put on industrial relations. Judging from the questionnaire matrix and the interview matrix the pattern seem to suggest that HR seems to be more strategically aligned to management and shows a rather skilled and unpredictable alignment towards employees of particular interest the questionnaire matrix reveals a rather uneven distribution of views pertaining to HR roles from employees. The aim of the research was to identify the impact of the prescribed strategic human resource roles and their impact on industrial relations. There was 80% concurrence from the respondents that the roles of strategic management were intertwined with good industrial relations practices. It was agreed that no meaningful strategic human resources function existed without fully embracing the function of IR. According to the Human resources matrix most employees appreciate the service of HR to employees at department level as 25 employees agreed that HR gave them service. However, on the contrast 23 disagree that departments were coordinated well by HR. however, according to Armstrong (2010) giving service to departments is not enough but being able to coordinate departments effectively gives more positive outputs. This means that employees will be operating in their units in isolation from other units within the organization. Thus instead of employees working towards the same goal they seem to be operating to out compete each other which is a worrying scenario at XYZ.

On guidance and advice role while the managers appreciate the way HR handles this portfolio the non-availing of written policies and procedures compromises continuity in the event that key personnel leave the department or the organization. Written documents are critical to ensuring that there is organizational memory to be tapped on so that an organization remains a legal persona and is detached from individual entrusted to run it. According to the employees' response in this area we deduced that employees do not have confidence in the current policies and procedures being administered since they disagree that HR is good at this role. Therefore, one can conclude that there is a lot anxiety and uncertainty amongst employees at XYZ. This shows that HR is not divorced from the primary planning

stage which is a positive in that there are the pulse of the organization. In further probing findings from the questionnaire the majority were neutral as to whether HR was a business partner showing that there is an information gap somewhere in the dissemination process of primary strategic issues to the employees who are the implementers of these plans from shop floor levels. According to literature presented in chapter two it is no secret that HR as a business partner will facilitate the attainment of the overall business objectives and this can only be achieved if employees are aware of what is expected of them. Meaning each employee should have a clear job description which translates into a clear and well-defined performance target supported by adequate working tools and resources. Therefore the findings seem to suggest that the key issues mentioned above are missing deducing from the respondents of questionnaires on this issue.

Both interview respondents and questionnaire respondents were in agreement that HR was not proactive as a strategic department and hence is need for HR at XYZ to be visible amongst units during short and long term planning amongst units. The involvement of HR at strategic level across the organization ensures that there is equitable information sharing and hence it is easy for the organization to be in touch with its competitors and focus on areas need improvement business wise, further enabling them to reward employees at more competitive levels. This reduces employee conflicts and creates unity of purpose towards the achievement of business of business goals.

In terms of innovation there is consensus that according to the findings, HR is comfortable to be maintenance managers rather than inventors of new ideas which generate wealth for the organization. Although managers believe the structure is hindering HR to be inventors but questionnaire results reflect though there is very little evidence as to why that is the case. Questionnaire respondents also disagree that HR at XYZ are good change agents and further interview respondents believe certain changes that HR implement are beyond their call of duty and did not want to be probed further into the issue.

The impact of the way change is being handled is however negative as employees believe they are subject to trauma according to questionnaire results. However, literature suggests that change is the most sensitive and highly detested by employees as they always believe that they are the biggest loser in any change process. Change has got a double effect on employees as there is post-change trauma, during change trauma and post change trauma. The sensitivity of change itself is indicative of the fact that HR

should never underestimate its impact on industrial harmony given its nature be it socially, at the work or otherwise. However, change is inevitable but its administration should take into cognizance the sensitivities of humans.

On the issue of internal consultancy findings seem to suggest that there is a huge gap between the current performance and expectations of both managements and employees. However, the ability to diagnose and be able to extinguish problems will go a long way in ensuring that labour and capital is able co-exists according M. Salaman (1997) that the pluralistic approach is the only way that progressive organizations are able to balance the expectations of workers and employer in this case management.

In this vain if the data gathered is to be looked at critically it seems to suggest that the HR, Industrial Relations mode at XYZ is more unitaristic in nature rather than the more accommodative approach alluded to earlier in the discussion. On the other hand it can also be deduced that questionnaire respondents were not conversant with the HR jargon that was used in trying to extrapolate appropriate response from them given the educational orientation of some of the respondents.

Human resources are supposed to be performing the monitoring role of policies, procedures and practices with a view of having uniformity an organization is run. Managerial respondents who were interviewed seem to satisfied that this is being done well and indeed evidence suggest that they believe, procedures and practices were being administered to the best of HR personnel's ability at XYZ. Questionnaire respondents gave evidence to the contrary further harnessing the point that there is some information gap between management and employees, hence, the issue of staff morale being suggested to be too low. HR has the responsibility to integrate management and worker's views about the administering of policies and practices at XYZ because business objectives will not be fully achieved without boosting staff morale. Thus the issue of staff morale has shown the monitoring role has had a negative on the industrial relations climate at XYZ.

Values of organizations distinguish one organization from the other and they make it unique. Therefore, findings seems to suggest that HR is performing well in this role however, according to questionnaire respondents there seem to be serious reservations on how discipline is being administered across units, pointing to the fact that the industrial relations climate is not well balanced within the organization in terms of discipline and the dispute resolution process though it is clearly in the labour act.

In conclusion the semi-structured interviews that were done by the researcher evidence is awash on what respondents wanted to say however, questionnaire matrix shows an uneven distribution amongst the respondents who responded to the questionnaire. What is only clear is that management seem to work as a team but questionnaire respondents suggest that employees seem to be divorced from key activities that are taking place within the organization therefore leaving them disgruntled.

### 1.10 Recommendations

The study here recommends that the following be considered:

- That the human resources function need to up its integral approach in terms of strategic focus and totally embrace the industrial relations function as one of its core activities and in order to enhance relationships that currently exist between the employer and the employed.
- There is need to adopt a participatory-consultative model of industrial relations and create a win-win scenario as opposed to the current situation of a win -lose game-where the employer is always on the win.
- There is need to run a series of workshops to conscientise and educate individual members and departments country wide on the importance of harmonisation of operations from a strategic human resources perspective targeting at creating good industrial relations. In the process of doing so, involving external and internal facilitators will make the job easier and more acceptable. There is need for a buy in.
- Adopting and implementation of good industrial relations through enhanced roles of the human resources function should not be an event but a process. In other words there is need for continuous evaluation of the system so that there is continuous improvement.
- The need to proved adequate resources cannot be overemphasised as this is necessary to ensure smooth implementation of the system
- There is need to continuously reinforce positive outcomes of the system so that the rest of departments and members of staff are motivated to embrace and accept the system and practice.

### 1.11 Conclusion

Given the plethora of events and activities emanating from the study, we do not hesitate to mention that the issue of strategic human resources role at XYZ still requires deep-seated thoughts, a holistic move as it relates to good industrial relations practice. It is important to mention that while some ground work has been done in an attempt to bring aboard its dictates, unity of purpose is needed. At least for now one cannot deny that there is some effort being put to re-energize the human resources role from a strategic position to reinforce and embrace a culture of good industrial relations practice. This study is just but one that will open –an open debate that will fruitfully culminate in transforming the role of the human resources function in Universities in SADC region and beyond and how the concept of best industrial relations practices should be embraced.

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## Author 1 Profile: Milton Gwakwa

### Who is Milton Gwakwa?



**"If you put nothing into the reservoir, nothing will come out of it"**

Milton Gwakwa is a Doctoral Fellow. He is currently a full-time freelance Consulting executive and founder of Africa Horizon Management Consulting. He is an accomplished and experienced academia and administrator and is currently in his final year of his studies in PhD in Business Administration- specializing in Entrepreneurship *epistomos and ontologis* with the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Zimbabwe. He holds a Master Degree in Business Administration (MBA) with National University of Science and Technology (NUST) and a Bachelor of Technology Honours Degree in Business Management obtained from the University of Zimbabwe. He has obtained several Management and Business Administration certificates that complement the above. He has worked both in the Public and Private sector as a Researcher, Trainer, Management Consultant, Tax Assessor, Administrator and Lecturer during his work career spanning back to 1994 and has worked in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Zambia and Lesotho between 1994 and 2015. As an accomplished academia, Researcher and administrator he has published several papers and carried out training on various leadership and management courses in Uganda, Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Dubai just but to mention a few. He is well travelled and has vast international exposure. His career is inspired and driven by the spirit of ubuntuism and African renaissance-the revival of African pride.