



Strengthening Public Sector Human Resource Management Capacities in Africa

Capacity Building Workshop on “Promoting Professionalism in the Public Service: Strengthening the Role of Human Resource Managers in the Public Sector for the effective implementation of the Charter for Public Service in Africa”

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HARD POWER: SOFT POWER

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Hard Power: Soft Power

The Secret to HR Influence & Impact

HR's Role in Promoting and strengthening professionalism in the Public Service in Africa: challenges and strategies for cultivating and strengthening professionalism in the Public service in Africa

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Introduction

The HR function has a pivotal role to play in fostering professionalism in the Public Service in Africa. This is the dominant theme of the APS-HRMnet, Addis 2011 workshop and the subject will be addressed in different ways and from a variety of- sometimes competing - perspectives. The argument in this short paper is that, In order to achieve this goal, HR must master the art of exercising power in all its subtleties and complexities. And specifically it must find ways to be truly exemplary in the institutional setting: influencing the behavior and attitudes of others by what it does. Too often HR, in both the public and private spheres, has failed to measure up and the function is often reduced in the eyes of its internal clients to a loose assembly of disjointed tools and processes or an nuisance compliance constabulary. It can be seen as impotent and powerless where it matters most. That need not be: many of HR's wounds, it is argued here, are self-inflicted and thus perfectly avoidable.

How should power be defined in this context and how should it be exercised? Certainly not the way *Machiavelli* mused about it in the Prince when he famously recommended that *"It is better to be feared than loved if one cannot be both"*. Probably sound advice in his era (and depressingly still the mode of choice of despots in some troubled corners of the World) but more recently and with respect to organizational life a more encompassing attitude to the exercise of power has been advocated. Charles Handy, for one, has written extensively and eloquently about the distinction between coercive or legally derived power and influence.¹ In a somewhat similar vein, the title of this paper **Hard Power: Soft Power** is plucked from the influential work of Joseph S. Nye, former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Professor Nye's primary focus has been on the exercise of power at the nation state level but his ideas also resonate at the institutional level. In a recent paper he had this to say about soft power:

"Leadership and power are inextricably intertwined. Broadly speaking, power is the ability to affect the behavior of others to get the outcomes you want, and there are three basic ways to do that:

- ☐ *You can coerce them with threats.*
- ☐ *You can induce them with payments*
- ☐ *Or you can attract and co-opt them.*

Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. At the personal level, we all know the power of attraction and seduction. In a relationship or a marriage, for example, power does not necessarily reside with the larger or richer partner, but in the poorly understood chemistry of attraction. Smart executives know that leadership is not just a matter of issuing commands, but also involves leading by example and attracting others to do what you want. As a former CEO once told me, you cannot run a large multinational by commands or threats alone. Many things in a large organization are

¹ Handy C. 1993, *Understanding Organizations*

*outside the leader's span of control. Your power is greater if you can get others to buy in to your values and vision."*²

This seems apt in the context of HR Management. All three ways of exercising power are at the HR function's disposal. The challenge is to find ways to use them so that they are mutually reinforcing and proportional. The paper discusses how HR can master the art of exercising hard and soft power. The examples and subject matters are illustrative only: the confines of a discussion paper do not permit a full or comprehensive treatment of the subject.

The author is reticent about launching hortatory prescriptions at the African HR Public Service community, partly because of lack of deep understanding of what is happening in the sector and partly because of an aversion to doing anything which might be construed as intellectual neo-colonialism. Some questions will be raised about HR in Africa but they should be interpreted as just that: questions and speculation.

The paper is structured as follows:

- ❖ We begin with a brief look at strengthening professionalism: what does this mean in the context of the African Public Service? The role and impact of the HR function is the exclusive laboratory for examining power and professionalism but the lessons learned have wider import.
- ❖ On the assumption that HR must lead by example, we then explore the question: to what extent does HR itself meet the standards of being a true profession?
- ❖ Several examples of how HR can exercise requisite hard power are then examined
- ❖ And finally, key ways in which HR can leverage soft power are offered up for consideration.

Professionalism in the Public Service (HR as a case study)

A 2000 UN report³ laid out a sensible set of criteria for gauging professionalism in the public service. It stated that: *"The public service as a profession, as it developed, espoused the values of probity, neutrality, and fairness, among many others. It has embraced the merit principle in setting up career structures from recruitment to promotions. By running the administrative machinery that supports decision-making and implements the policies and programs of the government-of the- day, public servants play an indispensable role in the sustainable development and governance of a nation. Further, as an institution, the public service ensures the continuity of administration between transitions of power, which are the hallmarks of modern day democracy. Given these crucial roles, a country expects its public service to demonstrate professionalism and ethics....."*

Based on the above, we recommend the following actions:

² Nye Joseph S. Jr. 2007 Soft Power, Hard Power and Leadership

³ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Public Economics: *Professionalism & Ethics in the Public Service, Issues & Practices in Selected Regions*

- *Each country makes the commitment and takes the necessary measures to regenerate professionalism and promote ethics in its public administration by:*
- *Creating managerial structures and mechanisms;*
- *Reforming civil service codes to introduce principles of neutrality, transparency, flexibility and stressing ethics and integrity;*
- *Implementing a system of recruitment, career development and remuneration based on merit;*
- *Improving and modernizing methodologies and programs for training civil servants.”*

The paper does not delve any deeper into the formal characteristics of professionalism, yet it's hard to quarrel with the general proposition. And as we will see later, the recommended espoused values of probity, neutrality, and fairness are quintessentially soft power values.

The term **professionalism** has a number of casual meanings in the vernacular, some of them quite tautological: “being good at what one does” as an example. More formally, however, professionalism can be described as typically exhibit the following features, including:

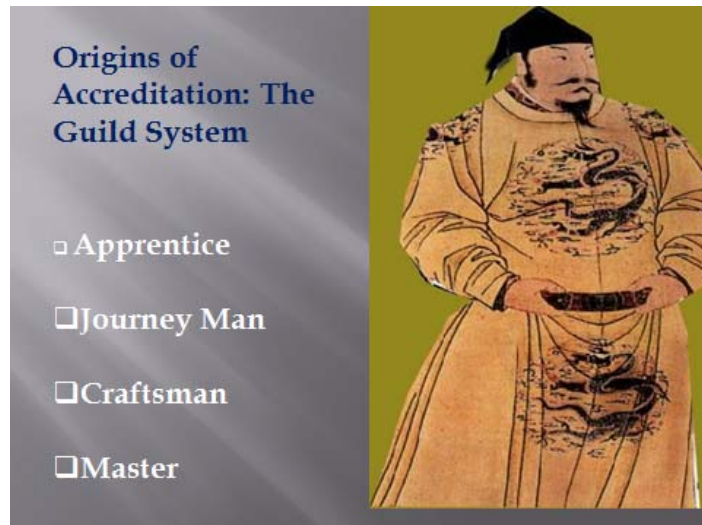
- It is associated with effort which is remunerated as opposed to amateur or pro bono enterprise.
- It connotes possession of expertise & specialized knowledge and efficacious use of same
- It's about the existence of established and recognized standards
- It's governed by a code of ethic
- And individuals take pride and are intrinsically motivated to live up to their shared standards in the act of delivering excellence

The question this begs is: to what extent does HR in the African Public Service exhibit professionalism and to what extent, indeed, can HR be regarded as a true profession? Again there is no one accepted definition of what constitutes a profession but the following features are posited:

- ❖ It is an occupational calling requiring specialized knowledge that can only be acquired through intensive and protracted study;
- ❖ Expertise is subject to accreditation;
- ❖ Accreditation and/or legal requirements constitute “high barriers to entry”;
- ❖ Knowledge acquisition and retention is dynamic: what is “cutting-edge” today may not be tomorrow
- ❖ There are most likely a number of career stages and distinct echelons of professional seniority

- ❖ Clients have a vested interest in the above conditions being met. There are varying degrees of risk associated with them not being met.

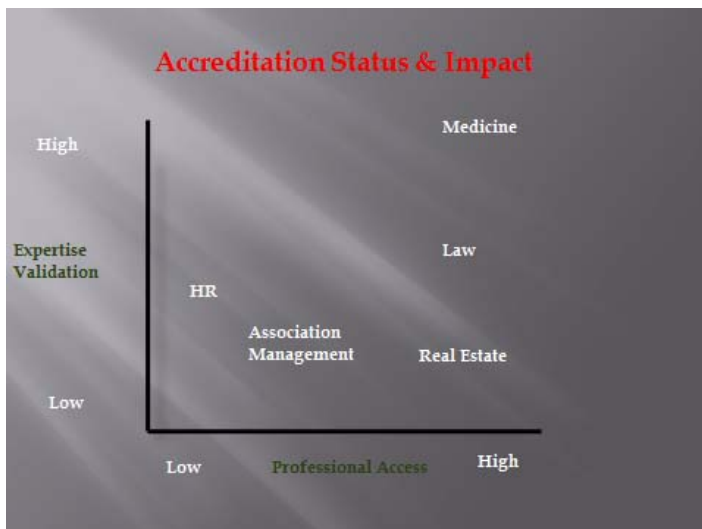
Lessons from the Guild System



In many respects, the modus operandi of professions owe a debt to the guild system - associations of craftsmen which flourished in Europe in the middle ages but whose antecedents can be traced as far back as the Gupta period in India (AD 300), the Han and Sui Dynasties of China and even ancient Greece.

Mature guilds protected the arts and secrets of their respective crafts and conferred gradations of status on their members, beginning with the apprentice stage and culminating in the master stage.

Guilds regulated two not necessarily fully compatible activities: husbanding knowledge and skills to which only guild members were privy; and guarding the exclusivity of the membership itself and its supply to the labor market. In key respects this combination of processes can be found in latter day professions which display varying permutations of rigor and steepness of accreditation on the one hand and ease of access to membership on the other. To illustrate, the location of a sample of professions and “quasi-professions” are mapped against these two dimensions.



The Medical profession serves as a blue ribbon benchmark for what an authentic profession should look like. Knowledge and skills are profound, always evolving, difficult to acquire and non-substitutable. The barriers-to-entry to each professional echelon or specialization are high and the

consumer market for medical services has a powerful vested interest in seeing that these standards are maintained, knowing the risks involved if they collapse or can be circumvented: no one wants to have visited upon them the attentions of a quack brain surgeon, for example. And medical quackery in most countries is not only a serious professional breach of trust but a punishable offense. There are perfectly sound reasons why this is so.

The legal profession, in contrast, arguably owns a less impenetrable, though still onerous, body of knowledge and expertise than medicine (*think “barrack room lawyer”!*) but barriers-to-entry to the profession in most countries are nevertheless tightly policed both by the local professional

associations and in many jurisdictions by state or local legislation. (Lawyers in the USA, for example, are required to pass state bar examinations if they want to ply their craft across state line, even though the body of the law is identical.)

In contrast other quasi-professions with relatively low accreditation thresholds still find ways in many countries to keep a firm grip on membership as a means of controlling market supply. The regulation of realtor licenses in the USA is a good case in point: acquisition of a license is de rigor in order to practice but the body of knowledge is quite shallow. This particular variant may have had its heyday in the unsavory practices of the British Trade Unions back in the 1960. The pejorative term “closed shop” described an all too familiar scenario in which trade unions (arguably mutations of the old guild system) had a strangle hold over supply of labor to certain occupations or work, frequently without any associated set of occupational standards or shared body of expertise. “Guild-lite” in other words.

Where does HR fit on the professional map? Rather lowly if truth be told: accreditation is typically a relatively low bar and barriers-to-entry are practically non-existent. There are many means of acquiring HR credentials –SHRM in the USA, CIPD in the UK and AHRI in Australia, as premier examples. The development programs leading to certification can be comprehensive and rigorous (the figure below outlines AHRI’s impressive professional development model) and yet lack of accreditation typically does not preclude association membership and, in any event, access to HR work and career opportunities is wide open. In more developed markets, absence of accreditation or association membership may militate against a candidate’s hiring prospects in a tight labor market but it does not constitute an absolute prohibition. Additionally, there is often considerable overlap between the content of accreditation curricula and what is taught in third level social science, psychology or business studies programs.



In summary, HR accreditation and/or association membership serves a number of softer purposes – a quest for continuous learning, say, or a yearning to “belong” professionally. It does not, however, regulate who gets to work in the HR field or what professional standards they are held to.

The problem of HR professionalism tends to be exacerbated in the public service

where many HR positions are filled by generalists and where HR constitutes an assignment rather than a career path. In an ideal world this would somehow be rectified and indeed the very existence of APS-HRMnet gives expression to a different mindset and purpose. But it will not change fundamentally

unless or until the prevailing incentive systems encourage or at least allow and reward individual public servants who wish to pursue a career in HR.

One final weak link in the HR professional chain, worth a mention in passing, is the relatively low risk attached to HR outcomes. Take recruitment as an example. While, in theory selection techniques and practices aim to and are touted as assisting in identifying the best and most qualified candidate for every job, the reality is quite different. Firstly is the unresolved debate about what are the surest predictors of future job performance. Raw IQ is strongly favored in some academic circles whereas competencies, attitudes, behaviors and so on hold sway among the practitioner/HR consulting ranks. They can't both be right. And secondly, amateurs don't necessarily cause horrible outcomes. Even the most blinkered member of a selection panel may be able to peer long enough through the fog of his or her biases and certitude to locate a candidate who, if not the best, is good enough and at least meets the requisite standards of the job. Unsuccessful candidates never get a chance to prove their worth but no feedback loop exists to invalidate the choice of a "good enough" candidate.

Notwithstanding the problems associated with HR as a fully-fledged profession and with the high flux in the HR ranks in the public service, HR can do a better job and garner more influence by attending to key aspects of hard and soft power.

Hard Power: Rules, Analytics & Metrics

Three aspects of HR Hard Power are singled out for attention. Firstly how the compliance function of HR policies and rules can be used in positive ways in the public service. Secondly how attending to thorough analysis and projections of the workforce can provide insight into optimal staffing. And thirdly how expanding the use of HR metrics can yield information critical to institutional decision-making.

Policies & Rules: Sound policies and staff rules constitute the foundation of public sector HRM.

Without policy and rules compliance consistency, fairness and order are at risk. But, equally, policies and rules must have clear meaning and serve a clear business purpose even, or especially, when the business is the business of government.

Too often, however, compliance is an end in itself and rules which make no sense, add to the administrative burden or impose avoidable costs on institutions are left unchallenged.

Frequent turnover of HR personnel – particularly in the public service and for the reasons outlined above - compounds the problem: why invest energy in tinkering with rules when one is likely to move onto another assignment outside the HR function: safer to hew to the status quo.

Best practice suggests that HR policies and rules need to be subject to periodic scrutiny and, where necessary overhaul, if they are not to ossify. A number of principles can aid this work:

- The underlying purpose of a policy or rule should be transparent, readily understood and not perceived as capricious;
- Policies and rules should serve a business purpose (here understood to mean the business of government) and not merely be imposed to regulate the behavior and rights of staff;
- They should be attuned to prevailing cultural mores while not abandoning universal values of equity and responsibility;
- And they should align with efficient use of institutional resources. A perverse by-product of rules meant to regulate behavior in bureaucracies is that they sometimes morph into justifications of entitlements – travel policies as a case in point.

Workforce Analytics (in the context of the changing nature of public sector employment)

Analysis and judicious use of data are at the heart of HR's exercise of hard power. Traditionally the function has stood alone as the one not in possession of robust data capable of swaying institutional decision-making. In the past decade, considerable strides have been made in what was traditionally termed manpower planning. Most fresh thinking has emanated from the private sector but the new approaches and models are equally relevant in the public service domain.

Increased Attention to Segmentation of Talent and Work

Traditional HR practice and workforce planning in particular tends to fuse work and worker: work that is important is carried out by employees, and the more important the work the more secure and tenured the employment and better the career prospects. The model hasn't always cooperated too well of course, particularly in tight labor market pockets or when public service compensation is uncompetitive with the private sector. The perennial challenge of attracting and retaining IT professionals in the public sector is a case in point, as is the challenge in the African public service of retaining high-end professionals such as doctors and lawyers. It also touches, however, on another less examined though critically important issue: difficulty or ease of attracting and retaining talent may or may not equate with how critical the skills being sought are to a particular public sector and its mission. A dogged preoccupation with competing for talent can in fact be a strategic distraction if the talent in question is required but not necessarily mission critical or organization specific. Workforce segmentation (a set of HR thinking and practices still in its infancy) confronts this danger by distinguishing explicitly between what is needed and how it is obtained. *Segmentation of work* addresses the different roles and requirements of a given organization, with particular reference to those that are core and most mission-critical. *Segmentation of talent*, on the other hand, addresses the different ways the organization may attract and retain skills and people based on a strategic analysis of work. It helps open up thinking about alternative approaches of procuring skills and expertise in the most cost effective way possible and, perhaps more controversially, distinguishes between staff who must be retained and developed—who must *belong*, organizationally—and others whose skills and services can be secured on a more arm's

length or contingent basis. Later in this chapter, a workforce segmentation model will be presented in detail.

The Wharton School's Dr. Peter Cappelli, a leading academic thinker on the changing nature of employment, envisions the employee relationship as an open-ended negotiation driven by market processes. The "new deal at work" is a more variable contract, based on mutual expectations that are dynamic and prone to change: it is contingent on the employer's changing requirements and the employee's lifestyle/life stage needs and intentions. How true or important is this for managing the future public sector workforce? As mentioned, public sector employment may become more fluid in places, but will remain predictable and relatively secure for the most part. Delivery of core government services and functions does not lend itself that well to contingent employment. Generation X workers seem to fit the "new deal" profile, valuing independence and moving among employers to pursue their objectives. But could this simply be a product of collective experience rather than preference? Who, after all, wants less rather than more security when the tradeoffs are small? It also appears that the emerging group of 16- to 24-year-olds is showing a renewed preference to work for a single company and values security. Baby boomers on the other hand, and as they approach retirement, present a real life stage workforce management challenge. Aggressive adoption of phased retirement arrangements—maintaining the employment relationship but on a diminishing basis—may well offer the best prospect for an orderly transition out of the active workforce even though this is currently one of the least available work-life balance options across the public sector. Conversely, the high hopes held for the establishment of a contingent workforce of public sector retirees are likely overblown: anecdotal experience suggests that the shelf life of retirees as consultants/contingent workers is surprisingly brief for a variety of reasons including the difficulty of keeping knowledge and skills up-to-date and the drying up of internal contact networks.

Workforce Planning: The Status Quo & Muddling Through⁴

Workforce planning continues to be honored mainly in the breach, notwithstanding its importance. Numerous studies and sources indicate that workforce planning is not well executed, systematically applied or indeed tackled at all in the majority of public and private organizations. A 1993 Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey found that 60 percent of companies had no workforce planning process whatsoever. A 1994 benchmark study conducted by the International Public Management Association for Human Resources' (IPMA-HR's) found that only 37 percent of (public service) respondents reported having a workforce planning process. Dismal as this latter statistic may appear at first blush, the bottom line could be grimmer still: The survey authors discovered that "not having a planning process" was the main reason for nonresponse, and non-respondents constituted 60 percent of the total survey sample size. Moreover, positive responses revealed nothing about the design quality or effectiveness of the planning processes in question; they could, in some cases, have been more aspirational than actual.

But organizations cannot be flying blind when attending to shifting workforce requirements, or be placing uninformed bets on future talent needs. The absence of any clear correlation between organization success (and survival) and workforce planning on the ground compounds the puzzle. In

⁴For a more in-depth analysis of the issue, see the author's published article: John Lavelle "On Workforce Architecture, Employment Relationships and Lifecycles: Expanding the Purview of Workforce Planning & Management" Public Personnel Management, Winter 2007

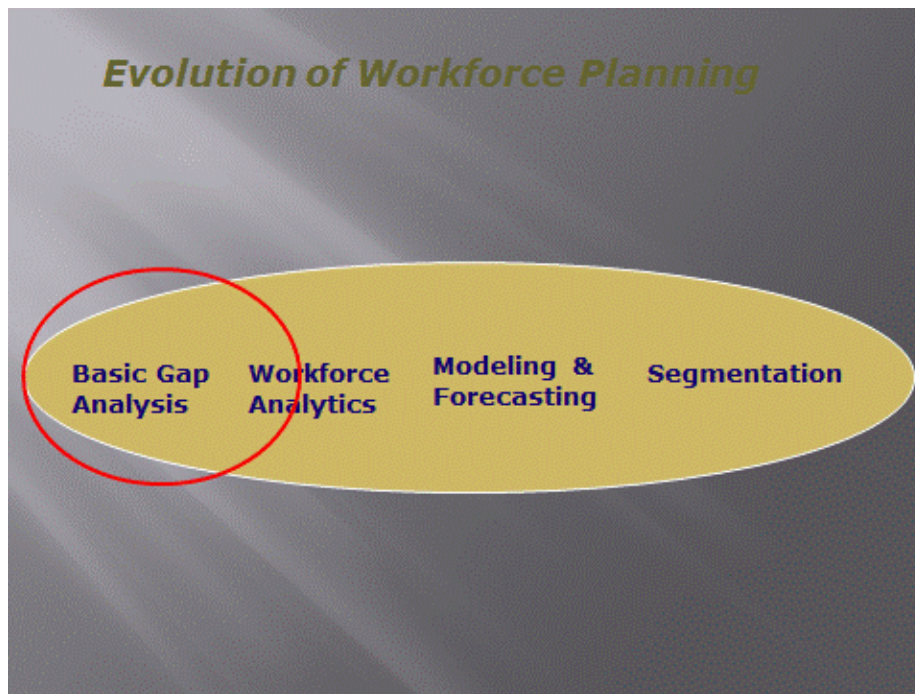
practice, however, it's safe to say that organizations claiming not to possess formal processes employ a variety of heuristics or rules of thumb to project workforce planning decisions into the future.

In the author's experience, the starting point for informal workforce planning is typically some sort of basic, episodic gap analysis aimed at identifying the discrepancy between demand and supply of particular staff cohorts or designated skill sets. The impulse to "plan" is often triggered by budgetary exigencies or a perceived resource crisis of some sort—it's a reflexive and tactical response, in other words. Headcount data, staff lists and other fairly rudimentary analytics variously fuel the process which sometimes meets expectations and sometimes does not, getting derailed or compromised along the way by a variety of uncooperative variables drawn from the following, not necessarily exhaustive, medley.

- The inherent and meta challenge of predicting the business future, particularly when the operating context is fluid.
- Bureaucratic "rules of the game," which buttress the stasis already nestled in the process; gaps tend to be defined in terms of *replacement* rather than *opportunity for change*.
- The difficulty of dealing adequately with the reality of skills fungibility and staff substitutability. In all but organizations with high technical expertise barriers, available skills can be used in different ways and staff can be deployed creatively. Skills substitutability tends to be routinely exploited informally yet confronted awkwardly if at all in more formal analytical planning terms. Specialists can be turned into generalists more easily than the other way round, and generalists are arguably more plentiful and prized in any event; it's just that they don't display readily on formal workforce planning radar.
- Organizational power—workforce planning being, after all, one component of the overall resource allocation system and, to that extent, a fringe theater for the acting out of internal political jousts and dramas—is one reason skill substitution efforts, which straddle departmental and/or budgetary lines of demarcation, are frequently cast in zero-sum terms and resisted, circumvented or covertly undermined. (It's worth pondering the practicality of the HRM aphorism "It's all about getting the right people, in the right place, at the right time" when the definition of "right" may be a relative, if not politically-derived, term.)
- The reality that staffing decisions are often taken incrementally and devolved to the local level. This means that individual employment transactions—anew staff member is brought on board; an existing staff member terminates or switches from being a functional "apple" to an "orange"—creates few organization ripples and often goes undetected. But it can also mean that staffing flows in the aggregate and when manifest can be strategically incoherent. This can be an unpleasant corporate surprise that typically surfaces after the event and when the time for taking corrective action has passed.

Trends & Emerging Best Practices

It would be wrong to conclude that workforce planning is entirely stuck in the Doldrums of gap analysis. Some important experimentation and honing of practice definitely obtains and warrants attention. The Conference Board's 2006 report *Strategic Workforce Planning*⁵ charts the evolutionary path clearly and provides many case studies detailing what individual organizations are doing. As shown in the figure below, the path from basic gap analysis leads first to active use of workforce analytics such as mining current and historic data to analyze the relationships and substitutability possibilities between different employment types and skill clusters as well as the links between HR and business data. To the extent that interplay between human capital metrics and costs can be determined, workforce analytics becomes the point of departure for consideration of Basic Gap Workforce Modeling & Segmentation Analytics forecasting alternative workforce strategies such as outsourcing, offshoring and shared services. Modeling and forecasting, the next step on the trail, takes workforce analytics into a more dynamic and textured setting, building various "what-if" scenarios to test the strategic veracity of different staffing models. This is naturally an intrinsically difficult, resource-intensive undertaking that is fraught with unknowns and justified only when the organization in question operates in a business environment in considerable flux. As with all scenario and strategic planning, the objective is less to settle upon the "optimal scenario" and more to experience the catharsis of risk assessment and strategic discovery. Finally, the path leads to workforce segmentation and human capital planning,



which are a variety of approaches distinguishing staff in terms of strategic contribution or mission criticality. This briefly seems to be the direction workforce planning is taking. However, as the survey results reported earlier, there is a wide chasm separating practice and evolving thinking. Most workforce planning activity remains anchored to gap analysis though it is encouraging to note that use of workforce analytics is on

a steady uptake.

In one sense, staff differentiation is not new and happens all the time through compensation and grading systems, allocation of responsibilities and calibrated conferring of status and other institutional symbolism. This is certainly true in the African public service where hierarchy and the trappings of

⁵The Conference Board, Inc. (2006). *Strategic workforce planning: Forecasting human capital needs to execute business strategy* (The Conference Board Research Working Group Report). New York: Conference Board.

office matter. The literature also pulsates with advice on the importance of identifying key staff contributors. Jim Collins argues in *Good to Great*⁶ that “great companies” focus obsessively on finding, bringing on board and retaining key (leadership) talent. Great companies, in fact, focus on the “who” (the key leadership cadre) before the “what” (core business strategy), on getting the “right people on the bus,” as Collins puts it, before finalizing its route.

Peter Capelli suggests that the productivity of top performing staff is on average five times that of the worst performers and, in certain industry sectors such as IT, as much as 20-fold.⁷ Workforce segmentation, however, seeks not to differentiate performance or individual contribution but rather to distinguish between roles and skill sets in terms of how vital they are to business success. This can be a difficult message for management to convey, and an unpalatable one for staff to digest. The unavoidable subtext is that people are no longer the organization’s most important asset; only those whose roles and skills are mission critical are. The others are, well, “mission noncritical.” That can be a difficult moniker to wear with pride and high self-esteem.

Matthew Brush and Donald Ruse have described how Corning Glass has been in the vanguard of incorporating segmentation into its strategic workforce planning processes.⁸ Four key roles are identified.

- **Strategic:** roles critical to desired top line growth and/or innovation/speed to market. These roles require unique capabilities that are difficult for competitors to copy.
- **Core:** roles essential to delivering consistently high-quality services and products, sustainable results and improvements in business processes. These roles require skill sets specific to Corning that are difficult to recruit and costly to groom staff for advancement into.
- **Requisite:** roles that support business performance but that could be staffed differently to reduce costs while maintaining quality and consistency. These roles could be outsourced or readily filled from the labor market.
- **Noncore:** roles that are not aligned with the strategic direction of the business and could be eliminated or redirected.

In this framework, strategic and core roles are considered *value creators*, while requisite and noncore roles are considered *value supporters*. Overall, this role classification taxonomy offers a different way to link the organization’s business needs with labor market realities. Value creators, such as R&D and sales personnel, can increase revenue and are paid accordingly, while value supporters, such as accounting or human resources employees, are considered necessary but less vital and might be paid relatively less.

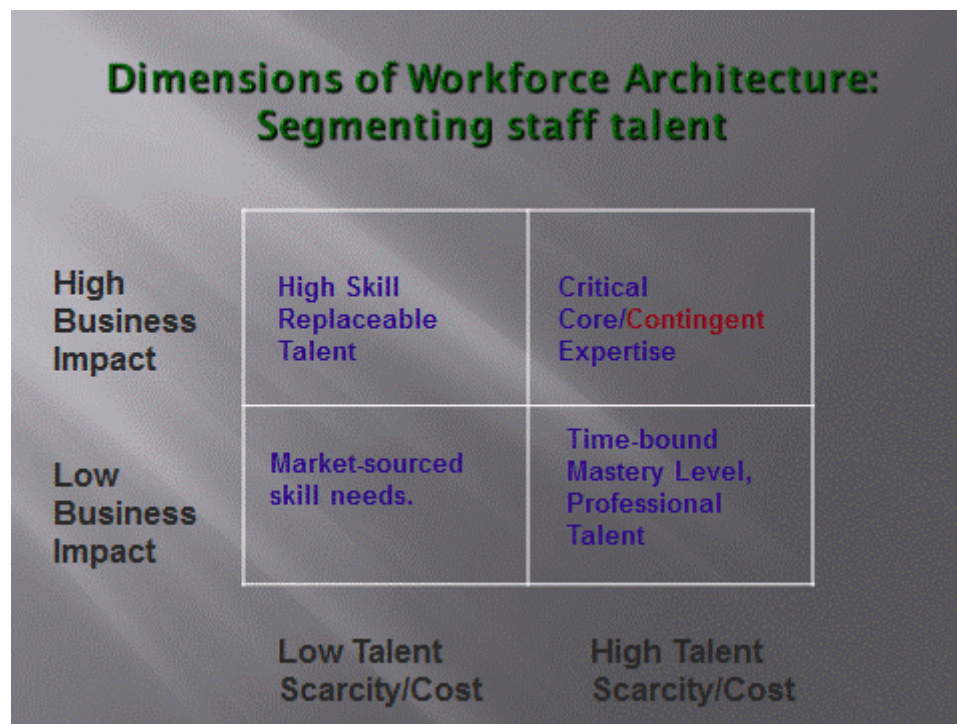
6 Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap ... and others don't*. New York: HarperCollins.

7 Capelli, P. (1999). *The new deal at work: Managing the market-driven workforce*. Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard College.

8 Brush, M. C., & Ruse, D. H. (2005). Driving strategic success through human capital planning: How Corning links business and HR strategy to improve the value and impact of its HR function. *Human Resources Planning*, 28(1), 49-60.

Moving Beyond Segmentation to Workforce Architecture

Workforce segmentation, while still inchoate and sometimes controversial, seems destined to play an important role in workforce planning going forward. It is versatile and capable of handling tough strategic questions that would not necessarily get asked otherwise, and it can cast a sharp challenging light on prevailing employment assumptions and practices. By way of illustration, the Figure below is a cryptic outcome from one such workforce segmentation exercise conducted a few years ago at the World Bank.



This particular talent segmentation matrix built on conceptual work by Walker and Merryman⁹ and was further refined in the course of the exercise itself. (The vertical axis of the matrix, business impact, roughly corresponds to the Corning value creator and value supporter dimension.) The primary focus was on the talent employed in areas of high business impact. A fresh insight was the fact that high cost/high impact talent is mobile to a fault, has a short attention span and is more likely to be wooed by instant professional challenge, as well as attractive contingent employment deals with tangible, short-term reward, than by more traditional and tenure-based arrangements such as more seniority in the grading pecking order or relatively copper-fastened job security. Though self-evident in hindsight, this was a striking denouement at the time. Staff clusters occupying the upper left and lower right quadrants also attracted attention; two will be discussed later as case studies in workforce and employment alignment context.

The reader might well ask: what has the above got to do with the public service in general and the African public service in particular? Employment in the African public service remains career-based for the most part and workforce planning and management are position-based. The answer is that, in the short-term, it has probably little to do. However, it would be a mistake to overlook (or fail to draw

⁹Walker, J., & Merryman, J. (2005). *Workforce architecture: Aligning talent with strategy through segmentation*. West Vancouver, British Columbia: The Walker Group.

lessons from) what is happening in public services across the globe. Irreversible changes are taking place, fundamentally reconstituting the concept of public sector employment, public service careers and workforce composition. The author's companion paper¹⁰ for the AAPAM Annual Round Table Conference in Durban last year outlines these changes in detail but just a few selective highlights:

- Public service work is increasingly being carried out by workers outside the civil service career system: workforce segmentation is continuing apace, like it or not. In the USA, for example, roughly 50% of the Federal workforce consists of contractual workers whose primary employment relationship is with their private sector firm, not the government;
- The use of contingent workers – short-term and with limited benefits and rights – is increasing, particularly in the more progressive public sectors of Northern Europe
- And countries – again the more progressive states of Northern Europe and Scandinavia in the vanguard – are eliminating their labor laws which confer special status and job security protection on civil servants and instead simply granting them the same (generous) rights and protections already enjoyed by the national workforces more generally.

HR Metrics

The third pillar of HR Hard Power is strategic use of HR metrics. Metrics can be used in two separate ways:

- To measure and assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the HR function itself
- Or to assess the efficiency of use of the institutions workforce or Human Capital.

Taking each in turn:

Various approaches exist to gauge the efficiency of the HR function. It can be benchmarked against other organizations in respect of (i) ratio of HR staff to total staff, or (ii) recruitment time cycle and many other similar metrics.

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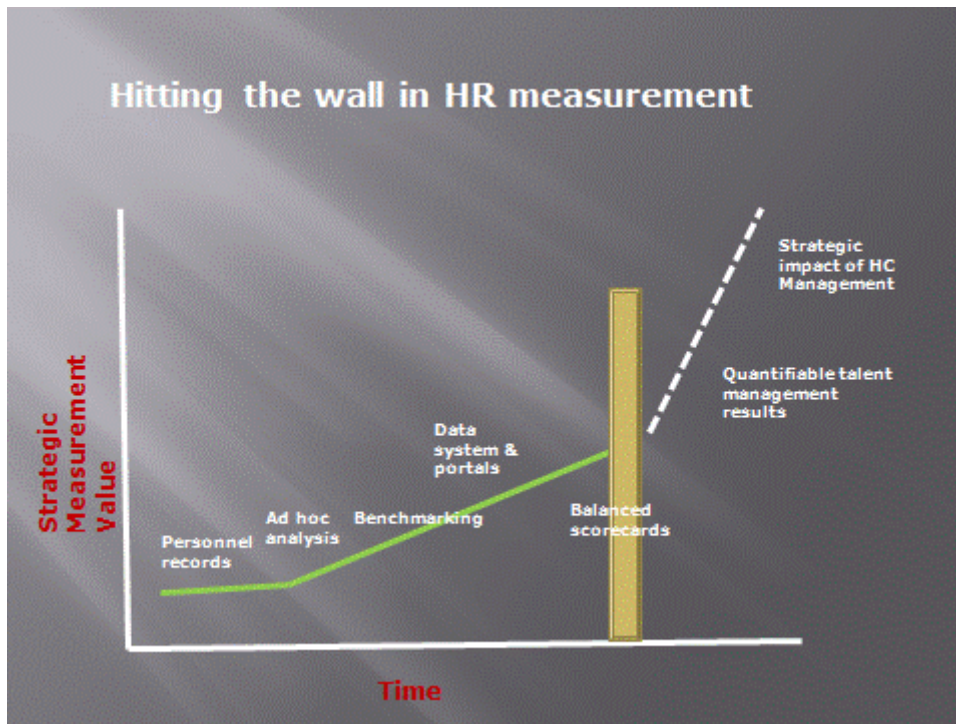
An assessment of HR's **Past Performance** against a suite of agreed upon standards and metrics (see more below).

- An HR assessment against agreed upon **Internal Benchmarks**. In most circumstances this would be predicated on the existence of a comprehensive workforce plan to evaluate fit and variance.
- A comparison of HR against **External Benchmarks** with the caveat that organizational uniqueness must be recognized and experience cautions that external evidence is prone to being incomplete and impressionistic.

¹⁰ John Lavelle *Public Services HRM Policies and Practices, Trends & Challenges for HR Management in the Broader Public Sector in the International Arena*, AAPAM Annual Round Table Conference, Durban SA. 2010

¹¹ Boudreau & Ramstad: *Beyond HR, The New Science of Human Capital*

- Or a judgment of **HRReadiness** to take on new challenges should the institution be embarking on a new strategic direction or adopting a fresh modus operandi. (Linking HCM to scenario



planning as discussed also under trends and developments in workforce planning.)

In General, a final HR efficiency evaluation methodology is often a composite of sorts, straddling more than one of the options above. This is perfectly fine as long as the different purposes served are kept in focus.

But there are limits to the extent to which HR effectiveness can be measured. While many consulting companies claim to have discovered “The North West Passage” connecting investment in HR to ultimate institutional performance their methodologies do not stand up to rigorous scrutiny. Wonderful as it would be to find a causal link, the search for same is most likely to be a futile one.

The second use of HR metrics is in assessing the efficiency of workforce or Human Capital usage. Here much headway has been made

HR standards and metrics and corresponding data usage can be deployed in several ways:

- Taking stock of Bedrock Human Capital, assessing workforce variables at the institution-wide level. This, again, is predicated on the existence of a comprehensive strategic workforce plan.
- Assessing HC capacity to cope with recurring project needs or periodic HC capacity imperatives—scaling up for peak operational periods, as an example. Finessing the core/contingent workforce balance for maximum flexibility and cost effectiveness as another.
- Or gauging capacity and HC nimbleness to gear up rapidly for ad hoc or unforeseen HC exigencies.

Again, final methodologies tend to comprise elements of all three standards with attendant choice of metric implications.

Choice of HR standards and metrics is always situational and hard prescription is premature. Some general principles can be advanced however, including:

- A metric is only valuable if it provides answers to organizationally strategic or significant HR questions. For example, the scale and reasons for voluntary turnover might be highly important in an organization in a pronounced state of flux or unstable competitive environment but peripheral to another in a more stable environment.
- It should be open to as limited interpretative degrees of freedom as possible.
- And it should ultimately inform strategic decision-making.

Below, for illustrative purposes is a non-exhaustive taxonomy of workforce/Human Capital metrics

Workforce Demographics

- What is the existing composition of the workforce in terms of age, service, level, functional specificity, employment status?
- How do the above demographic align or depart from the formal strategic workforce plan? How significant are variances if any?
- What is the embedded workforce flexibility? (Capacity to pivot at reasonable cost and or time to a materially different composition in response to changing institutional demands or business environment.)
- The above can be measured in core-contingent workforce terms though this is often a rogue HC metric – contingent, for example, being more about administrative freedom to turnover staff “at will” as opposed to a business-driven need for workforce continuity or lack thereof.

Management of Staffing Flows

- Effectiveness of the recruitment function. Percentage of offers accepted. Time span of hiring process. Competitiveness in difficult but strategically important external labor markets.
- Level of strategically important voluntary turnover hemorrhaging and reason why.
- Efficiency of the internal labor market. To what extent can staff be redeployed in response to changing institutional priorities? How well does the internal market balance institutional priorities and individual staff-inspired career interests? What does average time-in-assignment look like and does it comport with strategic workforce objectives?
- Is involuntary turnover an issue and, if so, what underlying workforce dysfunctions are at play?

Building Staff Capacity

- Performance Management
- Training & Development
- Management & Leadership
- Sabbaticals and extended development opportunities
- Injecting short-run external talent into the mix

Engagement

- Employee engagement survey
- Staff loyalty
- Team effectiveness assessments (where appropriate)

Compensation & Rewards

- Strength of market reference point
- Appropriateness of reward and recognition schemes
- Grade structure
- Benefits program (including expatriate benefits)

Working Environment

- Employee relations
- Absence/Attendance patterns
- Health and Safety
- Mission travel policies and practices

HR Service Delivery

- Internal client survey on HR effectiveness
- Capacity to deliver analytical support to top management
- Extent to which HR services benchmark against best practice – self-service portals, automated information & transaction services. Veracity of HR policies.
- Per capita HR costs against best practice.

Organization Effectiveness

- A critical examination of organizational structure set against mission and strategic goals.
- Staff productivity and commitment.
- Quality of management.
- Clarity and concreteness of strategic plan.

The Limitations of Hard Power

The argument coursing through this brief outline of use of HR Hard Power is that the function can be more impactful and respected if it uses instruments which are concrete and generally perceived as legitimate (HR policies and rules) and evidence-based (HR analytics and metrics). But, while necessary, this is not sufficient. The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously observed that: *“everyone is entitled to his own opinions but not to his own facts”*. True, but if that were so, facts would resolve every dispute and preempt fruitless debate. The reality of course is that we view facts through the prism of our own pre-determined opinions: the positive is captive to the normative. To illustrate with a mundane HR example: suppose turnover in an institution increases from 2% to 10% per annum. Is that a good or a bad thing? The truth is that it all depends: the data may point to different causality.

- If, for example, the cause of the attrition is traceable to workforce demographics – a large cohort of staff reaching mandatory retirement age at once, say, it represents both an opportunity and a threat: releasing space to replenish talent and bring on board new skills sets, while also holds the challenge of staunching a rapid hemorrhaging of senior experience and institutional memory.
- If the turnover is voluntary in nature it could signal eroding competitiveness in the labor market and presage future recruitment and retention difficulties.
- And if it is involuntary in nature it could reflect deliberate public policy, structural shifts in the public service (or, heaven forbid, a new searing round of imposed conditionality by the World Bank or IMF).

But the data is also likely to be interpreted subjectively and stir value systems. To some, persistently low turnover, for example, is proof positive of a sclerotic underperforming workforce; to others the same data is reassuring testimony to a career-based public sector, without which commitment to public service and delivery of services will be compromised and eventually atrophy.

Soft Power

The exercise of HR Hard Power is thus necessary but not sufficient for HR to be consistently impactful. Granted, policies and rules, if enforced with sufficient vim, can ensure conformity but at significant transactional costs and at the likely gain of mere compliance which tends to evaporate when policy surveillance becomes lax. It takes soft power to convince, persuade and establish commitment. About why, say, central recruitment policies must trump local expedient staffing needs or why attention to diversity matters. This can entail skill, professional confidence and sometimes backbone.

How best to exercise Soft Power in the HR context? A number of thoughts and suggestions:

- ✚ Firstly the use of soft power benefits when the right skills are available and in play. Arming HR professionals with a range of behavioral skills clustered under the broader panoply of consulting

skills is recommended. Behavioral skills not linked to appropriate values, however, result in slickness and give off a whiff of deception, so;

- ✚ The HR function must live up to the standards of professionalism enunciated in the UNDESA 2000 paper. It needs to promote probity, neutrality, fairness and a striving for meritocracy in the institution as a whole but, just as importantly, in its own conduct and application of rules and policies as they affect its own staff; influence through exemplary behavior and action in other words. Turning a blind eye to soft cronyism or extracurricular meddling in personnel matters by senior management has (positive) repercussions for the favored individual(s) in question but is also an indirect assault on the rights of staff at large who are obliged to play by the espoused rules on pay, promotions, merit-based access to career opportunities and so on. When HR is found wanting in this regard, its institutional stature is sullied and diminished even when the infraction stems from a sense of impotence to halt the policy infractions rather than some more sinister set of collusive motives.

The squalid circumstances surrounding the departure of Paul Wolfowitz from the Presidency of the World Bank in 2007 illustrate the points above and were telling in many respects: they underscored the poor judgment exercised in his original selection; and shone the spotlight on his woeful inadequacy to fill the role, not to mention his flimsy code of personal ethics.

Wolfowitz's violations of the Bank's staff rules and policies were flagrant and transparently so. But just as his reputation was sorely damaged so too were the internal reputations of the Bank's HR and Legal Vice-Presidencies the leadership teams of which stood on the side lines until a whistle blowing campaign doomed his tenure. Staff noticed.

- ✚ HR Soft Power hinges on the function being seen as an honest institutional broker by both management and staff. In a fundamental sense, the primary role of HR can be conceptualized as striving to bring the needs and goals of institutions and their respective workforces into more perfect alignment. It could be argued that this equates with two of the four roles in the familiar Ulrich HR model: Business Partner and Employee Champion. But the author disagrees. The Ulrich roles imply adversarial relationships between the parties and a sense of zero sum being played out: what is best for the institution is ipso facto detrimental to its staff and vice versa. In reality the two Ulrich roles are aspects of a larger more encompassing role and should be worked in tandem and in an iterative fashion by HR. The 2010 industrial relations crisis in the South African public sector offered a bleak illustration of what can happen when the mandate of "employee champion" transfers completely to powerful trade unions.

Summary

The paper explores the notion of professionalism in the public service and the African public service in particular. In doing so, it focuses exclusively on the HR function in the Public Service, both because it is a microcosm of the public service as a whole and thus suitable case study and because HR has a special – unique even – role to play in fostering public service professionalism, more broadly.

We try to answer the difficult question: how professional is HR and how does the function measure up as a bona fide profession? The answers are somewhat inconclusive yet give some cause for concern. HR is not a protected domain: its core body of knowledge suffers from some inherent shortcomings and overlaps with other disciplines; and its boundaries are porous. But there are grounds for optimism.

Borrowing the concept of Hard & Soft Power, coined by Professor Joseph S. Nye, of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, the paper outlines how HR can increase its influence and impact within institutions by employing a judicious mix of Hard Power (*promulgation and enforcement of sensible policies and rules, deepening analytical capacity and strengthening the use of metrics to gauge performance*) and Soft Power (*influencing the attitudes and actions of institutional actors by modeling standards of behavior and adhering to espoused values while also endeavoring to speak to the better angels of its clients, both management and staff*).