An Investigation into the Impact of Selection Instruments used in High Unemployment Conditions to Job Seekers

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ABSTRACT

Many job applicants incur repeatedly, expenses they in reality cannot afford, to respond to job advertisements. Even after making these sacrifices, the responses they are likely to get from the prospective employers are ‘silence’. This article sought to investigate the recruitment and selection practices used in conditions of high unemployment. The research also sought the perceptions of employees on the recruitment and selection processes. A survey research methodology was adopted with interviews, focus groups and questionnaires used as data gathering instruments. Findings showed that a financial cost ranging from US$2-US$75 was incurred by applicants with 76% of them receiving no responses in the form of acknowledgements or regrets. The costs incurred while seeking for employment were astronomical and also against sustainable development of the individual applicants as well as the nation. The recruitment and selection methods used were far from best practice as they allowed irregular human resource practices. Employers on the other hand found no problem with their recruitment and selection methods. However, employers needed to pay closer attention to their recruitment and selection methods in order to minimise the cost incurred by job seekers and also endeavour to be transparent for sustainable development.

Key words: High unemployment, sustainable development, recruitment and selection, best practice, transparent

INTRODUCTION

Qualified and skilled workers respond daily to job advertisements and in most cases they do not get any responses. There are so many graduates of training institutions, formal and informal, and yet there are so few jobs on offer on the labour market. The few jobs on offer, once advertised to the employment seekers, are obviously responded to by an overwhelming number of applicants. The research seeks to find out how employers recruit and select applicants from overwhelming responses due to high unemployment levels and the subsequent effects that these recruitment and selection processes have on the job seekers.

Research Questions
The research will be guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What methods are used to recruit and select job applicants in situations of high unemployment conditions?

Research Question 2: What are the implications of the selection instruments used to the job applicants?

General Aim and specific objectives of the Research

General Aim
The general aim of the research is to investigate the effects of the selection methods used in times of overemployment and their subsequent effects to the job seekers.

Objectives of the Study
The objectives of study are to:

1. Evaluate the perceptions of employment seekers about employers’ selection methods.
2. Investigate the recruitment and selection processes used by employers.
3. Determine the implications of the selection methods used to the job applicants.
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Many job applicants incur repeatedly, expenses they in reality cannot afford, to respond to job advertisements. Even after making these sacrifices, the responses they are likely to get from the prospective employers are ‘silence’. In developed nations, long term un-employment may come as a result of the deficiency of the employment seekers and not a shortage of jobs. In the case of Zimbabwe, the opposite may be said to be true with many employment seekers meeting the minimum requirements of advertised jobs. As a result of this abundance of manpower for most jobs, Bertone (1999) suggests, that the winners and losers get to be determined by the cultural context of the labour market in general and in particular the behaviour of employers. As such, due to the wide choice that the employers have, they tend to use narrower selection methods which only favour the cultural bias rather than use more objective attributes in their recruitment and selection process. A form of discrimination is therefore used to select employees to join organisations (Bertone, 1999).

Knowledge Gaps

Most research that is available has focused on recruitment and selection in developed nations whose conditions are very different from the developing nations. Developed nations are mostly characterised by a tight labour market where employment seekers have to choose an ideal employer. However, in the case of Zimbabwe, a developing nation, many employment seekers will almost take a job in any organisation. Only after securing their first job, will a few employees get an opportunity to change to a better organisation. The gap filled in by this research will be the recruitment and selection methods applied to fill the few vacant posts and the subsequent impact that these methods have on the job seekers in conditions where there is an abundance of qualified and skilled labour.

Justification of the Study

As a result of the variance of the conditions within which the theory surrounding recruitment and selection was written and the conditions facing employment seekers in Zimbabwe, it is important to find out how the employers manage their recruitment and selection as well as what the perceptions of the job seekers are. Many job seekers do not get the due consideration they deserve as they respond to various forms of recruitment used by organisations. Exposing the recruitment and selection methods used by many organisations may cause the employers to evaluate their methods thereby, in the process, giving the necessary considerations that job applicants deserve. Besides, human resource management (HRM) practices, which include recruitment and selection have been found to have a positive correlation to the competitive advantage especially of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) (Cunningham and Rowley 2008, Singh. 2004).

Review of Related Literature

Recruitment and selection has been overwhelmingly researched on by many authorities. This HRM activity is undoubtedly one of the most performed functions in organisations (Zhiwei. 2012). The author further concludes that,

“there is a need to conduct studies in other nations, particularly in developing and newly developed nations to testify the generalizability of the western HRM theory in those countries and whether we can find alternative policies or practices to suit different regional or national contexts”.

Irrespective of whether the recruitment and selection is done in the developed world or in developing nations, the ultimate objective is to come out with the best person for the vacant position (Osoian, Zaharie & Lazar. 2011). The recruitment and selection processes are also affected, besides other reasons, by the unemployment levels which in the case of Zimbabwe are very high. On that note, Bassy and Atan (2012) define unemployment as the situation in which able and qualified people who are willing to work cannot find jobs. Due the unfavourable economic conditions in Zimbabwe that have been persistent for some time and have had a bearing on the unemployment levels, the recruitment and selection processes are therefore significantly affected.

While there are many ways at the disposal of recruiters to select the best applicants which range from job fairs, print media, employment agencies and e-recruitment the choice of methods used are largely dependent on the labour market as well as the capabilities to handle the chosen methods (Llorens
In the recruitment process, Visser and DeJong (2001) highlight the importance of the applicant to be able to adjust to the environment of the organisation while also performing the job successfully. While it can be said that there are ‘growing global shortfalls of qualified and competent applicants’ (Ployhart 2006, p 867) which result in tight labour markets that are characteristic of developed nations, this is contrary to the situation in Zimbabwe for most occupations. Despite the economic challenges that Zimbabwe is facing, the country has continued to develop its labour force resulting in an abundance of the skills that are in short supply in most of the developed nations. The employment seekers have very limited choices of employers when it comes to seeking for employment, contrary to developed nations.

There are various selection screening tools that are at the disposal of human resource officers and managers and these include application resumes, interviews, different types of testing, background checks and reference checks (Wright, Domagalski & Collins 2011). Inappropriate selection techniques have a direct cost to both the individual as well as the organisation since organisational effectiveness can be reduced, while also affecting the development strategies besides being a stressor for managers who have to then deal with the unsuitable employee (Kuma 2012). Despite shortcomings of the interviews as a predictor of job performance many organisations in Zimbabwe are seemingly preferring this selection instrument over other methods. Ideally the selection process should be a two-way process where the candidate chooses the employer and vice-versa (Kama 2012). However in situations of overemployment it seemingly is not the case. Employers have a choice while job applicants have to take whatever organisations offer as jobs. It is therefore important for the employers, in order to reduce unnecessary applications, to find ways of recruitment that are good enough to attract the best applicants and at the same time self-select out those not good enough for the organisation (Gardener, 2008) thereby reducing financial implications incurred by job seekers.

The recruitment processes have mostly been investigated in the developed world and as such most literature is not very relevant to developing nations like Zimbabwe (Mellahi and Wood 2003). These same authors further argue that “pre-capitalist networks constitute an important survival mechanism, allowing marginal groupings to access patronage and resources’ thereby resulting in proliferation of corrupt activities with regard to recruitment and selection (Mellahi and Wood 2003, p 370). This is also supported by Soukup (2011) who highlights that the process of securing a job is not only affected by the qualifications and experience of the job seeker but also largely includes the connections and contacts that these job seekers may have.

For countries with high unemployment rates the situation is made even worse as Ployhart (2006) argues that when it comes to the search of jobs, half of those already gainfully employed are also passively looking for jobs. While many organisations in the western world struggle with how to attract applicants (Ployhart 2006), in developing countries like Zimbabwe employers struggle in finding ways of objectively selecting prospective employees from a large pool of candidates. Just like in Thailand where the excess labour force has always been an issue and recruitment and selection has mostly been based on family relations (Zhiwei 2012), Zimbabwe may fall into the same category. Soukup (2011) concurs with many authors that there is discrimination by employers in the labour market based on such characteristics as gender, age and membership of a group of people due to the lack of the job seeker’s marginal productivity knowledge.

There are various methods and ways designed by organisations to ‘attract and sift candidates’ (Bergstrom and Nights 2006). The recruitment process consists of a number of ways designed to attract a good number of candidates. In the academic field for instance, Brink et al (2010) suggest that
the recruitment process is shrouded with selection processes that are informal and made in closed sessions by an inner circle of few elites. As long as the recruitment and selection process has no transparency or accountability it has a bearing on the employment seekers. Some Chairpersons of selection committees actually manipulate the processes to eventually nominate a person of their choice as revealed in interviews carried out by Brink et al (2010). This research will therefore try to establish the selection process that Zimbabwean organisations employ and how these in turn affect the job applicants.

The perceived fairness of the selection process has an effect on the both the organisation as well as the applicants. Gilliland (1993) posits that if applicants take the selection process as fair even if they are rejected their self-esteem is not affected while if perceived as unfair discrimination cases may arise. As such in cases where there are very high levels of unemployment this can become very rampant as those that are capable would be trying to staff their organisation with their own people. In some cases, the candidates for the jobs would already be known, and advertisements on the media would just be a cosmetic formality (Brink et al 2010). With such corrupt activities happening in countries where unemployment levels are not really high, one is left wondering as to what happens in countries such as Zimbabwe where only 11 percent of the labour force is in formal employment. Cultural aspects also come into play when it comes to the selection of job applicants. In collectivist cultures of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, selection is not on the basis of test results but on the recommendations of relatives of the employer and employees over and above the knowledge of the company (Milikic 2009).

Zimbabwe has most of its current industries that categorically fall under the SMEs. As such these organisations have been found not to be using best practice selection techniques which include: job analysis, selection tool design and validation (Madeleine et al 2010). Failure to use best practice selection techniques, the possibility of manipulation of selection processes to fill openings with pre-selected candidates, the lack of responses to job applicants has therefore necessitated this research. As a result of the abundance of labour in the market, Zimbabwean employers may, contrary to face validity, overlook the importance of employee selection that encompass face validity which according to Ekuma (2012) acts as a realistic preview of the decision to join the organisation or not by the employee even after an offer is made. This ultimately affects the employee’s commitment to the organisation as well as job satisfaction thereby also affecting turnover and productivity.

By virtue of the size of the organisations that we have in Zimbabwe, not many of them have sophisticated recruitment and selection processes. The lack of such processes and policies as found by Mellahi and Wood (2003) in their research of recruitment practices in unstable political contexts, may lead to managers or those in the recruitment panel earmarking the positions for targeted people. In this case, the managers would not advertise in the mass media for the positions, thereby avoiding unnecessary interviews. The research therefore seeks, in the case of Zimbabwe, to establish how the recruitment process is carried out. In the same study Mellahi and Wood (2003) found out that those employed in unstable political environment were, either members of the nuclear family or extended family, recommended by a trusted friend or were of the same ethnic background to the owners. Of importance in this kind of scenario was the trust that the expected employee was to have which according to Brink et al (2010) acts as a realistic preview of the decision to join the organisation or not by the employee even after an offer is made. This ultimately affects the employee’s commitment to the organisation as well as job satisfaction thereby also affecting turnover and productivity.

Realistic Job Previews (RJP) are one way of reducing the number of applicants while increasing the retention of the employees that would have joined the organisation (Gardener et.al 2008). Due to high unemployment and an abundance of applicants with relevant qualifications, it is expected that many organisations with established human resource departments would take advantage of such previews.

Marie (2007) argues that some people deemed unemployable can through a different selection tool be the most suitable candidate for the job. Hence the need to investigate the selection techniques adopted by many organisations since it has been found that the long term unemployed are not likely to be re-employed early compared to those who might be searching for jobs while in employment. All these
factors have led to the need to investigate the selection processes in many Zimbabwean companies considering the challenges raised in the preview and the subsequent financial and psychological implications that this has on the applicants.

Research Design/Methodology
The research used surveys to solicit for data on the recruitment practices adopted by employers in times of overemployment and the perceptions of job seekers on the employment practices. The research adopted largely the snowball non-probability sampling technique, since it was difficult to get organisational representatives to speak openly about issues pertaining to employment practices and policies in their organisations. It began with the few Human Resource managers that were known to the researcher. These were then asked to connect the researcher to other managers whom they knew. There was also a deliberate move to include different industries and sectors such as the private, public and non-governmental organisations. With such connections the study managed to get a sizeable number of Human Resource managers and SMEs Directors to participate in the study.

The sample was mostly limited to the Bulawayo Metropolitan district where the researcher could visit the organisations in person. An effort to carryout telephone interviews with organisations outside Bulawayo was not successful as organisations preferred not to communicate their internal affairs through the phone. This therefore precludes the study from being representative of the recruitment and selection practices in Zimbabwe. It however gives insights into likely recruitment and selection practices in Zimbabwe since some of the organisations that participated in the research have branches all over the country. For large organisations the interviewees were with the Human Resource managers and/or human resource officers, while for smaller organisations where there were no human resource departments the researcher interviewed the owners. For employment seekers a total of 100 questionnaires were self-administered to respondents randomly, having determined whether they had at any one time applied for jobs. Focus groups were also organised to gather data from employment seekers.

Semi structured interviews were used to gather data from the managers and small business owners. The interviews lasted an average of 25 minutes. Pre-set questions were formulated and these were followed up by unstructured questions depending on the responses received. While the objective of the research was to record all interviews, some respondents had reservations about being recorded in the interview sessions. For those that agreed the recordings were played and carefully transcribed to the data base. For those that refused recordings the researchers noted the responses on the pre-set semi-structured questionnaire.

Findings & Discussions
The organisations that participated in the research ranged from those that employed as little as 20 people to those employing up to 4000 employees but scattered in different parts of Zimbabwe, though using the same policy. From the 21 organisations that participated in the research, 95% of them requested for the paper format (hard copies) of applications together with certified copies of certificates to include, educational, birth and other certificates. Of this group of employers asking for hard copies, 25% asked for more than one copy of a similar set of application documents for one post, with an extreme requirement of seven (7) copies by one organisation.

Considering the cost of a single application being as high as US$75 for isolated cases there is a cause for concern on how these applications are treated by prospective employers. 80% of the respondents incurred a cost of between US$2 to US$75 in processing their applications, with most of the applicants (17.7 %) incurring a financial cost of US$10 dollars per application as illustrated in table 1.
The application costs when looked as isolated cases for a single application are insignificant. However the employment seekers do not make only one application, but ideally respond to as many advertisements as they can possibly get hold of and which they qualify for.

A response rate of above one hundred (100) applications was reported by 65% of employers for lower level jobs. There was however a significant number of respondents (24%) that did not even bother to apply for any jobs anymore as indicated in Figure 1 below. Further inquiry as to why they were not responding to advertisements though they qualified revealed that these applicants were fed up of applying for jobs, and in some cases to the same organisations, and getting no responses, regrets or just an acknowledgement that the organisations had received their applications.
With 58% of the employment seekers responding to two or more advertisements and in extreme cases to twenty two (22), in a period of three months, the combined amount spent applying is astronomical. As an example, with only one hundred (100) applications per advertisement at a cost of US$10 this would translate to a whopping US$1000 gone to waste if there are no responses. With such an astronomical unemployment rate in Zimbabwe and taking one thousand (1000) job seekers to be making applications monthly, at a cost of US$10 per application, in a period of three (3) months US$30 000 is spent just applying for jobs, indicating how significant the cost of seeking for employment is. Also, due to the high unemployment levels and against the hope of landing a job one day, job seekers continue to remain in the queue for employment by continuously responding to advertisements while those already in employment quit less in concurrence to a study by Ramaswami (2008). In situations of high unemployment this is normal since even those people in employment would avoid changing jobs in fear of losing their security even if the current working conditions may not be ideal.

Taking the scenario given above, in a year, US$120 000 is spent applying for jobs by just one thousand applicants. Figure 1 illustrates that 75% of these respondents do not get any responses which translates to an amount of US$90 000 gone to waste. The figure is obviously much higher considering the number of people searching for jobs in the country. If employers were using recruitment and selection methods a greater amount of this money could be served and used for sustainable development or even the creation of employment. Besides the financial cost the situation is made worse by some employers who also request for a police clearance, an activity that was introduced by government a couple of years ago in its selection process and was now being used by 17.5% of employers in the private sector. While a good move to ask for police clearance, these employers could not give a satisfactory reason for this request besides indicating that government was also using this check as a selection criterion. For the employers that requested for a police clearance, 68% indicated that if someone had a criminal offence highlighted by the police clearance, they would not shortlist that person. This already would be an unfair discrimination considering that if someone would have served time in a correctional facility, they should be afforded another chance. Seeking for a police clearance adds on the burden that employment seekers have to through since for the clearance they have to spend hours queuing for the service from the police. As has already been revealed by Gardener (2008), employers need a recruitment strategy that could only attract the most suitable applicants while self-selecting out those not likely to be shortlisted thereby saving the already struggling applicants huge amounts of money. The ideal recruitment and selection instrument could be one that would be at a minimal cost for both the job seeker as well as the employer while at the same time resulting in a relevant applicant being selected for the job.

Figure 1: Number of Advertisements Responded to Per Month
The habit of not acknowledging and responding to job applicants was consistent with 73% of prospective employers. These employers in principle said they were responding to all applicants in bulk or on the advertisements. They cited the overwhelming responses they were receiving for each advertisement which was uneconomical to respond to individually. In place of individual responses these employers placed a close at the bottom of the advertisements stating that if the applicants did not get a response by a certain date they should consider their applications unsuccessful. Of this group of employers (57%) added a close at the bottom of the advert stating that only shortlisted applicants would be responded to. A further 43% of these employees noted that they did respond to the applicants in bulk by placing an advertisement stating that the shortlisted applicants had since been contacted and those not contacted would have been unsuccessful. This was however not consistent with the responses from 75% of the applicants (Table 2) who indicated that they received no responses at all for their applications.

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Table 2: Number of Responses Received to Applications

To the applicants these clauses on advertisements were immaterial considering the individual efforts and financial costs expended in making an application. To show due consideration, the applicants preferred individual responses. For the organisations that did advertise that they had responded to shortlisted applicants in the print media, this would probably be missed by many applicants considering the cost of newspapers. It is because of this observation that employers have to seriously
consider recruitment and selection methods that take cognisance of the plight of the huge number of applicants that respond to their advertisements.

The employers used mostly the print media (86%) to recruit applicants to the few available jobs as illustrated in figure 3 below.

A total of 29% of the applicants adopted the use of the electronic media in the form of company web portals. From this group of employees only 10% of them required online applications while the other 19% advertised online but required applications in the hard copy format. The 19% of employers who advertised online and required hard copies, also did advertise the same vacancies on the print media. The other 14% of employers did not even advertise for vacant positions but kept a contact record of walk-ins and in some cases their resumes thereby concurring with Mellahi and Wood (2003) that irregular selection processes would then creep in. These people would then be called as vacancies arose for training. Headhunting was used by just 5% of the employers considering that there was usually an abundance of labour supply even for key management positions due to the high unemployment levels in the country.

Considering that 86% of the employers were still preferring to deal with applications in the paper format, in cases where there are hundreds of these applications it would be difficult to make a fair assessment of the applications during the shortlisting process. When looked at from the applicants view, some advertisements are just a formality where there already would be targeted individuals for the positions as already observed by Mellahi and Wood (2003). A significant number of applicants did indicate that applying was just a formality, in most cases one needed to have known someone to at least be afforded a chance to be invited to an interview, thereby confirming Brink et al (2010)’s observation of the manipulation of selection processes. While this was the observation of many applicants, from those that had successfully acquired jobs through applications, none of them were open enough to indicate that they had indeed attained a job through connections in those organisations. This denial of declaring how they could have landed those jobs could be just a way of preserving their own dignity besides protecting those that would have assisted them to acquire those jobs. This was despite the research’s promise that the results would not be linked to any individual.

Since applicants were already sceptical as they were applying for these vacant positions, the subsequent silence by the organisations applied to, only confirmed their suspicion of unfair and discriminatory selection methods adopted. The respondents did however indicate that in some organisations policies could be clearly laid out, but junior officers could be capitalising on the desperation of applicants in a poorly performing economy to engage in corrupt recruitment practices.
such as requesting for payment to secure a job. This observation was made by 9% of the employment seekers during interview sessions, on different occasions, who particularly pin-pointed two big organisations as the culprits to such activities. Considering also the expense incurred as well as the emotional stress that these employment seekers go through, this could explain the relatively large number (24%) of people that did not bother to respond to advertisements despite them meeting all the job requirements that would have been stated.

This was an indication of poor recruitment practices which allowed officers, senior or junior, to abuse their positions to engage in corrupt activities. When organisations were interrogated on the use of simple best practice recruitment practices adopted, the results showed that an insignificant number did apply these principles as illustrated in figure 4 below.

![Figure 4. Tool Design and Validation](image)

Only 19% of the employers did design and test selection instruments. There was very little consideration of the recruitment process. All the employers indicated that despite the huge number of applications they would receive, they would give each application the necessary attention before shortlisting or rejection. However on the selection process only the 19% of organisations, who were mostly the big organisations that participated in the research, designed and tested the instruments prior to their final implementation. They also adopted the use of more than one selection tool. These organisations combined, in most cases, psychometric tests and face to face interviews. In some cases, for practical jobs, on-the-job tests were carried out. While this really took into consideration best practice, the only weaknesses were in the initial shortlisting where the organisations could improve on transparency and involve panels rather than individuals to do the shortlisting.

The majority (81%) of the employers who mostly constitute the small to medium enterprises also shortlisted using resumes and then went straight to face to face interviews before appointments. When asked about validation of interview questions, training of interviewers and weaknesses of the face to face interview as the only selection tool used, the representatives of the organisations indicated that they did not need to train interviewers nor validate the interview questions as they were able to successfully appoint relevant job applicants. They also expressed concern that validation of interview questions or the training of interviewers was only in theory and not practice, as in industry they did not have time for that. On expressing the possible weaknesses of recruiting the way they were doing, the response was once again that they did not find any problems with their recruitment processes.
Conclusion

A huge cost was being incurred by applicants in this environment of high unemployment in a poorly performing economy which could be minimised if employers paid a little more attention in their recruitment and selection processes. The perception of the employment seekers on employers and the recruitment and selection processes used is that a job is either landed on by luck, connection or being bought and not qualifications and experience. The recruitment and selection process is good according to the employers, but according the employment seekers there is no transparency and is associated with irregular human resource practices which are against best practices. Organisations may think that they are getting the best employees when they are not hence the high cost of goods produced locally. With the cost of processing an application to one vacant position ranging from US$2-US$75, all applicants would need a response as an indication of their worthwhile efforts. Put together national, the money spent applying for jobs where there are no responses could better be utilised for more sustainable development of these applicants hence the need for a relook by organisations.

Putting together the challenges that employment seekers come across in search of employment a conclusion could be drawn that a significant number employment seekers do suffer abuse in the hands of unscrupulous employers who use desperate job seekers to fill vacant posts with relatives, friends and pre-selected applicants. It is therefore time that employers used best practices in the human resource area of area of recruitment and selection and also thought about ethical behaviour over and above sustainable development in an effort to come out with selection methods that can be fair to both the employer and the applicants.

REFERENCES


