The Perception of Punctuality in the Management of Time

Canaan Mpala
Lupane State University, Zimbabwe

This article examines the perception of Zimbabweans on time management, particularly on punctuality. It is observed that the perception of time management may be heavily dependent on the culture of a nation and the ethnicity of its citizens. A survey was carried out with 61 randomly selected participants completing a questionnaire. The results did indicate a gross neglect of time as evidenced by the percentage of people that are generally late for various gatherings such as meetings, lectures, conferences, church services and weddings. In some cases, the failure to meet specified times was as a result of nationally controlled factors such as road blocks intended to protect the safety of the passengers who use public service vehicles. Besides being delayed unnecessarily the results generally indicate that in Zimbabwe the range of time in which a person can be said to be late is too wide and has possible effects on the economic development of the nation.

Introduction

The common phrase to many that “time is money” (Iutcovich et a. 1979, Hashimoto 2002) is an understatement of the value of time since time is said to even consume money (Hashimoto 2002). Ueno in his writings as quoted by Hashimoto (2002) instead posits that the importance of time should be phrased as “time is life”. Time management affects us all, but in many situations there are possible time negligence’s that are within our control. Time is one of the most scarce resources that cannot not be recovered (Shome, Bhardwaj and Titus. 1996, Manketelow and Anand 2008) hence its importance. While time is the most valuable resource (Shome, Bhardwaj and Titus (1996) for many organisations, for some individuals it may appear not to be as important as anticipated by many. Lack of punctuality may begin as individual deficiencies of keeping time, and before we know it becomes a norm in an organisation. This however may grow as a result of environment in which the individual would have been brought up and that in which they are operating from. To a certain extent it may be as a result of the ethnicity of the individual employees or even the continent and country in which the person is living in. If people were keeping time then this article would probably not have been written. A general observation made by the author was the rampant disrespect of time in many different gatherings be it work organisations, churches services, weddings, conferences, political gatherings and many other gatherings. In work situations, as way back as (1911) a finding was made that workers began to pack and get ready to knock off 20 minutes before time (Hashimoto 2002), which meant that the organisations were losing 20 minutes from each employee per day. The author sought to investigate the perceptions of the organisers as well as the attendees to these various gatherings where time is either respected or disrespect.

It has been observed that in many of the above gatherings including work organisations, punctuality is not observed. Gatherings usually start late and end late. In other instances starting is late while the end is very punctual. However, as this was observed to be a general trend in the country, it was important to therefore get to understand particularly the causes of lateness in beginning most of the gatherings.

Review of Related Literature

Nishimoto (2002) relates closely punctuality to the societal norms of a people where the breadth of a time zone is reduced to a point rather than being loosely defined. Japan is one country where time is not relative but specific. On the contrary in Africa and in this case Zimbabwe, time seems to be spread over a wide range. For instance an appointment for 0900hrs may mean sometime around 0900hrs to maybe 0930hrs or even more. Surprisingly, primary and secondary school going
children are specifically trained to be punctual. Even the parents that take the children to school are punctual about keeping time that is set for the beginning of lessons in various schools. Late children are usually punished. It then becomes disturbing that the very same people that will keep time in taking their children to school, will not bother to be specific about time in meetings at work and other social gatherings. This is however done at the discretion of the schools and not a deliberate policy like what Japan did. Japan even dedicated a “Time Day” as far back as 1920 (Nishimoto 2002, Hashimoto 2002) which was set as the 10th of June. To enhance time discipline the Tokyo Educational Museum organised an exhibition where there were pamphlets under the theme “Time” and subheadings: time in business, time of meetings and time of calling meetings, as well as some posters being put up reading “be punctual in departure as well as arrival” were displayed (Hashimoto 2002).

As early as 1873, Japan’s Ministry of Education came up with time disciplinary guidelines for both home and school called the “Seito Kokoroe”. Of particular interest in the training of the Japanese in time keeping at these tender ages, was the element of “10 minutes before time” where the children were expected to be waiting for the teacher. Hashimoto (2002) further reiterated the ‘10 minute rule’ where its importance in time keeping to always be 10 minutes earlier and also finish 10 minutes after the set time was advised to Fredrick W Taylor, the acknowledged father of Scientific Management, by his uncle. This therefore meant that if the employer required an employee to work from 8 to 5 pm, then the employee would discipline themselves to be at work by 0750 hrs and leave work at 1710hrs.

It may appear as if, in the Zimbabwean scenario, that the starting time of various gatherings is meant to be the arrival time or later. This view is also posited by Shome, Bhardwaj and Titus (1996) who relate the response to time management to the cultural norms, personality, nationality and even religious beliefs. This view is further supported by the theory of value orientation that explains the behaviour of people as stemming from their cultural values and norms (Iutcovich et al. 1979). Zimbabwe as a sovereign country has its own culture, and religious beliefs and other variables that affect how the nation responds to time. The research sought to therefore investigate what a set time for a gathering meant to the respondents and organisers of those functions. One observation that one easily makes from the society is the wearing of wrist watches, a phenomenon that is now almost none fashionable at all to many in Zimbabwe. Many people will prefer to use the watch on their mobile phones which periodically have to be removed from pockets and handbags. It could be one of the signs that time is not that important since the use of a wrist watch cannot really be replaced by gadget that is usually kept in a pocket or handbag. Even at university level, students will insist that at examination time, they be provided with wall clocks that they use to time themselves.

Being punctual in departure as well arrival posters (Hashimoto 2002) have a huge nearing on the management of time for any gathering. It is therefore important even for the chairpersons of meetings to be cognisant of the consequences of failing to start on time and end on time in the meetings they chair as they can affect the punctuality of the attendees in other activities they are to do thereafter.

Time is so important especially in work situations where if a delay is made in one unit it possibly can have a negative chain reaction in various units. To indicate its importance it is even emphasized that during selection processes, time is a fundamental area important to the success of the organisation and that employees showing characteristics of being punctual be hired (Martin & Orban 1995).

The Study

The study sought without being specific about gatherings the general time management, particularly punctuality. This has been a cause of concern to the researcher as it seems there is deliberate disrespect of time even in highly placed organisations such as universities that should be leading by example. Instead they fail to manage time and are therefore proliferating this culture to the many students that pass through the system. This being a work situation it then defeats the notion that time is the most valuable resource which may eventually contributes to the inefficiency and lack of global competitive advantage. The lack of this advantage globally then results in our locally produced
products failing to compete with imported goods as their prices are very high due to inefficiencies that may partly be as a result of inadequate time management.

Objectives:

The study’s aim was therefore to investigate;
1. Punctuality in various work and social gatherings
2. Perceptions about punctuality to various categories of the society in various gatherings
3. The possibly future effects of time management to the nation.

Method

A mixed method approach was adopted for the study where both qualitative and quantitative variables were sought. In order to investigate the perceptions of the respondents on the meaning of time, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 61 randomly selected participants from a university community. The sample included students pursuing the conventional as well as parallel programs, administrative staff as well as academic and non-academic staff of the community. The sample was used for investigations of time management at work settings as well as in other gatherings outside work. Participation by the respondents was voluntary.

Results and Discussion

The results indicate serious omission on the importance of time in various gatherings (Figure 1). For instance in the attendance of meetings only 57% of the attendees were reported to be punctual. On further interrogations for many of the functions there was a common concern that even if one kept time it was more than likely that the meeting would not start on time let alone the end as those presiding over the meeting would be late.

Respondents did highlight a very important observation that meetings usually did not have specific ending times as they were left open. As a result the meeting could continue until all matters were exhausted. This therefore meant if one were to attend a meeting they would then have to cancel all other timed events scheduled after the meeting since the ending time would not be precise. The respondents highlighted even some businesses conferences where the delays were as long as 2 hours as a result of the guest speakers failing to manage punctuality. It was also mentioned that some of the delays are deliberate and also lack of respect for those who would come on time and wait as there are even no apologies for starting late.

The highest punctuality rating was reported for conferences where 75 % of the respondents indicated that there was punctuality in conferences. However on further inquiries these conferences were mainly Church conferences since most of the respondents were students who had only attended
these. Even in academic circles, students’ punctuality in attending lectures was appalling with only 52 % of students being punctual. As for other social settings such as the weddings and family gatherings punctuality was as low as 29%.

While 95% of the respondents were of the opinion that it was important to be punctual, 90% indicated that punctuality in the country was generally poor. What then are the implications of the results of this study? Zimbabweans have nurtured their own concept of time guided by their own culture as the results have shown (Saunders, Slyke & Vogel 2004, Shome, Bhardwaj & Titus 1996). The results show lack of punctuality in many gatherings, social or work, and the society seems to be content with it. This culture is not only perpetrated by the attendees of these gatherings but by the organisers and facilitators. Respondents have indicated that at times it is pointless to attend a meeting on time when one knows that it will never start at the set time. Some even indicate that the culture is more like saying “please come at 0900hrs for 0930hrs”, yet even at 0930 hrs the function may not even begin promptly. This view is supported by Vinton (1992) who raises the issue that an acceptable allowance in a gathering/meeting etc., is dependent on the culture of a people. Failure to observe punctuality is however contrary to scientific management theories that introduced the stopwatch to improve efficiency in the factories (Vinton 1992). This can then explain partly the failure of organisations to compete globally as the eventual costs of products rise due to some inefficiencies and lack of proper time management principles that can match the first world countries.

Zimbabwe has been lucky to have experienced mixed cultures by virtue of some of its citizens coming from nations where “time is life”. As a result the eventual lateness outside the acceptable range in cultures where there is a range or just being late, can be taken to be a sign of apathy and laziness or even irresponsibility (Vinton 1992). Now, with a country’s culture accepting such levels of lateness, the contribution to the economic challenges cannot be spared. Some of the factors contributing to the failure to meet specified times was as a result of nationally controlled activities such as road blocks intended to protect the safety of the passengers who use public service vehicles. It is important to note that if one can manage their punctuality it can be inferred that they can manage time to a reasonable level in other various activities be it social or work situations.

It is a common practice in Zimbabwe to see people queuing where if time was managed properly these queues would not be there, at all. Of particular mention by the respondents were queues in surgeries where the doctors kept their patients waiting before they arrived especially in the mornings and after lunch. Booking time with most Doctors does not translate to a patient then making other appointments after seeing the Doctor as one is almost assured that the Doctor would not likely to see them on the scheduled time. Datta (1987) actually looks at the patients waiting to see the Doctor as innocent people who would, when the Doctor arrived, be seen for less than three minutes having waited for hours. If however the consultant kept his time, the waiting room would remain almost empty as patients would be seen as they came (Datta 1987). To also note is that if consultants who are expected to save people’s lives have adopted a culture where time is not important to patients but to them, other activities and functions are therefore worse off hence the need to relook at the definition of time at national levels.

Conclusion

The concept of time as its importance cannot be over emphasized needs to be revisited not only at organisational levels but at national level with a view to modify the culture and minimise the time range of punctuality thereby improving time management. Japan did it as way back as 1920 resulting in the country even setting aside a special day (10th of June) to recognise the importance of time. This was as a result of observing how the Americans were obsessed with time. That being the case and seeing the productivity and efficiency that these countries currently enjoy, Zimbabwe in particular and Africa in general can take the same direction and make a deliberate move to improve on punctuality and time management since time is more than just money but life and cannot be recovered. This was a generally study to investigate the general perception of Zimbabweans on the management of time and in particular punctuality. More detailed studies therefore need to be carried out to explore the eventual effects that this laxity in punctuality has had on the eventual economic situation of the nation.
References


