

Chapter 13

Positioning Digital Transformation of Public Sector Human Resources in Zimbabwe and South Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter notes that in Zimbabwe and South Africa, where challenges such as service delivery, economic instability, and technological disruptions are prevalent, the potential of advanced technologies to reshape the public service workforce is recognised. However, very few studies position the digital transformation of HRM within these countries' contextual constraints and opportunities necessitating a need for more systematic inquiries. The study draws from various peer-reviewed articles and expansive policy documents on the digital transformation of HRM in the public sector in South Africa and Zimbabwe. It found that while the two countries have recognised the importance of digital transformation in HRM and laid down frameworks to support this transition, their paths diverge on implementation effectiveness and the challenges faced. Strategic and administrative hurdles impede South Africa's journey, whereas infrastructural and HR constraints deeply challenge Zimbabwe's. The study recommends that these countries must establish solid digital transformation strategies for HRM.

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of digital government initiatives has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, evolving through various policy paradigms and ideological trends in public administration and management (Mergel, 2019). From the early prescriptions of Woodrow Wilson and Max Weber to the New Public Management (NPM) reforms and the subsequent era of digital governance, the landscape of public sector administration has continuously evolved (Hood, 1991; Osborne & Gaebler, 1995; Dunleavy et al., 2006). Amidst these shifts, the imperative for building responsive and efficient public sector human capital remains paramount, particularly in regions like Zimbabwe and South Africa, which grapple with multifaceted challenges such as service delivery, economic instability, and technological disruptions. Bourgon (2015, p. 2) aptly captures, “In absolute terms, people in government today may not face challenges that are more difficult than the ones faced by prior generations of public sector leaders, but they sure are different”. The unique challenges of the digital age, where Digital Transformation has emerged as a driving force for innovative, inclusive and sustainable growth (African Union, 2020), are particularly complex. The sudden upsurge in the use of digital technologies necessitates more systematic inquiries to understand the challenges and opportunities brought by positioning the digital transformation of public sector human resources, considering its potential to alter how people work and think within our communities (Nhede et al., 2022).

Historical imperatives and ideological currents have shaped HRM in public administration theory and practice trajectories. From the principles of bureaucracy delineated by Max Weber to the market-oriented reforms of the NPM era, successive waves of scholarship have informed the development of the public service ethos (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Hood, 1991; Weber, 2023). However, Bourgon (2015) highlights that contemporary public servants operate in a world of volatility, hyper-connectivity, and novel challenges that demand innovative responses. These new circumstances require policymakers and regulators to keep pace with technological advances, address the latest regulatory frontiers and create the foundation upon which digital transformation can achieve its full potential (African Union, 2020). However, in the context of Zimbabwe and South Africa, the imperative for digital transformation in public sector human resource (HR) is underscored by the observations of Majam and Jarbandhan (2022) regarding the inadequacy of data-driven Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and the necessity of equipping public servants with skills relevant to the 4IR. The potential of advanced technologies to reshape the public service workforce is recognised, but positioning the digital transformation of HRM within the contextual constraints and opportunities in these countries is imperative.

Furthermore, as Christensen et al. (2020) and Osborne et al. (2012) emphasise, the public sector possesses distinctive features that differentiate them from their private sector counterparts. These features include their embeddedness within the political sphere, multi-functional mandates, and obligations to serve societal interests. Hence, while lessons from the private sector can inform the positioning of digital transformation of HRM practices in the public sector, a critical scholarly perspective is warranted to ensure the applicability and effectiveness of such transfers. Currently, Majam and Jarbandhan (2022, p. 2) note that, for instance, while the private sector makes greater use of performance metrics using data science, the public sector lags. These scholars argue that this situation creates a cause of concern given that the public sector is relied on to set the policy agenda for all stakeholders (Majam & Jarbandhan, 2022, p. 2). More so, Osborne, Radnor, and Nasi (2012, p. 140) have warned against transferring lessons from the private to the public sector—whether from a manufacturing or services context, arguing the criticality of framing analyses within a critical view of the relationship between these sectors.

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