

INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) AS A MEANS OF STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

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Abstract

In leading-edge universities, Information Communication Technology (ICT) is now perceived as a tool for potentially transforming relationship between students, faculty, staff and other stakeholders (Ibidapo-Obe, 2003). The Nigerian university of this decade, if it is to be run efficiently, must expose its operations to modern techniques of management, assisted in the process by professional administrators equipped with the relevant knowledge and experience. This would assist the Nigerian university system to streamline their structures, cut down on unnecessary overheads, satisfy personal ambitions through some other legitimate means, restructure in such a way that we are better able to utilize our human resources so that someone who does not know how higher institutions should function would not one day impose a SAP-like adjustment on Nigeria.

Impact of ICT in the University Educational Sector

There is no doubt that the impact of ICT in the University Educational Sector has been particularly revolutionary and it has facilitated an efficient and effective learning and research environment. Apart from its use in supporting teaching, learning and research activities, ICT is the backbone of the resources required in the key administrative activities of planning, monitoring, control and management. Ibidapo-Obe (2003) observes that the university system at present is going through phenomenal growth and changes in students' enrolment, number of academic programmes, number of personnel with negative indices of cultism and activism among students and staff unions. He states further that these changes pose enormous challenges to the administration of the university system especially at a time when the much-needed funding is diminishing.

A typical Nigerian university is beset oftentimes with problems and tasks that can easily be solved with ICT tools, but fail in those tasks due to inability or determination to deploy ICT. The resultant effect of this is frustration and inability to cope with ever) mounting pressures on university administration. When properly utilized, ICT tools provide the best solutions in many areas of university administration at an enormously highly reduced personnel costs. Charles-Owaba (2001) opines that the university is one area in which information technology strategies should yield good returns and that there is need for sophisticated internal and external communication systems. The speed and quality of service may depend on rapid communication system, regular supply of utilities, etc.

Faced with the demands of globalization and the challenges of a steady rise in the volume of its activities, in the midst of declining funding, the university administration has little or no options than to seek efficient and effective ways of meeting the demands and needs of its various components and stakeholders without necessarily increasing overhead costs and at the same time remain proactive in its play. In order to achieve these plans, ICT tools cannot be ignored as they make the most positive impact in the collection, processing, storage, transmission and dissemination of information.

The Concept of Strategic Management

According to Oyedotun (2003), "strategic management can be broadly described as a comprehensive and on-going management process aimed at formulating and implementing effective strategies". Furthermore, Richard and Roger (1984) describe it as "both a process and a philosophy for determining and controlling an institution's relationship to its changing environment". In other words, as a process, it integrates the concept of strategic planning, strategic thinking and strategic action.

Strategic management can further be defined as a process which involves the direction, purpose, objectives, goals and strategies that are consistent with an institution's mission, as well as monitoring of both internal and external environment and integrating budgets and profit with strategic plan.

Strategic Planning and Management Concept

Strategic planning as the core of strategic management involves the formulation of an institution's mission, objectives and goals. Gupta (1996) describes strategic planning as a way of becoming more future-oriented rather than revealing today's problems. In other words, strategic planning is the set of actions and decisions made by management that will lead to the development of specific, achievable, time-bound and measurable actions designed to help the organization. Strategic planning involves 'visioning' which helps to formulate your goals and targets for the future. Richard and Roger (1984) suggested that since strategic planning involves a step-by-step methodology, to measure both the progress and results over time;' the following process map should be adopted to ensure effective and efficient strategic planning:

- (a) Establishment of the top management support to create the desired planning environment;
- (b) Development of preliminary mission and a set of common economic assumptions for use throughout the organization;
- (c) Definition of the planning units around which the strategic plan will be built;
- (d) Development of work programmes and a completion time-table;
- (e) Identification of preliminary data requirements and initiation of data collection efforts; and
- (f) Communication of the planning process and guidelines to employees.

The aspect of strategic management that involves actual combination of strategic action and planning is referred to as strategic thinking whereas strategic action refers to the translation of vision or mission into concrete and measurable actions to meet set goals. This aspect brings plans to reality or in other words, it means the actual implementation phase of strategic management. Thus, from motivating individuals to translating the strategies into actions to achieve the organization's objectives are the various measures needed to get the work done.

Strategic Human Resource Management

The business situation in the Nigerian universities today especially with regards to human resources calls for the adoption of strategic management. Charles- Owaba (2001) Opines that the type and number of personnel required for any work situation depends on the types and volume of business. Hence, to plan for human resource in any future, one needs to know the volume and type of business to be carried out at the period.

Tinuoye (1991) postulates that in any evaluation of the conditions that are necessary for the growth, development and survival of any organization, be it private or public, the role of strategic human resource planning and management is a major factor. The role and activities of human resource development function influence, and at the same time are influenced by the environment within which they operate.

Strategic human resource management is concerned with obtaining the best possible staff for the organization and, having got them, looking after them so that they would want to stay and give off their best to their jobs. It addresses-itself to obtaining, retaining and motivating employees in the work situation, making for an accommodation, organizational climate, fitting appropriate individuals to jobs in the organization, looking after the welfare of these individuals, determining criteria for evaluating performance, planning and forecasting the manpower needs of the organization. Strategic human resources management also aims at developing appropriate policies on all personnel functions, prescribing appropriate remuneration for all categories of jobs, promoting the health, safety and moral guidance of employees through training and retraining as well as development policies and programmes in order to make for better qualified employees, opening up avenues of communication between management and employees, and so on. According to Tinuoye (1991), the major areas of strategic human resource development and management are manpower planning, recruitment, selection and placement, compensation and administration, training and development, compliance with government legislation, general employee services, application of modern human resources techniques and industrial relations.

Wohlegemuth (1998) posits that the question of treatment of staff, money and premises is growing in importance and is becoming more difficult to handle. The issue of management is therefore becoming the focus of attention in modern Africa. Education has been described as a critical and sensitive sector that requires responsible leadership at national and institutional levels

and a leader is an agent of change. He or she must be an individual action of ideological representation of society with its leadership culture, a function of a given ideology in which the subjects are interpolated. He has to have a good grasp of strategic human resources planning and management in order to be able to make a success of the enterprise.

The Strategic Planning Committee (2001) observes that "Universities can no longer be seen as privileged points of access to knowledge, nor a university be seen as just a repository of knowledge, nor has a University graduate any longer an automatic expectation of a single job lasting a lifetime. More and more, graduates' careers will involve many changes, including changes of direction. 'Knowledge workers' will prosper according to the extent to which they continue to learn and put their knowledge to work; they will be rewarded not for owning a static corpus of knowledge, but for problem-solving skills, creative thinking and adaptability". This observation underscores the importance of training and retraining of staff in the strategic management process of manpower.

Having made these far-reaching statements about strategic human resources management, one, may be tempted to ask for the position of strategic human resources management in Nigerian universities today. To say the least, Nigeria could not have been said to have adequately provided for higher education neither has the environment over the years been friendly to Teaming and management process. Folarin (2003) postulates that the watch principle for the practitioner, be it the Registrar, Provost, Vice-Chancellor etc. are standard, relevance, maintenance, welfare and discipline of his personnel. She argues that some of the factors that come to play in the system are out of control of the practitioner. The issues of funding, conducive political ethos, mismanagement, etc. would be a cog in the wheel of management.

This situation notwithstanding, emphasis should be placed on planning and a long-term strategy of building up capacity from existing staff. The practitioners would have planned and resolved concerning the type and level of required staff through institutional and defined goals and objectives. Folarin (2003) identifies the greatest dilemma in this practice as the retention of staff which causes rapid turnover and the inability to pay competitive remuneration and the absence of well-packaged welfare services. She suggests that the way out of the dilemma is the provision of adequate incentives and automatic motivation of staff. The criteria to be used in doing this are measured achievement over specific period, service period and tolerable conduct.

ICT and Strategic Human Resource Management

The need for the application of ICT in the strategic management of human resources in the university system stems out of the need to block the drainage pipes i.e. cut down severely on wasteful spending in non-essential areas, to improve its revenue base, to build a culture of financial prudence in the management of its own affairs (Obanya, 1999). Personnel costs account for a sizeable proportion of the university's annual budget allocation and experience has shown that until recently, appointments into positions are being made as means of social service and for political patronage reasons.

It is high time for the Nigerian university system to realize that the honeymoon period is over. Ajayi (1990) notes that funding of higher education and particularly universities has emerged as a major topic of debate in both developed and developing countries in recent years. In Nigeria, the issue has drawn more attention and is probably the greatest problem facing university development today.

Hitherto, the student/staff ratio by faculty, the academic support unit ratio and the non-academic department unit ratio as enunciated by the National Universities Commission (NUC) is just a provision in the university books that is not in Use. The situation in many universities is such that the number of junior staff is up to, if not more than, the number of all Senior staff, academic and non-academic put together.

Addae-Mensah (2001) notes that policy makers in this era of liberalization and privatization -because of their poor conception of the societal good and what constitutes national interest -chronically underfund educational institutions in a way that eschews any priority of right and justice. Universities are therefore underfunded although they face escalating social demand for higher education. The legitimacy of higher education is under attack from many directions due to the stringent demands of austerity under structural adjustment. In the last twenty years, stakeholders

expected universities to do far more than they could cope with in the face of rapidly dwindling resources. Governments drastically reduced subsidies to universities but expected them to increase their intake to meet national manpower needs.

To be able to meet this high expectations in the face of the dwindling economic resources, universities have little or no choice but to imbibe the wide-range use of ICT tools in all aspects of their operations, both academic and administrative. This will cut down seriously on personnel costs as it would remove the possibility of duplication of hands on specific assignments and plug the drainage pipe of using appointment as social service.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight the importance of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in strategic human resource management in the present day university system. This is an all-important subject in this globalized era particularly in the face of a global economic recession that calls for a radical approach to the allocation of scarce resources without necessarily compromising the fulfillment of the vision and mission of the system. In other words, a university personnel administration nowadays must be ICT driven if it is to fulfill its vision and mission.

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