

## **Best Practice in Managing Diverse Employees. Lived Experiences At The Zimbabwe Open University.**

<sup>1</sup>Daniel Ndudzo

<sup>1</sup>Registrar, Zimbabwe Open University 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Stanley House, Cnr 1<sup>st</sup> street & Jason Moyo, Harare,  
Zimbabwe

---

**Abstract:** *This paper identifies best practices in employee diversity management. Data was generated through face to face structured interviews with core managers in human resources and administration as well by an analysis of documentary information from University records. The findings reveal a significant gap between international best practice in managing employee diversity and practices in the (Open and Distance Learning ODL) institution. The study also revealed some barriers in implementing employee diversity programs. The study recommends that the human resources department should have a written employee diversity policy which will be a guideline in developing diversity programs in the ODL institution. The Zimbabwe Open University should also introduce employee diversity training workshops. The research further recommends that management should craft clear communication strategies that address organisational barriers that militate against the effective implementation of employee diversity programs.*

---

### **Definition of key terms**

Best Practice and Employee Diversity

### **Best Practice**

Best practices are defined as “techniques or methods which are considered acceptable or through experience and research, have reliably led to desired or optimum results” (Dictionary.com, 2007).

### **Employee diversity**

According to Sonnenschein (1997) employee diversity can be described as the similarities and differences among employees in terms of age, race, disability, sex, religion or belief.

## **I. Background to the Study**

The advent of globalization requires more interaction among people from diverse cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds than ever before. To this end, organisations should implement diversity management programs aimed at building and supporting an equitable and inclusive workplace where diverse talents of all employees are valued. Cox (2001) defined diversity as the variation of social and cultural identities among people existing together in a defined employment or marketing setting.

Managing diversity is a long term strategy which focuses on changing the workplace environment and culture to enable all individuals to participate and reach their full potential. According to Ruffino (1999; 9) organisations that embrace and value diversity as an integral part of their goals benefited a lot from managing diversity. The benefits include; attracting and retaining the best available human talent, gaining and keeping greater market share, increasing organizational productivity, etc.

Recruiting employees from various multicultural backgrounds may be a good strategy for promoting diversity. However, this alone may not enable an organization to harness the power of employee diversity. This paper therefore identifies best practices that can enable an organization to reap the full benefits of employee diversity. It is expected that the research findings will assist ZOU and other ODL institutions to improve their employee diversity management practices.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

There is not known a study carried out at the Zimbabwe Open University on best practices in managing diverse employees in the ODL institution. This study, therefore, identifies best practices in managing diverse employees and assesses if the Zimbabwe Open University is complying with international best practices in employee diversity management.

## **III. Purpose of the study**

This study seeks to identify best practices in employee diversity management.

#### **IV. Objectives of the study**

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To identify International best practices in employee diversity management.
- To assess whether the Zimbabwe Open University is complying with international best practice in employee diversity management.
- To recommend any improvements that could be adopted by the Zimbabwe Open University.

#### **5.0 Key research questions**

The study was guided by the following questions;

- What are the best practices in employee diversity management?
- Is the Zimbabwe Open University complying with best practices in employee diversity management?
- What, if any, improvements could the University adopt to enhance employee diversity?

#### **V. Justification of the study**

The findings of this study will assist the ODL institution with specific guidelines and recommendations on employee diversity management. This research will enable ZOU and other ODL institutions to realize the full potential of their human capital. The study will also allow ODL institutions to attract the best employees in the market, improve employee engagement which increases organizational productivity and employee retention.

#### **VI. Review of related literature**

The identification of best practices in diversity management has proved to be a challenge due to lack of empirical research assessing particular diversity practices to determine if they will produce ‘desired or optimum’ results (Lauring & Ross, 2004). Most research articles done on this topic are interpretive and rely on case studies or stories to support the authors’ assertions, (Pitts, 2006).

#### **Managing Diversity**

According to Maxwell, et al (2001) managing diversity involves an understanding that there are differences among employees and, if properly managed, are an asset to work being done more efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, Friday (2003) argue that managing diversity should be considered an active phenomenon, which involves supervising, coordinating and directing the diversity or differences individuals bring to the organization to ensure that the organization’s strategic goals are fully and effectively met. Kreitz (2002) listed top-level best practices in employee diversity management that almost any organization can implement.

#### **Top leadership commitment**

An organization’s vision of employee diversity and commitment must start from the top management. The Chief Executive Officer of an organisation must possess the vision and leadership to inspire his/her top managers and all employees to embrace diversity as a tool for success in the marketplace. As the institution’s leader, the Chief Executive Officer must champion diversity by infusing it into all of the organisation’s processes to ensure that diversity is integrated into the core values of the organisation at all levels. The CEO must set diversity as an important goal and position the responsibility for diversity with senior executives. Aronson’s (2002) observed that diversity succeeded in those organisations where the Chief Executive Officer was directly involved in the organisations’ diversity strategies either by reviewing reports from diversity committees, discussing diversity plans at board meetings or serving as an advisor to the or diversity team. Diversity strategies are severely limited where there is poor commitment from the top.

#### **Strategic planning on employee diversity**

The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) analysis reveals that an organization must infuse diversity in its strategic plan to promote a culture of diversity that permeates every department and function of the organization. Without the establishment of an explicit diversity plan, it becomes difficult for an organisation to address accountability for promoting and implementing diversity initiatives. Friday (2003) observed that when an organisation’s business practices fail to include a well-developed diversity vision, it will have difficulties in realizing a successful diversity process because the business will lack the proper mechanisms to assess the status and accomplishments of the process. He further noted that any diversity strategy must contain well defined goals and objectives that are straightforward and clear so that management and employees understand what is expected.

### **Embracing workplace diversity principles in the recruitment and selection processes**

Kaye (1995) states that recruitment is the process of attracting and retaining qualified diverse applicants for employment. Top management should ensure that recruitment and selection personnel in the human resources department should present a diverse pool of candidates. Recruitment information should contain the organisation's commitment to workplace diversity. With the widespread use of the Internet in promoting business activities, many organisations have realized that posting notices of job openings to multiple and diverse websites has yielded the most positive results in attracting diverse candidates.

### **Measuring employee diversity**

Organisations should have a diversity metrics system to accurately and objectively measure their progress in achieving employee diversity. Winston & Li, (2000) propound that a "diversity metrics" is a tool which organisations can use to measure not just where they are, but how far they have come and how far they have to move up to the next level in terms of employee diversity. This type of benchmark serves as an important instrument to monitor employee diversity objectives. Organisations can also use another mechanism which involves the creation of a diversity "scorecard" that essentially grades an organisation's diversity efforts on a scale. Organisations then submit quarterly diversity scorecards to the top management for review.

### **Employee involvement**

Thomas, (1992) further noted that employee involvement is critical to building workplace diversity success. Establishment of an internal diversity committee can be instrumental in engaging employees to take an active role in diversity initiatives. The committee can plan diversity awareness events and disseminate diversity education information and materials, and serve in an advisory capacity to senior leaders. Employees should be able to communicate their concerns and satisfaction on diversity related issues. Open dialogue can be healthy for individuals and organizations, but must be facilitated by supportive environments for sensitive conversations. Facilitated study circles or roundtable discussions can be used to implement productive dialogues on diversity issues in an organisation.

### **Inclusive Work Environment**

When employees feel that they are being treated equally, no matter their background differences, they will appreciate the fairness of an organisation's leadership style. Organizations should ensure that photographic depictions of staff reflect their inclusive culture of diversity. Kreitz (2002) noted that staff promotions should not be based on race, creed, disability status or any factor other than talent and skills. The institution should develop and maintain a highly skilled diverse workforce, where all employees and members are valued, encouraged and provided with opportunities to develop their potential. To promote an inclusive work environment, organisations should celebrate specific cultural holidays such as The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Employers can also modify working conditions and allow flexible holidays to allow employees to celebrate their own special days.

### **Diversity awareness training**

Many organisations acknowledge that they should encourage employees to continue to learn new ideas in dealing with the management of a diverse workforce. The objectives of these employee diversity workshops are to; identify the business implications of valuing diversity, examine the effects that personal attitudes and stereotypes have on behavior and develop a communication model that emphasizes cultural diversity. Through diversity training, an organisation can create a conducive environment where employees can understand each other. Diversity awareness training helps to eliminate biases and barriers that often impede on the organisation's overall ability to effectively promote a culture of inclusion. Human resources personnel should provide written documents and periodic emails encouraging employees to appreciate the diversity of their organisation. Wilson & Weiler (2000) evaluated a pilot cross-cultural training program conducted for hospitality staff in Melbourne. They reported that staff members who joined the cross-cultural awareness training from the first meeting until the training program ended were very enthusiastic and recommended that this program should continue in the future.

### **Accommodate employees with special needs**

The institution should accommodate individuals with disabilities to ease their integration into the workforce and make them comfortable in their environment. The Labour Act of Zimbabwe Chapter 28:01 Section 5 states that no employer shall discriminate against any employee or prospective employee on grounds of race, tribe, place of origin, political opinion, colour, creed, gender, pregnancy, HIV/AIDS status or, subject to the Disabled Persons Act [Chapter 17:01], any disability referred to in the definition of "disabled person" in that Act, in relation to advertisement, recruitment, remuneration, etc. The ZOU Act Chapter 25:20 Section 6

prohibits discrimination on membership of the University. Organisations need to address all kinds of harassment and bullying policies to ensure employees develop personal behaviours based on a culture of respect for individuality. Managers should have the knowledge and skills to deal appropriately with any complaints of workplace harassment or discriminatory behavior. The ZOU Code of Conduct should be provided to all current and new employees and should be even accessed on the Intranet.

### **Employee diversity Incentives**

Through a Diversity Performance Incentive Scheme, the level of diversity success is linked to the short-term compensation of directors and senior managers. Organisations could create incentives to encourage employees on every level to participate in the diversity process. A large telecommunications company in America introduced a Chairman's Diversity Award which was presented to the individual and group that have made the most exemplary contributions to their particular divisions and to the overall company in promoting diversity. Organisations may introduce a Supplier Diversity Achievement Award program annually. The purpose is to honor individual employees and teams for their innovative approaches to increasing opportunities for diverse business enterprises.

## **VII. Research Methodology**

The study used an interpretivist philosophy with the Zimbabwe Open University being the case study. The qualitative research methodology was used where a deep and extensive review of the human resources literature and practices in various organisations was used. Data was generated by conducting face to face structured interviews with core managers in Human Resources and Administration. This was complemented by an analysis of documentary information from the University i.e., the ZOU Act, the Labour Act of Zimbabwe [Chapter 28:01], International Labour Convention Act 1948 No/87; 1951 No/100; 1958 No/111, and the ZOU Ordinances. Leedy (1997) argues that an in-depth study is effective in collecting information because it clearly captures values and perceptions of respondents. This was an appropriate research design to describe the best practices in managing diverse employees.

## **VIII. Discussion of Findings.**

### **Equal Employment Opportunity**

The study confirmed that there is equal employment opportunity at ZOU. The research revealed that the Human Resources Unit enforces impartiality, fairness and equity across the University's wide operations. The study revealed that the ZOU Act Chapter 25:20 Section 6 and the Labour Act of Zimbabwe Chapter 28:01 Section 5 prohibits discrimination in employment practices on the basis of national origin, race, religion, gender, physical ability and age.

### **Gender Equality**

Human resources documents revealed that the University has taken a major step towards accomplishing gender equality on employment opportunities as statistical data confirm that there are 47% female employees as compared to 53% males. The ZOU strategic Plan 2010-2014 document stipulates that all employees receive fair and equitable treatment and men and women who perform equal work have the right to receive equal pay.

### **Employment of people with disabilities and special needs**

The Zimbabwe Open University is guided by the Disabled Persons Act [Chapter 17:01] for recruitment of disabled employees. However, human resources personnel indicated that the Zimbabwe Open University has only three employees who are disabled. Taking into account that the University has a Special Needs Department in the Faculty which provides Courses in Disability Studies, the institution should lead by example in targeting the recruitment of qualified disabled graduates.

### **ZOU lagging behind in other diversity characteristics**

An assessment of the University Human Resources Manual and Strategic Plan Document reveals that while gender issues and tribal differences have been addressed to some extent, the main concern in the ODL institution is that nationality, religion, language, physical ability, race and other characteristics of diversity are lagging behind. Groschl, (2004) observed that race, religion, ethnicity, disability might not be a priority for human resources directors in most African organisations. This might cause prejudice, misconception and negative attitudes among organisational stakeholders, (Smith 2002).

### **Lack of knowledge on employee diversity issues**

Interviews with the University managers and administrators revealed that most managers in the ODL institution lack familiarity with terminology related to diversity and most of them believe that diversity is

difficult to implement in reality. Although during the interviews managers could explain their understanding about employee diversity, there is an obvious dearth of implementation of the practices in their daily activities.

### **ZOU policy on employee diversity**

The study revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University does not have a clear written policy on employee diversity. The institution also does not have a diversity mission statement to guide the organisation in creating an environment of fairness and equality that appeal to employees and stakeholders. This is supported by Campbell, (2006) who observed that from the 169 members of the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) chosen as respondents, 53% reported that their organizations do not have a written policy or program related to employee diversity.

### **Training of employees on employee diversity**

Structured interviews with the Human resources management revealed that the Zimbabwe Open University does not train its employees specifically on diversity related issues. Further follow up discussions with the human resources staff indicated that this could be due to the absence of a diversity policy for the institution. The absence of employee diversity training workshops could have led to the staff's lack of knowledge on diversity issues.

### **Employee diversity incentives**

The ZOU Strategic Plan 2010-2014 document has on paper an incentive policy with various ways of introducing ways of acknowledging good performance, innovativeness and recognition. These incentives include the Worker of the year award, Long service award, Unit of the year award, Researcher of the year award, etc. It was observed that the incentives introduced by ZOU do not include acknowledgement of staff who excel in promoting employee diversity at the institution.

## **IX. Conclusion**

The research concluded that the Zimbabwe Open University is lagging behind in implementing a coherent employee diversity program. It was revealed that current practices focus mainly on gender diversity. The research revealed that human resources managers are more concerned about gender issues but ignore other characteristics of diversity such as nationality, religion, race, disability and ethnicity. The study recommended that human resource managers should foster openness to dissimilarity of stakeholders in the organization. Respecting stakeholder differences and encouraging open communication can minimize barriers in implementing diversity programs, reduce bias and prejudice in the ODL institution. This study also suggested that the institution should introduce employee diversity workshops for management and all employees to increase awareness on diversity related issues in the ODL institution. The Zimbabwe Open University must go beyond creating a more diverse workplace environment simply based on gender to other key attributes of diversity as discussed earlier on.

## **X. Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

- The University should have a written policy on employee diversity. The aim of the policy is to develop a common perspective towards employee diversity within the institution.
- Human Resource personnel should be trained in the field of employee diversity in order to effectively deliver training to other employees.
- Employee diversity concepts and principles should be incorporated into all training programs such as team building and new employee orientation.

## **References**

### **Journals**

- [1]. Aronson, D. (2002). Managing the diversity revolution: Best practices for 21st century business. *Civil Rights Journal*, 6, 46-66.
- [2]. Carr-Ruffino, N. (1996). *Managing diversity: People skills for a multicultural workplace*. Stamford, CT: Thompson Executive Press.
- [3]. Campbell, J.D. (2006). Changing a cultural icon: The academic library as a virtual destination. *Educause Review*, 41, 16-30.
- [4]. Cox, Jr. T. (2001). *Creating the Multicultural Organization: A strategy for Capturing the Power of Diversity*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 3-16.
- [5]. Friday, E., & Friday, S.S. (2003). Managing diversity using a strategic planned change approach.
- [6]. *Journal of Management Development*, 22, 863-880.
- [7]. Groschl, S. 2004, 'Current Human Resources Practices Affecting the Employment of Persons with Disabilities in Selected Toronto Hotels-A Case Study', *International Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Administration*, volume 5, no 3, pp. 15-29.
- [8]. Kim, B. 2006, 'Managing Workforce Diversity: Developing a Learning Organization', *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism* 5, no. 2, pp. 69-90.
- [9]. Kreitz, Patricia A. (2008). Best Practices for Managing Organizational Diversity. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 34(2), 101-120. Retrieved September 14, 2008 from Library, Information Science & Technology.

- [10]. Luring, J., & Ross, C. (2004). Research notes: Cultural diversity and organizational efficiency. *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations*, 29, 89-103.
- [11]. Labour Act of Zimbabwe [Chapter28:01]
- [12]. Miller, G. E. & Rowney, J. I. A. 1999, 'Workplace Diversity Management in Multicultural Society', *Women in Management Review*, volume 14 no 8 pp 307-315, viewed 20 September 2006, retrieved from Emerald Database.
- [13]. Pitts, D.W. (2006). Modeling the impact of diversity management. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 26,245-268.
- [14]. Smith, T. 2002, 'Diversity and Disability: Exploring the Experience of Vision Impaired People in Workplace', *Equal Opportunities International*, volume 21 no 8 pp.59-72, viewed 3 October 2006, retrieved from Emerald Database.
- [15]. Swanson, D. R. 2002, 'Diversity Programs: Attitude and Realities in the Contemporary Corporate Environment', *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*, volume 7 no 4 pp 257-268, viewed 20 September 2006, retrieved from Emerald Database.
- [16]. Thomas, R. (1992). *Beyond Race and Gender: Unleashing the power of your total workforce by managing diversity*. New York, AMACOM.
- [17]. Vela, F. 2006, *Managing Cultural Diversity in Hospitality Industry- The Role of Eastern European Worker in the Western European Hospitality Sector*, Hellenic Open University, Greece, viewed 20 August 2006,
- [18]. Wilborn, L., Weaver, P. 2002, 'Diversity Management Training Initiatives: A Profile of Current Practices within the Lodging Industry', *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism* 1, no. 4, pp. 79-96.
- [19]. Winston, M.D., & Li, H. (2000). Managing diversity in liberal arts colleges. *College & Research libraries*, 61,205-215.
- [20]. Zimbabwe Open University Strategic Plan (2010-2014)
- Books**
- [21]. Carr & Ruffino 1999, *Diversity Success Strategies*, Butterworth Heinemann, Boston.
- [22]. Johnson, R & David, R. 2000, *Diversity Incorporated-Managing People for Success in Diverse World*, Prentice Hall, London.
- [23]. Sonnenschein 1997, *Practical Executive and Workforce Diversity*, NTC publishing group, Lincolnwood, Illinois, USA.
- [24]. Lundberg, D. 1992, *Management of People in Hotels and Restaurant*, fifth edition, Wm C Brown Publishers, USA.