HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT IN CRISIS: A CASE OF A UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Human Resources (HR) departments in previously disadvantaged higher education institutions (HEI) in South Africa have contributed to the crisis that has led them to be governed by appointed Administrators assigned by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training. The malfunctioning of HR departments persists even in the post-Administrator's era, with a prevalence of personal, interpersonal and operational challenges. This study aimed at interrogating challenges faced by the HR Department of the university concerned post the appointed Administrator era and its negative effects. This study adopted a qualitative research approach whereby in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 10 HR Department staff members. Focus group discussions were also carried out with 20 academic and non-academic university leaders. Further data was also collected through ethnographic observation and secondary data was also used. The non-probability purposive sampling was used for qualitative analysis and NVivo was used for organizing and analyzing data gleaned from the in-depth interviews. The study findings consistently revealed unclear roles and responsibilities, outmoded recruitment and selection processes and poor interpersonal relations amongst the HR department staff members as some of the challenges that still persist post the Administrator's era, all of which have contributed to the paralysis of organizational culture. University leaders can use the study findings as a tool to devise and implement radical change management interventions aiming at re-engineering HR departments that are operating abnormally, as well as for designing a responsive HR Strategic Architect. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge in the HR fraternity as there is a dearth of published studies on the internal challenges faces by HR Departments (both interpersonal and operational), which have the potential to hamper smooth operations of higher education institutions.

Keywords: Human Resources Department; Administrator; Higher Education; Ethnographic Observation

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Introduction

Very successful higher education institutions (HEI) in South Africa are perceived to be those where the roles and responsibilities of the Human Resources (HR) departments are clearly defined, smooth recruitment and selection processes are in place and where the department is led by leaders who possess very strong personal, interpersonal and intellectual capabilities. Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman (2011) argue that the HR departments at HEI may be faced with difficulties when attempting to implement change, due to the relatively "new" nature of the function. This results in first having to justify their position, worth and capabilities before attempting to gain the buy-in of academic departments, in order to implement a culture change in their departments. This is in line with Gordon & Whitchurch (2007, p. 136) position that human resources operations in institutions are constrained in scope, and many key areas (such as recruitment, reward and promotion) require external approval and authorization. This theoretical background necessitated this study to question the existence and impact of such internal HR Department impediments that may prevent them from performing their core functions at a required level. The primary

objective of this study is to investigate the underlying factors that contribute to the dysfunctionality of the HR Department at the university concerned.

Researchers such as Oba (2005, p. 108) have highlighted wider opportunities for recruitment and greater potential for conflict within institutions between management and staff unions. McInnis (1998) mentions that the impact of shifts in job profiles, values and behaviours of the workforce have received less attention than issues such as governance and senior academic leadership. At the same time, Archer (2005) suggests that HR departments have become more involved with institutional strategy than day-to- day line management issues. On the other hand, devolved organizational structures, involving distributed management and leadership have created increased demand, and provision, of formal management and leadership programmes for those having direct responsibility for staff (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007, p. 148-9). Hence this study is aligned to the aforementioned arguments; more emphasis was placed on investigating the HR Department's staff members and the operational challenges that negatively affect the smooth operation of the department.

According to Knight (2012, 15) senior HR Directors across the sector are concerned that some institutions do not gain the value and contribution from their HR function that they could. HR usually has to focus its resources on administration and performance - managing those (relatively small numbers of) staff with serious performance issues, at the expense of focusing on the effective engagement and productivity of the wider workforce. When this happens, HR may be perceived as bureaucratic as and more focused on process efficiency than on effectiveness. The remainder of the article is structured into four sections. Firstly, the literature is reviewed, secondly, the research design employed is articulated, followed by the presentation and analysis of data and finally a conclusion and recommendations are made.

Literature review

Roles and responsibilities within the HR Department

Human Resources departments in higher education institutions are faced with mammoth tasks in their roles to develop and implement a strategic plan that is aligned with the university-wide approved plan, while responding to the needs of all the key stakeholders of the university (including faculties or departments, leaders, employees and trade unions). An effective HR Department needs to implement its strategy and business plan through its structures (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank & Ulrich, 2012, p. 241). Human Resource leaders have spent many years in a quest for the optimal HR organization with the clearest roles, responsibilities, and rules of operation (Ulrich *et al.* 2012, p. 241). The latter researchers suggest that continually revising the present HR structure should not be a primary priority for HR leaders. However, the HR structures can be designed to deliver value by taking action to align the HR organization with the business organization and clarify responsibilities for each role (Ulrich *et al.,* 2012, p. 241). According to the Society for Human Resource Management "2006 Strategic Management Survey Report," of the 427 responding HR professionals (from all industries) about three quarters of respondents considered their own roles and the role of their HR Department as a combination of strategic and operational functions (Patton, 2007). Clearly, solidification of HR's strategic role depends on organizational design and reporting relationships, because these structural components are vital to HR's ability to have a seat at the table and to participate in decision making (Ulrich *et al*., 2009, p. 41). Evans & Chun (2012, p. 41) report that within higher education, the most typical reporting relationship of HR is through the finance or business area. More than half of all chief HR officers (57.9 percent) in higher education report; through the chief business officer (34.4 percent), chief financial officer (14.2 percent), or chief administration officer (9.3 percent) (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2010). This predominant model subsumes HR under the finance function, limiting its scope, influence, and authority. It also assumes a commonality between finance and HR functions, despite the distinct differences in these fields of work (Evans & Chun, 2012, p. 41). Human Resources departments usually retain oversight of some integrated functions for faculty and staff, including health benefits, workers' compensation, and retirement. They may also have responsibility for oversight for recruitment guidelines and processes, affirmative action, appointment processes, and the management of records for faculty and staff (Evans & Chun, 2012, p. 42). This study revolves around the arguments raised by the abovementioned researchers, while it further investigates whether the roles and responsibilities of the HR Department staff are clarified and respond to the needs of the university key stakeholders.

Service delivery in an HR environment at a higher education institution

Ulrich *et al*. (2012, p. 229) mention that the HR service delivery is the implementation arm of HR. It includes on-the-ground resources that are the face of HR for employees, geographic specialists, global specialists, and shared service centers. They have suggested that line managers are the owners of HR and that HR professionals are the architects. It is also noteworthy that the HR Department should be a role model for the rest of the organization (Ulrich *et al.,* 2012, p. 237). While this study is informed by the views of the latter researchers, it also focuses on whether the level of service delivery of the HR Department as a whole in this university hinders the realization of its mandate.

Staff Recruitment and selection in an HR Department: A higher education perspective

Inadequately applied recruitment and selection processes and incompetent recruitment and selection specialists in the HR departments in higher education institutions are regarded as being the cause of the high level of inept candidates who are attracted to these institutions. HR professionals have their own views on the necessary competencies they should possess, with these being skills in communication, problem-solving, leadership, recruiting and selection, an adherence to employment law, training and development, technology, forecasting, compensation design, benefits design and administration, and accounting or finance record keeping (Becker, Huselid & Ulrich, 2001). The study conducted by Dubosc, Kelov & Brussels (2012, p. 7) investigated to what extent some unfavourable conditions, such as inadequate recruitment procedures and lack of career progression schemes, may be hindering the development of proper HR in higher education in the Tempus Partner Countries. The researchers revealed several problems related to staff recruitment which were common in many of the countries investigated. For example, the high frequency of internal recruitments; lack of transparency of recruitment procedures and criteria; persisting corruption and political or personal appointments; as well as in some cases, the rigidity of the legal frameworks, were seen to prevent institutions from recruiting the best candidates available (Dubosc *et al.,* 2012, p. 32). The process of staff recruitment is one of the most crucial aspects in ensuring that an institution has good quality staff with appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes that are in line with the needs of the institutions (Dubosc *et al*., 2012, p. 9). Appropriate recruitment procedures that are transparent, fair and open, are likely to enable institutions to better select the best candidates from the available pool and increase the ability of institutions to set their own recruitment requirements, according to their specific needs whilst supporting the institutional level management of Human Resources (Dubosc *et al.,* 2012, p. 31). This study seeks to identify competency deficiencies amongst the HR Department staff members while it adheres to the above analogy on the competencies which they should possess.

Interpersonal skills amongst the HR Department staff members

Staff members of HR departments in previously disadvantaged South African higher education institutions seem to lack the necessary interpersonal and intellectual capabilities to respond to the needs of their internal customers and clients. The study conducted by Schultz (2010, p. 6) in the merged higher education institution environment concluded that the staff is not entirely satisfied with the fact that the HR Department does not have sufficient business knowledge, that HR practices are currently not satisfactory, and that there is a lack of personal skills and management skills in the HR Department. On the other hand, staff indicated that business knowledge, HR practices, personal skills and management skills are crucial to the HR Department, adding value to this institution. An emphasis should be placed on assisting the staff of the HR Department to gain the necessary personal skills (Schultz, 2010, p. 6). The HR Department should consider different perspectives to contribute to this positive effect. Meisinger (2003) suggests that HR resource-managers should determine what top management and non-HR managers expect from the HR Department and then act upon it. The HR Department should ensure that the different HR practices add value. The personal skills of the staff should be of such a nature that the staff can carry out their duties with professionalism (Schultz, 2010, p. 6). The impact of the poor personal skills of HR Department staff members, which have the potential to diminish the values of the HR Department, as shown by the researchers above, informs this study. It is further extended by interrogating whether poor service is caused by lack of interpersonal and intellectual incapability.

Research methodology

This study employed an exploratory element where in-depth qualitative interviews (Bloemberg, Cooper, & Schindler, 2005) were conducted. The in-depth interviews (King, 2004) were conducted with 10 permanent and 2 contract HR Department staff members who were in junior, middle and senior management levels. These included Senior/Director, Coordinators for Recruitment and Selection and Organizational Design, Administrators, a Secretary, Advisors, Employee Relations Officer, a Skills Development Facilitator and a Health and Safety Officer. The research participants were asked about their daily activities and the challenges which they are facing in executing their agreed duties. These questions were to determine whether the incumbents perform the agreed activities as per their employment contracts. Furthermore, focused group discussions including 20 academic and non-academic leaders, trade union members and all HR Department staff members were also organized, in order to deliberate on the challenges facing the department in question (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001) where the researcher performed the role of the facilitator (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, 340). The research also employed an ethnographic component which included the use of participant observation, enabling the ethnographer to immerse himself in the setting. This generated a rich understanding of social action and allowed for an understanding of the subtleties in the specific contexts (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008, p. 5). Secondary data sources, including the Independent Assessors' Report (2008) and the HEQC Report (Council on Higher Education, 2011), were used as a means of triangulating the research findings that were gleaned from the in-depth interviews. This was also the way in which the findings were gleaned from the in-depth interviews. The use of the Report was an advantage as the data already existed (Stewart & Kamins, 1993) and met the research questions and objectives of this study (Saunders *et al.,* 2007).

Research findings

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the research participants, including 10 permanent and 2 contract staff members, where their responses were categorized and organized using Nvivo qualitative analytical tool. The disproportionately high total coverage of 11.9% based on the unclear roles and responsibilities as challenges advanced by the research participants. This has been confirmed by the junior staff member, who stated:

> *"Conflicts within the department are caused by unclear and duplication of the roles and responsibilities, with certain functions being performed by the interns"*

The next total highest coverage was on operational challenges (7.27%) faced by the HR Department. The research participants mentioned the absence of a recruitment plan and selection processes. Concurrent with the above mentioned findings, the senior member of the department mentioned that:

> *"HR staff members lack the requisite skills to craft recruitment plans and are inept in recruitment and selection processes, which enables the university to seek the services of the external HR consultant"*

In addition, employees equity statistics, lack of knowledge and access to the case law website and the submission of the fraudulent study grants documents were challenges mentioned by the research participants. In concurrence to the latter, the junior member of the HR Department articulated that:

> *"Labor related matters, or functions have been outsourced to the Legal Services Department, deprive me to perform my duties up to standard"*

The third highest total coverage was on interpersonal relations at 6.20% challenges, as encountered by the research participants. In support of this finding, members of management of the HR Department claimed that:

> *"The HR Organogram is premised on conflicts amongst HR staff members and is not based on the needs of the department and that of the university".*

> *"The department is divided into camps, with the domination of those who are aligned to the consultant with higher salary scales as well as poor organizational culture characterized by gossips and conflicts."*

The lowest total coverage was on structural challenges (5.40%); communication (0.86%); core values and principles (0.77%) and compensation (2.57%). Structural challenges were concurrent with following evidence:

> *"the HR Department organogram was crafted to suit certain camps and marginalized others and is emotional and illogical".*

Junior staff members mentioned compensation challenges as supported below:

> *"Salary determination is false as certain employees are awarded notches between three and five without justification".*

The respondents were asked to suggest recommendations emanating from the above-mentioned challenges. Their responses were categorized into three layers, which were institutional, departmental and individual. The departmental recommendations had the highest total coverage of 19.55%, as compared to other variables. Their recommendations ranged from appointment or the creation of new positions to supporting the existing staff members, including a Wellness Programme Officer, Recruitment and Selection Officer, Receptionist and Filing Specialist and improving reporting lines. The next highest total coverage was institutional (3.73%), based on the equity statistics being moved to the HR Department from the Legal Services Department and the need for strategic planning to involve all stakeholders. There were no recommendations mentioned regarding individual employees.

Ethnographic observation

As a member of the HR group over a period of three years, the researcher was able to observe the different pitfalls mostly confirmed by the research participants during the in-depth interviews. The researcher evidenced the exodus of the Senior Directors: HR, whereby within this three year period two individuals were employed in the position permanently, while one was in an acting capacity for a period of seven months. Both Senior Director and the Director positions had similar Key Performance Areas (KPAs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which created confusion regarding their roles and responsibilities. While middle and junior staff members had similar KPAs and KPIs, with all staff members having recruitment and selection as a KPA while there was a specialist dedicated to perform such functions. This created poor relations amongst staff members, exacerbated by the interference of external cabal, including the trade unions, on departmental operational issues.

Furthermore, those who were opportunistically aligned to new leaders of the department were remunerated better than those who were either neutral or resistant. Although the staff members were abundant in number, it did not appear that they were fully utilized. Human Resource Department staff members were input orientated, as evidenced by their systems (IT) which were dissimilar to that of finance, which aggravated the prevalent silo mentality. The culture of poor performance caused by a lack of skills motivated the university leadership to seek the services of an external consultant to be involved in operational issues, including recruitment and selection.

Focus group discussions with the university stakeholders:

Weaknesses

The researcher conducted focus group discussions with both academic and non-academic leaders, HR staff members and trade unions. During deliberations, the following matters were raised:
1. Inequity in workload distribution and remuneration.
2. Poor confidentiality in all areas of the Human Resources function.
3. Protocol and procedures in all Human Resources functional areas were not followed.
4. Poor Professionalism (failing to abide by the HR code of conduct and ethics).
5. Roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined and communicated.
6. Outmoded recruitment processes and procedures were in use.

7.   Unlimited HR Consultant powers.
8.   Labour issues were not cascaded to line managers.
9.   Absence of guidelines for interns.
10. Training line managers on different aspects of HR.
11. Coordinating HR positions to be goal oriented.
12. Poor departmental leadership.
13. Telephones were not answered promptly.
14. Poor service delivery.
15. Silo mentality, generally and specifically between the HR Department and the Finance Department.
16. Mismatched staff numbers (ITS vs Unique).
17. Absence of promotion policy for non-academic staff.
18. Absence of a staff retention strategy.

Independent Assessor's Report 2008: Investigation into the affairs of the university concerned

The independent Assessor's report, as appointed by the Minister of Education in 2008 as per the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act 101 of 1997), was initiated by the Chairperson of Council to thoroughly investigate the governance, management and employment relations of the university. The Minister's terms of reference to the Independent Assessor encapsulated investigations on Human Resources policies and practices, in relation to enhancing organizational efficiency and employment relations at the university. Section 3.2 of the report found selective favoritism and non-procedural promotions and appointments, nepotism and inconsistency in implementing procedures and decision-making. The report found that the Human Resources Department had policies but these were not based on best practices and were cumbersome in terms of timeous delivery, mainly as a result of being controlled from the Vice Chancellor's (VCs) office.

The Report also identified that the Employment Relations within the university appeared to be discipline based rather than enhancement based. Furthermore, it was found that the HR Department had been reduced from eleven to four staff members over a few years, with their functions being reduced to filing and appointments. The Report depicted that essential HR functions had been moved to other departments such as Industrial Relations (IR) and Employment Equity being moved to the Legal Services Department, with Benefits and Administration having been moved to the Finance Department. The HR Department was found to be dysfunctional by the Assessor. The long processes of dealing with disciplinary cases were mentioned as extremely cumbersome and ranged from 5 to 32 months in duration. The HR and Finance departments had different IT systems which were not linked or networked, making cross-referencing difficult. The Report revealed that the VC played a dominant role in the process of recruitment and appointments.

Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) 2011 Report

The HEQC Report (Council on Higher Education, 2011) presented to the university community as part of the institutional audit by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) revealed serious challenges caused by the dysfunctional HR Department. The panel noted that the university concerned had a serious challenge to attract and retain competent staff members. They further mentioned that this was exacerbated during the period of 'diminished governance' when all staffing decisions and interviews of positions were directed through the office of the VC. The panel also found evidence of under-qualified staff being appointed in the absence of suitably qualified candidates. The HEQC Report (Council on Higher Education, 2011) recommended that the university concerned should ensure that academic programmes are taught by appropriately qualified staff. Further recommendations included that the university should develop and implement a staff recruitment and retention programme, and address issues of staff morale and commitment. The panel noted that a performance management policy has been developed and that implementation thereof, if it embraces the appropriate developmental guidelines, will ensure that both recently appointed and established staff members are able to develop themselves further.

Major findings of the study

The most notable finding gleaned from the triangulated findings that are deemed to make the HR Department dysfunctional at the university concerned was the unclear roles and responsibilities of staff

members. The importance of this specific factor was also corroborated by the focus group discussions conducted with university leaders, where the duplication of HR activities was mentioned by almost all staff members. Furthermore, it was identified that operational challenges emanating from incompetency in the recruitment and selection processes, as well as the lack of knowledge related to labour related matters necessitated the university leaders to seek the services of the external HR Consultant. This lack of knowledge on labor related matters had been cited by the Independent Assessor's Report (2008) as a reason why essential HR functions had been moved to other departments - such as Industrial Relations (IR) and Employment Equity being moved to the Legal Services Department and Benefits and Administration to the Finance Department. This finding was corroborated by the HEQC Report (Council on Higher Education, 2011) that all staffing decisions and interviews of positions were directed through the office of the previous VC. The focus group discussions also supported this finding that departmental recruitment and selection processes were outmoded. The latter finding was also supported by the HEQC Report (Council on Higher Education, 2011) finding that the university experienced a serious challenge to attract and retain competent staff and it recommended that the university develop and implement a staff recruitment plan to address this gap. The HR Consultant role in the department had been confirmed by the focus group discussion participants; this included unlimited powers to take decisions and full involvement in daily operational activities. Another major highlight was on the challenges pertaining to poor interpersonal relations amongst staff members, perceived to be caused by divisive Organogram that is seen to promote unequal workloads and remuneration for similar positions and functions. This was confirmed through the focus group discussions, where unequal workload distribution was mentioned and those who were aligned to the HR Consultant were perceived to be remunerated better. The lowest responses advanced by the research participants pertained to structural issues, those of compensation, and those relating to core values and principles. Focus group discussion participants also highlighted that the department had poor confidentiality and professionalism and they were failing to abide by the HR code of conduct and ethics. Another finding of interest was the recommendations provided by the respondents, where departmental recommendations featured mostly, and suggestions were made regarding the creation of new positions within the department. This has been supported by the Independent Assessor's Report (2008) that the HR Department had reduced in staffing. Institutional recommendations were the least common, suggesting the relocation of certain labour related functions back to HR and there were no individual recommendations mentioned. Some major highlights gleaned from the focus group discussions were poor HR leadership, poor service delivery, mismatched staff numbers caused by the use of different systems in the HR (Unique) and Finance departments (ITS). It was also confirmed by the Independent Assessor that these unlinked systems made cross-referencing difficult and perpetuated a silo mentality. Lastly, the absence of the promotion policy for non-academic staff members and retention strategy was also mentioned.

Discussion of the findings

The highly evidenced finding from different reliable sources that the HR Department's employees had unclear roles and responsibilities is not in accordance within the views of Ulrich *et al*. (2012) who have spent years in a quest for the HR Department to have clear roles, responsibilities and rules of operation. Some researchers also mentioned that HR structures should clarify responsibilities for each role which was in line with the finding of this study. In contrast, Patton's (2007) argument was unaligned with the finding of this study regarding that by clarifying the role of the HR Department it should be both strategic and operational. The study reveals that there was no relationship between the Finance and HR departments, which is not consistent with the findings of Evans & Chun (2012) that in higher education institutions the reporting relationship of HR is through the Finance Department. While there were disagreements in the above arguments put forth by the plethora of researchers, their arguments were based on organizations in general without any reference to higher education institutions, with the exception of Evans & Chun (2012).

Whilst poor service delivery in this department was confirmed by the triangulated findings, it was inconsistent with the views of Ulrich *et al.* (2012) that HR service delivery is the implementation arm of HR. The lack of the recruitment and selection requisite skills amongst HR Department staff members which was found in this study is in contrast with Becker *et al.* (2001) who argue that HR professionals should have the necessary competencies, including recruitment and selection. This finding concurs with that of Dubosc *et al.* (2012) that inadequate recruitment procedures may hinder the development of proper human resources in higher education. While the above mentioned arguments may or may not be consistent with the latter finding, it cannot be clearly linked to this study as it was conducted in a

previously disadvantaged university in South Africa. The finding on the state of relations, which were regarded as poor amongst the staff members, was supported by the study conducted by Schultz (2010) on the perception of staff towards the HR Department. The latter researcher highlighted the lack of personal skills and recommended that the department should work to develop these necessary personal skills amongst staff members. While this finding closely correlates with the latter researcher's findings, one has to bear in mind that this study was conducted at a university in South Africa that has never merged.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study findings explicitly showed the predicament of having HR Department staff members who are inept at the recruitment and selection processes, which can be seen to have a ripple effect on the institution as a whole. This has been confirmed by the HEQC Report (Council on Higher Education, 2011) that the university has a challenge to attract and retain competent employees. The study concludes that unclear roles and responsibilities amongst the HR Department staff members were caused by the absence of a strong and decisive HR Department leadership with the competencies to provide strategic direction through realignment of the department. This has manifested in poor interpersonal relations, unequal workload distributions and unequal remuneration. This study concludes that the challenges in this department, as shown in the recommendations advanced by HR Department staff members, are departmental. It has also been confirmed by the Independent Assessor's Report (2008) that these challenges have been recurring without being resolved. There is a paucity of published data on the functioning of the HR Departments in higher education institutions, which made it difficult to draw valid conclusions. Future studies should investigate customer satisfaction surveys regarding the HR Department's operations and services. Furthermore, this study should be extended to other previously disadvantaged institutions in South Africa. This study recommended that:

- The university leaders should seek the services of a business designs specialist to conduct an intervention with the aim to document the AS-IS and TO-BE business processes that could assist in increased levels of efficiency and effectiveness within the department.
- The university leaders should seek the services of an external specialist to assess the competencies of the existing staff members and their level of operations. This will assist the university leaders to understand the personal, interpersonal and intellectual in/capabilities of the HR Department staff members.
- The university leaders should appoint recruitment and selection staff members that can operate at operational, tactical and strategic levels. This will assist in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of these staff members.
- The external HR Consultant should be appointed to provide specialist assistance and capacitate where there are deficiencies, with clear terms of reference and measurable outcomes and timeframes.
- The university leaders should devise a project plan, including input from all key stakeholders, to relocating essential HR functions housed in other departments back within the HR Department.
- The HR Department should develop and implement their strategic plan in alignment with the university and its policies. Therefore, the departmental Organogram should include clearly articulated job descriptions and be crafted to follow the strategy with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
- All positions in the new Organogram should be evaluated using an accurate and transparent job evaluation tool that will improve the trust relationships amongst the staff members.

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