



The significance of digitalisation in public sector institutions in the COVID-19 era.

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Abstract

The COVID 19 pandemic led to a restrictive lockdown period which disrupted social life and marked the dawn of a new era of remote working and digital experiences in confined environments. This paper sought to establish how the COVID 19 lockdown restrictions affected the delivering of services by selected public institutions in Zimbabwe. A cross-sectional survey of clients from the selected public institutions was conducted in Zimbabwe's Harare metropolitan province using self-administered questionnaires, using a sample of 300 participants. It was established that the selected institutions had no facilities and technology to provide their services from home given the restrictive lock-down. The study concluded that the COVID 19 situation had negatively impacted on the service delivery of the selected institutions by constraining systems and limiting the number of clients being served. The implications of the findings are discussed and recommendations made.

Keywords

COVID 19; Digitalisation; Public institutions; Public service delivery; Performance.

Introduction

Since its outbreak, the novel coronavirus of 2019 (COVID 19) has wreaked havoc on businesses and economies resulting in a paradigm shift on business operations globally. More than 180 countries have been affected by this pandemic, resulting in more than 6.5 million infections and 383 000 deaths as of 3 June 2020 (UN/DESA Policy Brief #79, 2020). In March

2020, the World Health Organisation advocated for the introduction of restrictive lockdown movement of people and closure of public places to curb the spread of the disease. A new phase

had just begun whereby people were confined to their homes and all public places were closed.

The Zimbabwean government adhered to this call and on 29 March 2020 introduced its first 21-day restrictive lockdown amid only nine COVID 19 confirmed cases and one death (The Herald, March 30, 2020). However, as of 15 November 2021, the confirmed cases had risen to

133 438 while 4 697 deaths were reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO). The restrictive lockdown period disrupted social life and marked the dawn of a new era of

remote working and digital experiences in confined environments. This pointed to the gradual phasing out of the traditional marketing tools and the increasing demand for the digital space as a tool for reaching out to clients. For institutions in the private sector, the transition was somewhat easy since some of them were already engaging with their various publics on digital

platforms. However, for institutions in the public sector, they faced the challenge of adhering to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where the public service and public servants

are critical. Part of the 2030 Agenda emphasize on policy and strategy planning as well as the provision of services. This meant that despite the havoc and lockdowns brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, public servants had to work under life threatening circumstances by directly interacting with clients (UN/DESA Policy Brief #79, 2020). In Zimbabwe, public sector service providers in the education sector were able to embrace and implement e-learning

in some of their institutions while their counterparts in the health and civil registration sectors continued to engage in direct (face to face) encounters with their clients.

There is paucity of research in terms of documented cases on the significance of digitalisation in public sector institutions in the COVID-19 era in developing countries hence this vital research gap begs to be filled. This paper sought to establish how the COVID 19 lockdown restrictions affected the delivering of services to the population by selected public institutions in Zimbabwe. It also sought to identify and propose ways that can be adopted by these institutions in reaching out to their targeted clients while minimizing the negative impact of the

pandemic on individuals and communities.

Literature review

Public sector organisations have the responsibility of providing essential services required for the survival and sustenance of the general public in the journey of life (Kolawole, 2020).

These

essential services include education, health, housing, transport and civil registration among others. Public institutions are expected to deliver these services in a manner that meet or exceed

the expectation of the general public (Masaire et al., 2021; Martins and Ledimo, 2020).

However, these institutions encounter various challenges in accomplishing their mandate.

The

latest challenge was brought about by the COVID 19 pandemic. This was a novel pandemic, which was unexpected and rapid. It disrupted the social and economic structures of service

delivery with significant consequences on lives, livelihoods and general economic development (Bhuptani, 2020; UNCDF, 2020). The impact of COVID 19 was felt by both large and small agencies globally. It marked an era in which most organisations fully embraced ecommerce (Alshaketheep et al., 2020; Bhuptani, 2020). Due to lockdown restrictions and closure of public places, businesses began to interact with their stakeholders on various digital platforms (Martins and Ledimo, 2020). In Zimbabwean public institutions, this marked a new phase in which meetings were convened on virtual platforms. E-learning was introduced in the education sector for both secondary and tertiary institutions. However, for sectors such as health and civil registration among others, frontline staff had to directly interact with the clients during service delivery. This exposed these frontline workers to the risk of contracting the deadly pandemic. The Zimbabwean government, among other governments globally, recorded cases of frontline workers who contracted the deadly pandemic during the execution of their mandate. Others even lost their lives. This paper therefore, seeks to establish the significance of providing government services on digital platforms as part of the global e-commerce initiative, aimed at safeguarding the lives and safety of both its workforce and the citizens during the COVID 19 pandemic. A cross-sectional survey of public sector clients was conducted in Zimbabwe's Harare metropolitan province using self-administered questionnaires. The sample was drawn from clients who sought civil registry services. The total number of clients was estimated to be 200 000. One hundred questionnaires were randomly distributed in person according to the services sought by clients namely: birth registration, national identity card registration and death registration. This resulted in a sample size of 300. Surveys were distributed in person. The total number of questionnaires returned and usable was 286 (122, 103 and 61 from birth, national identity and death registration respectively). The overall response rate was thus 95.3% constituted of 36% for birth registration clients, 43% from national identity registration and 21% from death registration. The questionnaire was categorised into three sections: general information about the clients; service delivery before and during the COVID 19 restrictive period; preferred digital platforms for delivering services in public institutions. The responses

were ranked using the Likert scale with ranges from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree)

with 3 being the median range, signifying Neither Agree nor Disagree.

Analysis and results

The profile of the study participants is presented in Table 1. The results show that there were slightly more females (57%) than males (43%). Ten percent of the respondents were aged between 16 and 20 years, 25.5% were aged between 21 and 30 years, 26.9% were aged between

31 and 40 years, 15.4% were aged between 41 and 50 years, 12.6% were aged between 51 and

60 years, while the remaining 9.4% were aged 61 years and above. The majority of the respondents who participated in this study had tertiary educational qualifications (45.8%); The

rest of the respondents were holders of either ordinary or advanced level education: (22.3%) and (17.1%) respectively. A small proportion (14.7%) had not attended secondary education.

The most sought after service was the national identity registration (ID) (43%); followed by the birth registration (36%) and last but not least, death registration (21%).

Table 1.1 Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Description	Frequency	(%)
Gender		
Male	123	(43)
Female	163	(57)
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Age		
16-20	29	(10)
21-30	73	(25.5)
31-40	77	(26.9)
41-50	44	(15.4)
51-60	36	(12.6)
<60	27	(9.4)
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Highest Level of Education		
Tertiary Education	131	(45.8)
Advanced Level	49	(17.1)
Ordinary Level	64	(22.3)
Primary Education	42	(14.7)
Service category		
Birth Certificate	103	(36.0)
Death Certificate	61	(21.3)
National Identity Card	122	(42.7)

The study established that civil registry services were offered on a face to face basis (direct interaction) before and during the COVID 19 pandemic. The respondents however, pointed out

that, during the restrictive lockdown period beginning 29 March 2021, they could not access civil registry services except for burial orders and very limited numbers of births and national identity card registrations. The study further established that the demand for suggested digital platforms was high among the 16-20 years (27%); 21-30 years (31%); 31-40 years (21%), respectively. This can be attributed to the fact that this is the younger generation that keeps abreast with latest technological trends. Moreover, the majority of the respondents in the 16-25 age group were initially applying for their national identity cards hence they strongly felt the impact of lack of digital platforms. The same applied to the 25-40 year age group, who were either seeking replacement for their lost identity cards or registering the births of their children, or in some cases, seeking both services. The middle age group between 41 and 50 years expressed mixed preferences as depicted by 14%. The older generation however 51 and 60 years (5%) and the < 61 years (2%) appeared to be comfortable with the current trend of directly interacting with their service providers. Other findings of the study also revealed that the civil registry institutions have no facilities and technology to provide their services from home given the restrictive lock-down. It relies entirely upon its office systems hence its workforce were physically reporting for duty during the entire period of the study. Due to the COVID 19 lockdown restrictions, only a very small percentage (10%) of the entire staff were reporting for duty.

The study concluded that the COVID 19 situation has negatively impacted on the service delivery of the Civil Registry department by constraining systems and limiting the number of clients being served. This has resulted in a backlog which might not be able to be cleared anytime soon. The study therefore recommends that the Civil Registry department as well as its counterparts in the Zimbabwean public sector, should consider introducing digital services as a key initiative of managing the impact of COVID 19 situation. This will aid on the execution

of their mandate as well as digitally marketing their services to the general public. The digitalisation facilities will also go a long way in de-congesting their premises in light of the COVID 19 pandemic as well as safe-guarding the health and safety of the workforce. Moreover, the aftermath of the pandemic will witness an upsurge of digital services in both private and public institutions.

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