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## E.C. Marawu's Investigation into Staff Turnover

Report prepared for the Journal by Howard Dean

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### Background

The first Quarterly Research Paper in the series comprising Volume 8 of the HR Research Journal was sent to you on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012. That paper reported Grace Ndlovu's 2011 research into medical employees at a national hospital.

The first quarterly paper marked the resurrection of the HR Research Journal after a 10-year gap in publication since 2002. It set out the philosophical underpinnings of the research journal, as well as the editorial policy. It explained that 4 papers would be sent to you, one each quarter, as an IPMZ membership service. Each quarterly paper will report on a Research Dissertation prepared by an IPMZ Higher Diploma student. Papers will summarize the Research Methodology used, offer observations and make suggestions for the guidance of future researchers, and conclude with comments on the Research Findings of possible use to HR practitioners.

The second Quarterly Research Paper appears below. You may find it useful to print out the quarterly papers and file them, for ease of future reference.

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## EDWIN CLARKSON MARAWU'S

2008 investigation into the

**CAUSES OF HIGH TURNOVER of JUDICIAL OFFICERS  
in the Ministry of Justice, Legal & Parliamentary Affairs  
during 2006-2007**

### Introductory comments

This is a survey of a group of public servants, seeking the views of a sample of them about what factors *might* cause them to leave their jobs in the Ministry concerned.

Consequently, the information obtained tends toward the speculative and subjective. It does not address the reasons for historical turnover (i.e. why those who have already resigned did so).

Obviously, tracking down those who have departed can be problematic, so this study – after noting its limitations – does represent a useful contribution to knowledge.

### The Research Question

Marawu formulated a Research Topic, which is here re-stated in question form as, “What are the causes of high turnover of judicial officers in the Ministry of Justice, Legal & Parliamentary Affairs during the period 2006-7?”

To widen and deepen his knowledge, he reviewed published literature both on the topic of turnover and on the appropriate research methodology.

His report on his readings about turnover (or ‘wastage’) is well done, clearly showing how his reading contributed to his formulation of the 14 ‘hypotheses’ he used to focus his investigation.

### Editorial Note

In research terms, an hypothesis is an assumed answer to the research question. Hypotheses can usually be developed from a researcher's early ideas about possible answers to the research question – a good reason to turn the research topic into a research question.

Note that it does not matter whether the results of the research eventually prove your hypotheses to be right or wrong. Hypotheses merely focus the researcher's attention. They are not attempts to guess the results in advance. In fact, if you are 100% convinced what the answers are before you even start researching, why bother to carry out the research at all? In this sense, if the research shows your hypotheses were wrong, it helps you to free yourself from bias and pre-judgment – which is one of the goals of collecting real information in the field.

### Marawu's Hypotheses

He hypothesized the causes of resignation would be –

- Poor remuneration (salaries; allowances)
- Lack of recognition/support
- Limited staff development/career advancement
- Triggered by attaining a higher qualification
- Desire –
  - to gain experience outside the public sector
  - to obtain a ‘personal issue’ vehicle
  - to obtain company accommodation
  - to join one's spouse based elsewhere
  - to gain experience outside the country
- Fear of discharging one's duty in ‘political’ cases.

A number of these hypotheses overlap – e.g. a remuneration package could be linked to a personal vehicle and/or to company accommodation.

However, separating them out as Marawu does enables the researcher to approach the phenomenon from a number of angles – and could be used to check the consistency of responses.

### **Definition of Abstract Terms used in the research question and hypotheses**

'Abstract' in research means the opposite of 'concrete'. When an abstract word or concept is used in a research question, the people from whom you seek information may interpret that word or concept in different ways. This reduces the comparability of their answers to the question, in unknown ways. For this reason, it is good intellectual discipline for a researcher to rigorously identify every abstract term in his research question and in his hypotheses – and then to 'concretise' each term in observable form. This can often usefully lead to clearer questions.

Some of the abstract terms that appear in Marawu's research question/hypotheses are: high turnover – poor – afraid – political – slim prospects – career progression – desire – more experience – outside the public service – economic environment – lack – staff development opportunities – personal recognition – support from management – elsewhere.

Marawu ably defines four terms – judicial officers, resignation, career progression and staff turnover. For example, he defines 'turnover' as 'the rate at which judicial officers are appointed and terminate service'.

However, although he states the number of positions available and the number of vacancies at the start of his research, this is not turned into a 'rate of turnover'. Thus the 27 vacant posts for magistrates against establishment meant a shortfall of 12% but this 'snapshot in time' does not give us a rate of turnover. This can be done by calculating the number of resignations over time – e.g. in the 24 month period 2006-7 – and then deciding whether that rate is 'high' enough to warrant concern, i.e. is it significantly greater than the normal rate of attrition attributable to employees leaving for whatever reason?

Unless a researcher puts abstract concepts in concrete form and uses these to make each question as clear as possible, as mentioned earlier there is a risk that the people from whom he seeks information may interpret the words in a question in different ways. The best way to minimize this risk at the start of the research design is to find a concrete example for each abstract term. To do this, merely take each 'fuzzy' word in the research question/hypotheses and methodically ask yourself in regard to each, "How will I see if it is... high? poor? political? slim? etc".

Since the purpose of data collection in survey research is to be able to aggregate responses from different people in order to see a pattern or trend, it is necessary to try and ensure that all who answer your questions have the same understanding of those questions. This is why it is necessary to define abstract terms concretely, observably or measurably.

### **Population of interest – and the sample selected from that population for research**

In research terms, a 'population' consists of all those about whom the researcher wishes to obtain information. In this case, Marawu was interested in all 424 judicial officers in employment at the start of his study. These were 195 magistrates, 138 prosecutors and 91 law officers, who comprised his population of interest.

As is usual in survey research where analyzing large numbers of responses can be unwieldy, he chose a sample of the staff (30% in this case), totalling 117 officers.

Conventionally, a researcher tries to ensure that the sample is representative of the population – i.e. that it mirrors the characteristics of the wider population of interest, so that he can confidently generalize the results from the smaller sample to the wider population.

This representativeness is achieved by selecting the sample on a random basis.

In research, 'random' has a special meaning. It does not mean 'haphazard', as it can do in everyday life. In research, for a sample to meet the requirements of random selection, each element in the population of interest (424 people in this study) must have a chance of being selected.

Marawu set certain specific parameters, when drawing his sample. Since this was a national survey, he wanted all provinces to be represented in the sample. He also wanted 30% each of magistrates, public prosecutors and law officers to be represented in the sample.

To achieve these proportional parameters, he used what he described as stratified, cluster random sampling, proceeding as follows –

- He began by stratifying his population of 424 judicial officers into 3 strata – 195 magistrates, 138 prosecutors and 91 law officers.
- To obtain a sample of 30% of these, he needed to draw 59 magistrates, 41 prosecutors and 27 law officers country-wide.
- He then clustered the 3 strata within provinces – i.e. how many magistrates/prosecutors/law officers were in each province? Thereafter he numbered each judicial officer in a given provincial sub-population, placed the numbers in a box, thoroughly mixed them and then (without looking) picked out one number after another until he had drawn out 30% of the numbers for judicial officers in that province. He repeated this process for each province.

This was obviously carefully done and an excellent technique to achieve Marawu's parameters. However, what is not clear from his description of this process is whether, having separated out his sub-populations into strata, he then drew separate samples for each strata within each province. If he did not, and instead drew 30% from 'all judicial officers in a province', then it cannot be said, for example, that every magistrate in a given province had an equal and independent chance of being chosen for the sample, i.e. independent of prosecutors etc. This in turn might impact on the representativeness of his sample.

### **Instrument used to collect data from the sample**

There are a number of 'instruments' a researcher can use in a survey. One of these is the self-administered questionnaire where the people in the sample write down their answers to questions and then return the questionnaire to the researcher.

Marawu's questionnaire consisted of 12 questions. Four were multi-part closed questions, some involving a scale from 'poor' to 'excellent'; 4 were closed questions of the Yes/No type, with supplementary space for comments; and 4 were open questions (e.g. 'What do you consider to be the main causes of turnover?').

Most of the questions related directly or indirectly to Marawu's hypotheses.

Some did not – i.e. the questions about age, gender, duration of employment, education and designation.

There are two circumstances where asking respondents for bio-data can be useful –

- (a) 'to break the ice', asking questions that require little effort on the part of the respondents before moving on to more difficult questions; ice-breakers obviously should appear at the beginning of the questionnaire to achieve this desired effect; and
- (b) where the researcher plans to differentiate responses by age/gender etc, in which case this assumed differentiation in responses should form part of the hypotheses. They did not form part of the hypotheses in this instance and in the end Marawu merely summarized the bio-data without drawing any conclusions relevant to his research topic or hypotheses.

In research literature, views differ about the value of soliciting bio-data. One view is that it is 'interesting to know something about the respondents' (even if you can't do anything with the data thereafter). Another view is that if questions will not yield information that enables the researcher to check his hypotheses, then why spend time and energy framing them, printing them, requiring respondents to answer

them; and then spend your time summarizing replies to them?

### **The Pilot Study**

Marawu pre-tested his questionnaire in a pilot study of 8 judicial officers in Harare. From the questionnaires that were returned, he formed the opinion that all questions were well understood and required no review, so he proceeded with the main study.

It would have been useful to know how the 8 were selected for the pilot study. If they were part of the 30% sample chosen for Harare province, then ideally another 8 should have been randomly chosen to replace them (referred to as 'sampling with replacement'). If they were chosen from the 70% of the Harare judicial officers who were not part of the 30% sample, replacement would obviously not be necessary. It would also be useful to know how they were spread across the 3 categories of employees (law officer-prosecutor-magistrate) since ideally a pilot study should as closely as feasible approximate the full study.

### **Response rate of questionnaires**

127 questionnaires were sent to those in the sample, who were asked not to state their names (in order that anonymity and confidentiality might encourage honest response).

How was the distribution done? Within Harare, the researcher 'distributed the questionnaires by himself'. He does not say how they were returned to him. For the rest of the country, Expedited Mail Service was used to send batches of questionnaires to various Clerks of Court. They were requested to distribute 'as per sample... and to collect the same after they had been completed by the respondents and return them to the researcher through the same channel' (presumably batched and sent back by EMS). Presumably, also, each questionnaire was individually addressed, although the researcher does not cover this point. Nor does he indicate whether envelopes were provided to assist in preserving anonymity of respondents where completed questionnaires were collected by or returned to the Clerks of Court. Could a clerk read what a magistrate had said, for example?

89% of the questionnaires were received back by the researcher. He reports that thereafter 'enquiries were made with stations that had not accounted for all the questionnaires'. Presumably, these enquiries were made with the respective clerks rather than directly with non-respondents, since that would have been disconcerting for those who thought they were participating in an anonymous exercise where their individual identities would not be known.

### **Editorial Note**

Conventionally, a questionnaire is accompanied by a brief letter. This should explain, among other things, why the particular recipient was singled out to receive the questionnaire. If the researcher does not explain that selection was random and there is no special significance in the selection, the recipient may modify his responses, perhaps thinking he is being scrutinized – for punishment, say, or for advancement. This could obviously impact on the truthfulness of his replies. So it is important to address this.

The covering letter should also clearly explain how and by what date questionnaires should be returned. For example, if they are to be personally collected or handed back to a colleague, even to the researcher, should they be first enclosed in a sealed envelope? If not, then despite any assurance of anonymity, the colleague might be able to tie specific responses to specific employees. Uncertainty about this could affect the truthfulness of responses. Not sealing questionnaires in an envelope for return could also affect the response rate, since a respondent may feel it practically compulsory to return the questionnaire or risk being called 'to account' for non-return.

In addition, the Covering Letter should explain why the research is being done (stressing the possible benefit to respondents, not merely to the researcher). It also does no harm to request care and accuracy in completion, stressing replies are anonymous.

Marawu was obviously concerned about the 89% response rate, hence his follow-up inquiries to stations that had not 'accounted for' all questionnaires.

In this connection, he would have found it useful, when reviewing published literature about his chosen research methodology, to have delved into response rates to questionnaire-based surveys. An 89% response is actually unusually high.

### **Editorial Note**

Where there is no external compulsion to respond (e.g. 'return this form to me by next week'), one could assume as a working model that there are three equally likely possibilities regarding response – voluntary response ("I want to fill this in"); voluntary non-response ("I can't be bothered to fill this in"); and involuntary non-response (the person is on leave etc, as in this case, so did not receive the questionnaire). Assuming all things to be equal, one might then expect a one-in-three (33%) response rate. Alternatively, where distribution and return is done through 'official channels' (with a follow-up regarding non-return, as in this case), then one could assume four equal possibilities regarding response – i.e. in addition to the three above, a fourth possibility is that of 'involuntary' response. A recipient may not want to complete the questionnaire but feels some external pressure to do so. Assuming all things are equal, one might then expect a two-in-four (50%) response rate – made up of voluntary and involuntary responses. Response rates may be increased by various means – a well-designed and easy-to-complete questionnaire; a promise (and guarantee) of anonymity; an appealing topic; the hope that completing the questionnaire might lead to some good personal outcome (more money, say), a convenient method of return – each increasing motivation to return the questionnaire. On the basis of this model, any response rate between 33% and 50% would be satisfactory.

### **Limitations of the research**

Researchers are encouraged to recognize the limitations of their research and to draw these to readers' attention, so that professional HR practitioners do not read more into the findings than they should. Here are some of the limitations that Marawu recognized.

- His research focused on people who were still in employment and not people who had already resigned, so the views he obtained may not necessarily be representative of those of the leavers. (In this context, his real 'population of interest' could be viewed as current-plus-former judicial officers, with his 30% sample of current officers constituting a non-random sample of the real population.)
- Some respondents might not give true answers to questions. The reason may be 'to please others'; and also 'the truth could be offensive and consequently compromise their job security'. In research terms, this relates to the validity (i.e. the 'truth') of what people say. One way of trying to encourage respondents to supply valid information – always an issue in research – is to promise to keep confidential any information supplied (reinforced by anonymity), as Marawu did in his introductory notes at the start of the questionnaire.

### **Comments on reliability and validity of the data**

Reliability and validity are related but separate issues in social research.

Reliability means consistency, i.e. if a respondent were to be asked a particular question a second time (either later in the questionnaire, perhaps in a slightly different form; or after the passage of time), would he give the same answer? If he does, we can conclude that his response is reliable. The dilemma is that he may be untruthful both times, i.e. he may consistently lie, perhaps for the reason Marawu gives above, 'to please others'. This takes us on to the issue of validity.

Validity means truthfulness, i.e. is the respondent giving accurate information – or, where he is stating an opinion (such as that he would not resign to get a higher salary), is he saying what he truly believes?

Concerns about reliability and validity arise in all social research. Researchers cannot guarantee that the information they gather is reliable and valid. What they must do is acknowledge the problems and seek to minimize them – as Marawu does.

One measure he adopted to try and increase the likelihood that answers would be truthful was to ask

respondents not to identify themselves. Specifying replies should be anonymous seeks to send a signal that there will be no personal consequences visited on any individual, so there is no reason not to be truthful.

To reinforce this, a researcher using mailed questionnaires should provide sealable envelopes for return of the completed questionnaires, so that no third party can read the responses. Similarly, third parties should not be in a position to approach any designated respondent inquiring why he has not returned his questionnaire. In other words, it is important not only to promise anonymity but to take steps to guarantee it in these ways. Marawu does not cover these aspects in his report.

### **The findings of the research**

Marawu summarizes the responses to his closed questions, in the form of tables. He then checks the data against the hypotheses that focused his study.

- Over 90% of judicial officers who responded said they would resign to get a job offering better pay; or better allowances; or a personal issue vehicle; or company accommodation. All of these relate in one way or another to remuneration.
  - It would not be inappropriate to cite this consistency in response as an indication that data obtained in these areas was reliable. (This is further supported by responses to an open-ended question about how to reduce turnover – with comments such as ‘provide competitive salaries and allowances’, ‘retention allowances’, ‘vehicles and accommodation’. Although Marawu does not quantify these responses, they are indicative.)
  - One might go further and ask whether these almost unanimous responses might not also be strongly indicative of valid data, i.e. truthful opinions? On the one hand, no financial benefit will accrue to individual respondents as a result of ‘truth-telling’ since they cannot be identified. On the other hand, if many respondents in effect complain about remuneration, this might result in general financial benefit. However, since those in the sample are not known to one another, collusion seems unlikely. The balance of probabilities favours the data being valid.
- Three-quarters of respondents said they felt staff development was poor or fair, i.e. less than good; and three-quarters said they would resign if they attained a higher qualification. Approximately two-thirds said they would resign where career prospects are limited; or to gain experience outside the public service; or to seek employment outside Zimbabwe. All of these could be deemed in some way also to relate to increased

remuneration. This lends further weight to the earlier points about reliability and validity.

- Two-thirds of the respondents said they would resign to join their spouses elsewhere.
- One in five respondents said they would resign because of involvement in ‘political’ cases.
- Finally, three-quarters rated their immediate supervisors as good/excellent in regard to recognition/support. In the absence of satisfactory remuneration (characteristic of the hyper-inflationary period during which this research was conducted), this makes logical sense, since little else could be done to retain staff.

With this data Marawu was able to return to his research topic and answer the research question – “What are the causes of high turnover of judicial officers in the Ministry of Justice, Legal & Parliamentary Affairs during the period 2006-7?” Briefly, with the provisos already mentioned, the causes may be summarized as inadequate remuneration packages and a wish to join spouses who had moved ‘elsewhere’ (possibly in search of better remuneration themselves, although that itself would need to have been investigated).

### **The usefulness of Marawu’s research**

Broadly, this study confirms the (with hindsight) self-evident fact that poor remuneration as a direct by-product of hyper-inflation can unsettle even professional persons who, in this instance, had chosen to be career civil servants. That so high a proportion of judicial officers continued at their posts during the worst hyper-inflation the world has apparently ever seen speaks volumes about their professional dedication.

Also noteworthy is the relatively low impact of cases where political issues were invoked or that involved persons connected to politicians (who might be thought to interfere with the impartial delivery of justice).

Remaining steadfast in the face of disruptive factors such as these is an important aspect of professional integrity. Although not a primary focus of the investigation, data on this aspect makes a useful contribution to knowledge, pointing up the fact that maintaining professional behaviour in the face of power may carry a risk – but avoiding risk cannot be the only option for those practising their chosen profession.