

Why do most Zimbabwean companies struggle with incompetent people?

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What exactly do we mean when we say a person is competent? The dictionary defines competent as “having the necessary ability, knowledge, or skill to do something successfully”. Please note that you are only pronounced as competent when you do something successfully. The assumption is that this something is positive and is pre-agreed before the person performs it successfully.

I have noted that most Zimbabweans tend to equate experience and level of qualification as being competent. The truth on the ground is that there are so many people who are highly qualified for their roles but are incompetent. There are also many people who have the requisite number of years of experience but are incompetent in their roles. I have noticed that these assumptions have led many people to hire the wrong people. Scientific evidence shows that level of education (years of education) and experience (in terms of numbers years) combined contribute only 3% variance in individual performance.

Despite the above scientific evidence it seems those with the responsibility to hire people for whatever role have an obsession with qualification and experience. Qualifications are good because they give domain technical know-how for the role but are not sufficient for competent performance. The same applies to experience; it gives you the necessary exposure but again it's not sufficient for successful performance.

Given all the above why it that we have so many incompetent people in jobs:

- There is a general obsession with qualification despite scientific evidence that shows that years of education alone are not sufficient for successful performance
- There is an obsession with experience with those with higher years of experience preferred in the hiring process. This is again despite ample scientific evidence showing that years of experience has a very weak relationship with actual performance on the job once the person has attained the minimum years of experience required for a role
- The past performance is a good predictor of performance in most roles. You must always ask yourself before hiring anyone; what has this person achieved in a similar role? If the answer is nothing do not hire them. That record of previous performance must be a consistent record of performance and not a one-off performance.
- Cognitive ability (general mental ability) is the biggest predictor of performance across all roles. If the person does not have this at the right level you can forget about performance no matter how good the environment is. The person will fail to deliver. This is the weakest link for an organisation. They hire people who do not even have potential and think they will change them. General mental ability is largely hereditary and early childhood experience. By the time you are

hiring an employee, they are sealed in terms of cognitive capacity. Always hire people who have the potential to go higher.

- Most organisations hire people who speak well in interviews but that has no relationship with performance.
- Most managers when they are given an opportunity they hire people they like. They hire people based on other factors (relationship with the candidate, attended the same school, come from the same village, physical appearance) not related to the capacity to perform. This is probably one of the biggest problems responsible for hiring of incompetent people.
- Highly intelligent and capable people who should succeed under ordinary circumstance fail because of personality defects. This is why you may find those fairly intelligent people doing stupid things. Unfortunately, personality is largely hereditary and early childhood experience. If you hire someone with a personality defect you will never be able to change them.
- One good hire among many incompetent colleagues will not make a difference. You need to at least have more than half of your staff being competent in order to win. This is why you find good people fail when they get into a system staffed with incompetent people. The system will be too powerful for them.

The unfortunate part with all of the above problems is that they can be addressed if an organisation agrees to follow proper recruitment and selection policy. Most organisations think they are saving costs by taking shortcuts as outlined above but the cost of hiring an incompetent person and pretend they are competent is huge. Most organisations realise this when it's too late to take corrective action. There is no substitute for being thorough on who joins your organisation. In the long run, your organisation succeeds based on the quality of the people you hire.

Until and unless we start hiring people on merit in the private sector and government we will continue to struggle as an economy. Only those organisations hiring people on merit will enjoy sustainable long term success.

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