

Is the Botswana Public Service Customer-Centric?

Sebusang E.M. Sebusang and Nkising N. Moeti

Department of Marketing, University of Botswana, P.O. Box 70177, Gaborone, Botswana

Abstract: Botswana unlike other mature democracies depends largely on the public sector for the delivery of goods and services. Government and her public corporations pretty much dominate the corporate landscape; with the sad reality that failure to perform by the sector compromises the economic well being of the country. We have carried out research to map out how far Botswana's public sector is from adopting customer-centric work models. Starting with the assumption that the public sector is not customer focussed we devised a questionnaire to solicit information from the public on their perceptions and experiences of being served by public officers. Eighty two respondents selected on the basis of variation in age, work experience, nationality, gender and workplaces constituted the survey. The mode of administration of this instrument was both hand delivery and electronic mail. The major constraints of the sampling and data gathering forms revolved around possible misrepresentation of the sample population (being exclusively Gaborone residents) and potential bias emanating from the use of the electronic mail as a medium of communication, thus excluding all those that are not online. In spite of all these concerns, the results of the survey confirm, most emphatically (92.5%) that the public service needs to be more customer-focussed, with a huge 80.2% saying they greatly agree with the need for this customer focus.

Key words: Service, service delivery, service experience, productivity, image, public service

INTRODUCTION

The public service in Botswana occupies a unique position compared with other countries owing to the fact that the government is the major economic player in both employment and project funding terms. Whence any systematic change in the processes and attitudes of work delivery, for them to have real impact nationally, they must necessarily address the public service and related public parastatals. The focus on the public sector as a provider of customer service is driven by this uniquely Botswana problem where services are principally provided by (and to) the public service. If the country is to achieve its lofty ideals of a diversified economy (specified in the country's National Development Plans, NDPs 8 and 9)^[1,2] and an educated and informed, tolerant and democratic country espoused by its vision document^[3], then the public service must render service that is focussed on the public. To do this, we postulate that certain attitudes and work practices that come with the bureaucratic history of public service must change. The public must come to be regarded as customers that deserve superior service, akin to what people customarily expect from an efficient private enterprise.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Why Public Service?: Given the desire by the Government of Botswana to diversify the economy away from diamonds and mining dependency to a diversified manufacturing and knowledge-based one^[1], plus the desire to have full employment by the time the country turns 50 years old^[2] (meaning in less than 13 years), concerted efforts are required in ensuring that the whole economy delivers services in the most cost effective way possible. This way Botswana will develop the competitive advantages necessary to beat the competition for the illusive Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). The trends in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of the past few years show the services sector as having had the greatest impact and growth than any other sector other than mining^[4], beating the erstwhile government's focus in manufacturing. Manufacturing had been heavily supported through government subsidy schemes the reasoning being to fund an economic sector that could absorb a larger share of the unemployed population. This strategy has since failed and now the focus is more on the services sector, though support for manufacturing is still in place.

This newer focus on services, calls for human resources; the link between products and government services and investors and other customers or stakeholders, thus elevating the importance of customer service even higher if Botswana is to retain any hope of out-competing other countries that are equally trying to tap into the limited FDI flows into developing countries.

The purpose of this study is thus to examine where Botswana falls in terms of customer focussed service delivery in government or quasi-government institutions. We are interested in mapping out what the consumers of public services perceive as the quality (and adequacy) of the public service. Then find out if the varied government intervention schemes aimed at improving productivity and quality in work such as work improvement teams (WITS) and Performance Management Systems (PMS) have had any positive impact on study service delivery. The study equally wishes to quantify current perceptions against what pertained five years ago before these intervention schemes could reasonably have been expected to have had the envisaged effect. Using these results, we then wish to solicit what more government must do to improve productivity and customer-centric thinking and working. These research questions are timely since, as has been pointed out before by other researchers^[5], the programme to embed productivity and quality into the public service fabric through the PMS exercise driven by the Botswana National Productivity Centre (BNPC) is important since, “the success of this programme is pivotal to leveraging the public sector towards higher levels of productivity and quality of delivery. Its success is also likely to have positive repercussions throughout the nation, as it is capable of engineering a positive work ethic, through its inculcation of the culture of accountability, in a significant portion of the working population”^[5].

A number of studies^[6,7] report about reforms that have been carried out in the public service of many countries, from the OECD countries in the north to the poor, so-called third world countries of the south including Botswana. An example of such studies is the Portuguese one which states the main targets of Portuguese administrative reform since 1985 has been to provide better services for users^[7]. It further states that, “a specific agenda reform issue, service delivery, has received attention for more than a decade^[7].” The study cites a number of similar studies in “developed countries” in what they call New Public Management (NPM), which is essentially a response to competitive pressures brought about by globalisation requiring new private sector-like responsiveness and focus on delivery that the traditional public sector normally shuns.

Another study that looked at risk taking behaviours of public service managers and the quality of service delivery in the UK concluded that “public managers needed to have some degree of leeway when taking and handling risk, given the increasing pressures and responsibilities which they face”^[6]. Thus the literature acknowledges the fact that for change to occur in the public service, the management practices must change, forcing managers to take more personal risks from decisions made, in much the same way as the private sector managers. In Botswana, the government seems bent on centralising authority in too few hands, despite its stated aim of decentralising public service. The question is whether in the Botswana context, this NPM style would work?

The Portuguese study has further showed that by embarking upon citizen shop concept^[7], which acts as one-stop-shopping-centres for public services, which in turn will be “outward looking and user focussed for the public and employees will be consistently reminded of the reasons why the organisation (the shops) exist”. These shops provided better service than traditional bureaucracy could by focussing on providing better service for users, increasing the skills of civil servants and improving resources management^[7]. However these wonderful NPM-centric creations suffer from one malaise in that whilst at the operational level they act almost as if they were not part of a traditional Portuguese bureaucracy, the management company responsible for them still followed the regimented top-down approach, thus initiative is somewhat stifled, in that senior management can intervene in any aspect of their management thus making Citizen Shops run foul of the let managers manage^[7] paradigm of NPM.

The customer-centred model of change has been challenged for using the wrong metaphor by Frederickson^[9]. The model puts citizens in a reactive role limited to liking or disliking services and hoping that the administrators will change delivery if enough customers object. The view is that citizens are not the customers of government; they are its owners who elect leaders to represent their interests^[9]. According to Frederickson^[9], owners play a proactive role; they decide what the government’s agenda will be. Thus in this model, citizens become “owner-shareholders”^[10] and therefore a more expansive role is envisaged for them, as “any enterprise needs the careful attention of the proprietor.” However Cleveland^[11] contends that this will only happen when the public had information about what the country did and how improved structures or procedures increase accomplishment. From Cleveland^[11]’s point of view, information would produce a movement that would

express citizen (rather than official) initiative. This advocacy for active citizens drives home the point that though public service reform might go along the lines of debureaucratisation and streamlining of services^[7], unless citizens participate any attempt at reform will have at the most partial success^[10].

A number of factors that are critical to improved productivity and quality (P and Q) of services (and products) are identified in Mothibi *et al.*^[5]. Some of these are:

1. Adoption of advanced management techniques
2. Good work ethic
3. Good working environment
4. Continuous personnel education and training
5. Inculcation of the culture of Productivity and Quality
6. Breeding an S and T culture
7. High levels of literacy
8. Satisfactory remuneration
9. Ensuring adequate capital investment
10. Low utility costs and
11. Retention of high quality skilled personnel

The conclusion was that political leaders and senior policy makers in management view the problems of poor education system, poor customer service and low national productivity as issues of major concern^[5]. They further discerned an “us” and “them” attitude by (especially) public servants with the result that productivity and quality improvement efforts were sabotaged. To buttress this observation^[5], quote, on page 83^[8], as stating that, “to improve productivity, you must manage. To manage effectively, you must control. To control consistently, you must measure. To measure validly, you must define. To define precisely, you must quantify”. The evidence from their study clearly indicates, whilst there are ‘us’ and ‘them’ attitudes in the civil service and a desire to sabotage any improvement schemes, the public service is nowhere near being able to be managed; there simply is no effective control that guarantees consistent results. One must however acknowledge that whilst the overall impression is that “a significant portion of the sampled population stated that they were dissatisfied with the quality of health services (as an example of public service)”^[5] the overall impression that the public service providers are not managed and out of control might be reading too much into the results of an isolated case.

Research methods and design: First extensive literature was reviewed of the global issues in public service improvements and attitudes to customer service in order to set the context under which the results of the study we

carried out could be interpreted in view of global experiences. This way, present study can be linked to and connected with the body of knowledge that exists globally on these matters. Beyond the literature reviewed the authors prepared and administered a questionnaire soliciting information from respondents on their perceptions of productivity and customer service in the public service. The nature and specifics of the research instrument used, the questionnaire, are the subject of the following sections.

The research design revolved around producing a questionnaire through which opinions, experiences and attitudes of people could be gauged with respect to the service delivery in the public service. In order to do this, the research task assumed the form of a survey, to get an average picture of the situation as opposed to a detailed, though non-representative output had we opted for an in-depth case study route. Based on the fact we are looking for average perceptions, attitudes, experiences and other factors of interest such as what must be done to motivate the public service to perform better, the questions are necessarily quantitative. This means for any variable of interest, a number of questions were composed enquiring into several aspects of the same and a composite score for the variable computed at the end. The variables looked at include productivity, respondent’s experiences of service, public image of the public service and public parastatals, productivity intervention schemes and their perceived impact, the requisites to improving public service delivery and lastly the demographics of the respondents.

The research therefore proposed the following working hypotheses, that:

- The public service is not customer centric
- Of all government departments, the police have shown the most appreciation of being customer focussed
- In general, government productivity improvement schemes have missed their target
- Increasing incentives and retraining employees will improve customer service

To make the results of the study meaningful, a conscious decision was made to target the population of Botswana that would be likely to have some expectation of what level of service the public sector must provide. This means the target population were people with some form of tertiary education. Three distinct groups of respondents were identified: The University of Botswana MBA students as well as staff members. These were chosen because of their wide and varied experiences,

ages, nationalities, professions and work profiles. The second and third groups representing the public and private sectors were Water Utilities Corporation (WUC) and Standard Chartered Bank staff. These corporations were randomly chosen from a pool of public parastatals and private sector players, respectively.

A standard questionnaire was administered to respondents for data collection. Two principal ways were employed to gather the data; the first was through the physical distribution of the questionnaire to potential respondents. The other method was through the propagation of the same through e-mail and receiving responses through the same medium.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of sample population: A total of 82 responses were obtained and analysed. Amongst these, 12 nationalities were represented covering three continents, Africa, Europe and Asia. Further demographics of the population include ages ranging from under 25 to over 56, with the majority (91.5%) in the range 26-45 (at 53.7% from 26-35 and 37.8% from 36-45). This group has work experiences of less than 2 years (less than 2%) to 42.7% in the range 6-10 years, with 7.35% of the respondents have chalked up more than 20 years.

As already mentioned, the research sought to quantify customer service in the public sector using a number of variables; productivity, experience of public service, the public image of the public service institutions, service delivery in the past 5 years, service delivery improvement proposals and population demographics.

In order to give some focus to the respondents, ten (10) government departments namely; police, immigration, customs, student placement and welfare, councils, water affairs, clinic/hospitals, schools (both primary and secondary), driver testing and licensing and registrar of companies were chosen for the study. In addition to these, five (5) public corporations notably; Water Utilities Corporation (WUC), Botswana Telecommunications Corporation (BTC), Botswana Power Corporation (BPC), Botswana Housing Corporation (BHC) and Botswana Post were chosen for the study.

Composite scores were added up for image, service delivery and service experience (for each respondent) for both public service departments and public corporations (collectively) as well as a composite of the two scores to represent overall score for the public sector. Statistical summaries of the different variables were determined and through the cross-tabulation of these variables against the population demographics, we captured the variations with respect to the demographics. The variables were equally correlated to find out whether they correlated in

any manner (and both direction and significance of this correlation established).

Looking at the variable whether in general the public servants are productive, of the 79 valid responses, with theoretical scores ranging from 5 to 25 and an expected mean score of 15 (where a score less than 15 means less productivity and a larger number reflects higher productivity) the sample mean is 11.15, meaning the perception is one of low productivity for the public service.

For service experience the (Table 1) a mean score of 32.77 and 15.90, respectively for the 10 government departments and 5 public corporations against the theoretical values 30 and 15. Here, a higher score than the theoretical mean indicates a poor service, thus the sample population experienced slightly poorer service than average. In terms of the public image and current service delivery, the survey means are, respectively 33.39 and 15.72 and 29.82 and 13.94 against expected values of 30 and 15. The results mean that the public sector image is still slightly worse than average, but at least in terms of level of service delivery the two organs of the state show slightly improved results, with the parastatals showing markedly better improvement (13.94 versus 15), as contrasted with (29.82 versus 30) for government departments.

The obvious conclusion from these results is that the public service is still not delivering to the expectations of customers, though some improvement, however slight, is becoming discernible. One must acknowledge that the above theoretical means are computed with the inherent assumption that the distributions of the scores were normal.

The figure shows a less than significant cross-correlation between productivity (perception) and the other three variables; delivery (-0.027), image (-0.205) and -service experience (-0.137). The negative sense emanates from the direction change in terms of a higher number showing more productivity whilst the opposite is true for the other variables (Table 2).

The rest of the cross-correlations are significant, delivery-image (0.485) and image-experience (0.515) at the 0.01 level whilst delivery-experience (0.368) is significant at the 0.05 level. The results point to strong correlation between the (poor) image (perceptions) of the public service and the less than satisfactory experiences of service enjoyed by the respondents at 0.515.

Asked where in the public sector there has been the most visible positive change in service delivery, 13.4% (11/82) say government in general; 11% (9) report the police, 1.2% (1 each) said hospitals and schools, the rest of the 10 departments getting no mention. The

Table 1: Mean scores of 10 government departments and 5 parastatals

	Productivity	Experience government	Experience parastatal	Image government	Image parastatal	Service delivery government	Service delivery parastatal
N	79.00	57.00	68.00	57.00	72.00	57.00	71.00
Mean	11.15	32.77	15.87	33.37	15.72	29.83	13.94
SD	3.64	6.57	3.07	6.60	3.26	6.19	3.31

Table 2: Pearson correlation of productivity, service experience, service delivery and image

	Productivity	Service delivery	Image	Serv. experience
Productivity				
Service delivery	-0.02			
Image	-0.20	0.48**		
Serv. experience	-0.13	0.36*	0.51**	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

corresponding figures for the public corporations are 29.3% (24) for parastatals in general, 4.9% (4) say WUC, 2.4% (2) say Botswana Post, whilst 1.2% (1) say BTC and the rest nothing.

These figures further confirm the earlier established perceptions that corporations have moved the most in service delivery 29.3% against 13.4% for government departments. In terms of the individual corporations and departments, it seems the police have done the most to improve (more than 10% of the respondents think so).

But still an overwhelming percentage of respondents, 59 (72%) feel the government productivity intervention schemes have not achieved their aims compared with the 8.5% (7) who believe they have.

We lastly asked the respondents to respond to the items that constituted suggestions for how service delivery could be improved in the public service including dismissing non-performers, increasing incentives, shrewd supervision and training of subordinates and treating the public as customers. For all these questions 98% (81) valid responses were obtained. The most popular singular response was 80.2% (65/8), who were in strong agreement with treating the public as customers, followed by 64.2% (52/81) who suggest that public service providers should have jobs with measurable outputs. About 34.6% (28/81) of respondents were indifferent to having non-performance as a dismissible offence. Looked at globally, an overwhelming 92.5% (75) respondents wish to be treated as customers by public sector employees. About 87.7% (72) want public servants to have jobs with measurable outputs; 61.7% (50) felt employees needed to be retrained; 58% (47) felt there should be increase in incentives whilst 50.6% (41) felt non-performance should be a dismissible offence. The incentives response is somewhat contrary to expectations and the sentiment that public service salaries are generally low. A substantial proportion of respondents, 70.5%, is of the view that more can be done to orient the public service to a customer-centric paradigm without necessarily enhancing incentives.

Research implications: Most of the hypotheses of the research have been proven that in general terms the public service lacks a customer centred orientation to service delivery and the various productivity enhancing schemes of government (e.g. WITS and PSM) have not achieved their objectives. One somewhat surprising result concerning incentives as motivators and thus potentially service delivery-improving tools, as they fulfil a Maslowian need for security by employees, was that 42% of respondents felt incentives should play no role in improving public sector productivity and service. Why should this be? A further reflection of who was in the sample clearly indicates that first the respondents are ‘victims’ of poor public service delivery hence might have a bone to chew with civil and other public servants; but a deeper analysis will reflect the fact that for this group of respondents, they are no longer motivated by basic physiological and security needs of the classic Maslow hierarchy. Their stage, being mostly graduates, is one of self-esteem and higher needs and thus can be expected to unapologetically demand better service performance from service providers inclusive of the public sector.

The condensed picture of this study is a strong affirmation of the lack of a service-oriented, customer-focussed service delivery ethos in the public sector, which measured against the demands of the nation’s vision document and national development plans, spells hard times ahead for the country. Until such time the public service re-orientates itself in line with the needs of the public, then service delivery will continue deteriorating especially since an increasingly literate and globally aware population will have higher and higher expectations from any service organisation, government included.

The methods and forms employed for sampling and data gathering for this research had several limitations. The first one relates to the small sample size relative to the spread and breadth of Botswana and the stratification of the sample population. The problem from this is whether the sample is representative enough to constitute the average view of residents. The second problem relates to the potential bias the data gathering through email might engender since it is likely that only those people who are computer literate (and use email) or interested in the study will respond, the rest ignoring the solicitation for information. Finally, the questionnaires excluded considering many institutions and certainly all places

outside of Gaborone (the capital city of Botswana) due to financial constraints.

Future research should consider replicating the same study to cover other geographic areas in the country to achieve a greater generalisability. The same study can be replicated in other countries for example the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. This will provide insights relative to the impact of culture on the evaluation of public services.

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