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Human Resource Planning and Organizational Performance in a State-Owned Enterprise: Evidence from Zamtel, Zambia

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Abstract

Human Resource Planning (HRP) has increasingly been recognised as a strategic function through which organizations align workforce capabilities with long-term objectives and enhance organizational performance (Armstrong & Taylor, 2022; Boxall & Purcell, 2020) ^[1, 6]. However, empirical evidence on HRP within state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in developing economies remains limited, particularly in sectors undergoing rapid technological transformation. This study examines how HRP practices influence organizational performance at Zamtel, Zambia's state-owned telecommunications company. Drawing on the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991) ^[2], Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) ^[3], and Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1964; Donaldson, 2001) ^[18, 16], the study adopts a qualitative case study design informed by an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[13]. Data were generated through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving employees from the Human Resource and Finance departments. The findings indicate that HRP practices at Zamtel, particularly workforce alignment, training, and role clarification, contribute positively to productivity,

operational efficiency, and employee competence, consistent with evidence from strategic HRM research (Nankervis *et al.*, 2019; Otoo, Asumeng, & Agyei, 2021) ^[29, 33]. However, their effectiveness is constrained by weaknesses in succession planning, limited soft-skills development, inconsistent leadership commitment, and labour market pressures characterised by skills shortages and competitive wage expectations (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2021) ^[21, 38]. Organizational culture and leadership dynamics emerge as critical mediating forces shaping HRP outcomes (Schein, 2017; Yukl, 2013) ^[34, 41]. The study argues that HRP in African SOEs must be conceptualised not merely as an administrative activity but as a strategic, context-sensitive capability embedded in leadership practice, organizational culture, and labour market realities. The article contributes to strategic human resource management scholarship by providing empirically grounded insights into HRP implementation in a public-sector telecommunications organization in Sub-Saharan Africa and offers practical guidance for strengthening HRP frameworks in comparable institutional contexts.

Keywords: Human Resource Planning, Organizational Performance, State-Owned Enterprises, Strategic HRM, Telecommunications Sector, Zambia

1. Introduction

Human Resource Planning (HRP) has increasingly been repositioned in the strategic human resource management literature as a core mechanism through which organizations translate human potential into sustained organizational capability. Armstrong and Taylor (2022) ^[1] argue that HRP is not simply concerned with predicting staffing numbers but with ensuring that workforce capacities are continuously aligned with organizational purpose, strategy, and future uncertainty. Similarly, Boxall and Purcell (2020) ^[6] conceptualise HRP as the institutional architecture through which organizations convert human capital into a source of durable competitive advantage. Read together, these perspectives shift HRP away from a narrow administrative function toward a strategic capability that structures how organizations anticipate change, build competence, and secure performance continuity.

This strategic repositioning is particularly significant in sectors characterised by rapid technological transformation, such as telecommunications. Becker and Huselid (1998) ^[4] demonstrate that organizations operating in dynamic environments derive disproportionate performance gains when HR systems are tightly coupled with business strategy, while Marler and Fisher

(2013) ^[26] show that technological turbulence intensifies the importance of anticipatory workforce planning and skill development. In such contexts, HRP functions not only as a coordination mechanism but also as an adaptive system that enables organizations to respond to shifting market demands and evolving service expectations.

Yet, much of this scholarship implicitly assumes institutional environments in which organizations enjoy high managerial autonomy, stable labour markets, and robust governance systems. Brewster, Chung, and Sparrow (2016) ^[10] caution that dominant models of strategic HRM remain heavily grounded in Western private-sector contexts and risk obscuring how HR practices are shaped by state structures, regulatory constraints, and socio-political realities elsewhere. Kamoche, Newenham-Kahindi, and Debrah (2012) ^[23] similarly argue that African organizations operate within institutional logics that fundamentally reconfigure how HR strategies are designed, implemented, and evaluated. HRP in such contexts cannot be treated as a neutral managerial technique; it is embedded within political authority, cultural expectations, and economic constraints that shape what is practically achievable.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) represent a particularly revealing site for examining these tensions. The World Bank (2014) ^[36] and OECD (2018) ^[32] observe that SOEs occupy a hybrid position between public accountability and commercial performance, creating structural contradictions that complicate strategic management. McGaughey and Hart (2017) ^[27] show that HR systems in SOEs are often constrained by bureaucratic procedures, politicised appointments, and limited performance incentives, which weaken the strategic coherence of workforce planning. Within such organizations, HRP becomes a contested space where institutional compliance, political authority, and managerial rationality intersect.

Zamtel, Zambia's state-owned telecommunications provider, provides a theoretically productive context for interrogating these dynamics. Telecommunications is widely recognised as a strategic infrastructure sector that underpins economic development, digital inclusion, and service innovation in developing economies (World Bank, 2016) ^[37]. For Zamtel, this role is compounded by its dual mandate: it must operate as a competitive market actor while simultaneously advancing national development priorities. Its transition from analogue to digital systems has intensified the strategic significance of HRP by demanding new technical skills, faster service delivery cycles, and stronger customer orientation.

This transformation situates Zamtel not merely as an empirical case but as a theoretical site where competing logics of public accountability, market competitiveness, and human capital development converge. Barney's (1991) ^[2] Resource-Based View (RBV) offers a powerful lens for interpreting this convergence. RBV posits that organizations secure sustainable advantage when they possess resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Within Zamtel, workforce capability becomes a strategic resource whose value lies not only in technical competence but also in institutional knowledge, service reliability, and adaptive capacity. HRP therefore functions as the mechanism through which Zamtel attempts to stabilise and reproduce its strategic resources in the face of technological and labour market volatility.

Human Capital Theory further deepens this interpretation. Becker (1964) ^[3] conceptualises education, training, and experience as investments that yield returns in productivity and innovation. Noe (2020) ^[30] extends this argument by showing that organizations that systematically invest in skill development cultivate stronger employee commitment and service quality. In developing economies, however, such investment carries heightened strategic significance because external labour markets often lack the depth required to supply advanced technical expertise (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2021) ^[21, 38]. HRP thus becomes less about optimizing external recruitment and more about building endogenous capacity. In Zamtel's case, HRP functions as a developmental infrastructure that compensates for structural weaknesses in the national skills ecosystem.

Yet RBV and Human Capital Theory alone cannot explain why similar HRP frameworks generate different outcomes across organizations. Contingency Theory reminds us that management practices derive their effectiveness from contextual fit rather than universal design (Fiedler, 1964; Donaldson, 2001) ^[18, 16]. HRP systems that succeed in private-sector firms may fail in SOEs if leadership authority is fragmented, organizational culture resists transparency, or labour regulations constrain managerial discretion. McGaughey and Hart (2017) ^[27] show that SOEs often struggle to institutionalise strategic HR practices precisely because their governance arrangements dilute accountability and weaken performance-oriented leadership.

Organizational culture becomes a critical mediating force in this process. Schein (2017) ^[34] argues that culture operates as an invisible architecture that defines what forms of authority, communication, and change are considered legitimate within organizations. HRP instruments only become effective when they resonate with these cultural assumptions. Denison (1990) ^[14] similarly demonstrates that organizations characterised by strong involvement and adaptability cultures are better able to translate HR strategies into performance outcomes. At Zamtel, HRP effectiveness therefore depends not merely on formal policy design but on whether workforce planning practices align with dominant beliefs about leadership authority, professional hierarchy, and institutional loyalty.

Leadership dynamics further shape this alignment. Yukl (2013) ^[41] and Northouse (2021) ^[31] emphasise that leadership legitimacy determines whether strategic initiatives are perceived as credible or symbolic. In HRP, leadership commitment is essential for mobilising employee participation, legitimising training investments, and sustaining succession planning processes. Where leadership support is inconsistent or politically constrained, HRP risks becoming procedural rather than transformative (Boxall & Purcell, 2020) ^[6].

Labour market conditions add a final layer of complexity. The ILO (2020) ^[21] and World Bank (2021) ^[38] document persistent skills shortages, brain drain, and wage competition in African technology sectors. These structural pressures limit organizations' ability to recruit and retain critical expertise, intensifying dependence on internal development strategies. HRP in this context becomes a form of institutional self-protection, enabling organizations to buffer themselves against volatile external labour environments.

Despite these theoretical insights, empirical research rarely examines how HRP operates at the intersection of strategy, culture, leadership, and labour markets within African SOEs. In Zambia, studies on strategic human resource management demonstrate positive links between HR practices and organizational performance (Oladipo & Abdulkadir, 2024), yet HRP itself is seldom analysed as a distinct strategic process. Moreover, little attention has been paid to how HRP is negotiated in environments where bureaucratic governance, political authority, and market competition coexist.

This study addresses these gaps by examining HRP at Zamtel as a strategic, culturally embedded, and institutionally constrained practice. Rather than treating HRP as a technical instrument, the article conceptualises it as a socio-organizational process through which competing logics of efficiency, accountability, and human development are reconciled. It asks:

1. How is HRP constructed and enacted within a state-owned telecommunications organization?
2. How does HRP shape organizational performance outcomes such as productivity, service quality, and workforce stability?
3. How do organizational culture, leadership dynamics, and labour market constraints mediate HRP effectiveness?

By framing Zamtel as a theoretical site rather than merely a case study, this article advances HRP scholarship in four ways. First, it demonstrates how HRP functions under institutional conditions rarely addressed in dominant strategic HRM models. Second, it shows that HRP effectiveness is inseparable from leadership legitimacy and cultural alignment. Third, it reconceptualises HRP as a developmental infrastructure in contexts where labour markets cannot reliably supply advanced skills. Finally, it extends RBV and Human Capital Theory by situating them within the political and organizational realities of African SOEs.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative case study design grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism assumes that organizational realities are socially constructed and that understanding human action requires attention to the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Schwandt, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018) [35, 13]. Within human resource management research, this approach is particularly appropriate where the objective is to explore how policies and practices such as Human Resource Planning (HRP) are enacted, interpreted, and negotiated within specific institutional contexts rather than merely measured as technical variables (Bryman, 2016) [11].

Yin (2018) [40] argues that case study research is most suitable when the researcher seeks to examine contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. HRP at Zamtel cannot be meaningfully separated from organizational culture, leadership structures, or labour market dynamics; consequently, a case study design enables the integration of these interdependencies into a coherent analytical frame.

Moreover, qualitative case studies are increasingly recognised as theoretically generative rather than merely

descriptive. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) [17] note that such designs are particularly valuable for refining theory and revealing how abstract concepts operate in practice. In this study, Zamtel is not treated simply as an empirical setting but as a theoretical site through which the strategic, cultural, and institutional dimensions of HRP can be interrogated.

2.2 Case Selection and Context

Zamtel was purposively selected as the case organization because it exemplifies the structural tensions that characterise state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in developing economies. As a state-owned telecommunications provider, Zamtel operates within a dual mandate that combines commercial performance expectations with public service obligations (World Bank, 2014; OECD, 2018) [36, 32]. This institutional hybridity creates a complex environment for HRP, where workforce planning must reconcile efficiency imperatives with bureaucratic governance, political accountability, and labour market volatility.

The telecommunications sector further intensifies the strategic significance of HRP. Rapid technological change, evolving service models, and competition from private-sector firms demand continuous workforce reskilling and adaptive capacity (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Becker & Huselid, 1998) [26, 4]. Studying HRP in this sector therefore offers critical insights into how organizations attempt to stabilise human capital under conditions of structural uncertainty.

Zamtel's transition from analogue to digital systems makes it a particularly revealing case for analysing HRP as a strategic response to technological disruption. This transformation necessitated new forms of technical expertise, revised job roles, and stronger performance accountability mechanisms, all of which place HRP at the centre of organizational survival and competitiveness (Armstrong & Taylor, 2022; Nankervis *et al.*, 2019) [1, 29].

2.3 Research Approach

The study is guided by an interpretive qualitative approach that prioritises depth of understanding over statistical generalisation. As Creswell and Poth (2018) [13] explain, qualitative inquiry is appropriate when the goal is to explore complex organizational processes that cannot be meaningfully reduced to numerical indicators. HRP at Zamtel involves not only formal systems such as training frameworks and staffing plans but also informal practices shaped by leadership authority, cultural norms, and employee perceptions.

This approach aligns with calls in strategic HRM scholarship to complement quantitative performance models with interpretive analyses that illuminate how HR practices function as social and institutional processes (Boxall & Purcell, 2020 [6]; Wright & McMahan, 2011).

2.4 Population and Sampling

The study focused on employees drawn from Zamtel's Human Resource and Finance departments at the organization's Lusaka headquarters. These departments were purposively selected because of their strategic involvement in HRP processes and organizational performance outcomes. The HR department plays a central role in workforce forecasting, training, and succession planning, while the Finance department interacts closely

with HRP through budgeting, workforce cost management, and performance accountability.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct experience and informed perspectives on HRP practices. Patton (2015) argues that purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when the objective is to obtain information-rich cases rather than statistically representative samples.

The final sample consisted of twenty participants: ten from the Human Resource Department and ten from the Finance Department. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards, which prioritise analytical depth and thematic saturation rather than numerical adequacy (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Bryman, 2016) [20, 11]. The diversity of professional roles and hierarchical positions within this group enabled the study to capture both strategic and operational perspectives on HRP.

2.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were generated through three complementary methods:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews
- Focus group discussions
- Document analysis

The combination of these methods facilitated triangulation, which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings by enabling the comparison of evidence from multiple sources (Denzin, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018) [15, 13].

2.5.1 In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants to explore their experiences and interpretations of HRP practices. This format balances consistency across interviews with flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) [24]. Questions focused on workforce forecasting, training and development, succession planning, leadership involvement, and perceived impacts on organizational performance.

Interviews allowed participants to articulate how HRP policies were enacted in practice and how they perceived their effectiveness within Zamtel's institutional constraints. As Alvesson (2011) notes, interviews are especially useful for exploring how organizational actors construct meaning around managerial processes.

2.5.2 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were conducted to capture collective perspectives and stimulate interaction among participants. Morgan (1997) [28] argues that focus groups are valuable for exploring shared norms, contested interpretations, and organizational culture because participants respond to each other's experiences rather than to the researcher alone.

In this study, focus groups enabled the identification of convergent and divergent views regarding HRP implementation, leadership credibility, and organizational transparency. They also illuminated how informal organizational narratives shaped perceptions of workforce planning effectiveness.

2.5.3 Document Analysis

Organizational documents were analysed to complement interview and focus group data. These included HR policy manuals, training plans, performance appraisal guidelines, and internal strategic reports. Bowen (2009) [5] argues that document analysis strengthens qualitative research by providing insight into formal institutional intentions and

enabling the comparison of official discourse with lived organizational practices.

Document analysis helped identify gaps between policy design and practical implementation, a critical dimension in evaluating HRP effectiveness in SOEs (McGaughey & Hart, 2017) [27].

2.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, which involves systematically identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [8]. The process unfolded in four stages:

- Familiarisation with data through repeated reading of transcripts
- Initial coding to identify meaningful units of analysis
- Development of broader themes through code clustering
- Interpretation of themes in relation to theoretical frameworks

Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and theoretical compatibility with interpretivist inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2019) [9]. Themes were developed inductively from participant accounts while also being informed by theoretical constructs derived from the Resource-Based View, Human Capital Theory, and Contingency Theory (Barney, 1991; Becker, 1964; Donaldson, 2001) [2, 3, 16].

This dual analytic strategy allowed empirical insights from Zamtel to refine and extend existing theoretical arguments rather than merely confirm them.

2.7 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, the research adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) [25] four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

- Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and prolonged engagement with participants (Denzin, 2012) [15].
- Dependability was supported by maintaining detailed records of data collection and analytic procedures.
- Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive documentation of analytic decisions, reducing the influence of researcher bias (Bryman, 2016) [11].
- Transferability was achieved by providing thick descriptions of organizational context, allowing readers to judge the applicability of findings to similar institutional settings (Geertz, 1973) [19].

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the study in accordance with standard qualitative research protocols (Israel & Hay, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018) [22, 13]. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Zambia prior to data collection.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and the confidential handling of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information.

These safeguards were essential given the political and institutional sensitivities often associated with SOEs, where employees may face risks when expressing critical views about organizational practices (McGaughey & Hart, 2017) [27].

4. Results

The results are organised thematically, reflecting how Human Resource Planning (HRP) is constructed, enacted, and experienced within Zamtel. The themes demonstrate that HRP at Zamtel functions as a strategic yet contested practice, shaped by organizational structures, leadership behaviour, and labour market constraints. While HRP contributes positively to organizational performance, its impact is uneven and mediated by institutional and cultural dynamics.

4.1 HRP as Workforce Alignment Rather Than Strategic Forecasting

Participants consistently described HRP at Zamtel less as a forward-looking strategic forecasting system and more as a mechanism for aligning existing employees to operational demands. Workforce planning was viewed as reactive, responding to immediate staffing pressures rather than anticipating future skills requirements. Several respondents noted that staffing decisions were often driven by short-term operational needs:

“Planning mostly happens when there is a gap that is already affecting operations. We adjust who is doing what, rather than preparing for what is coming.”

This indicates that HRP is primarily used as an internal coordination tool rather than as a strategic forecasting framework. While this approach helps maintain operational continuity, it limits Zamtel’s capacity to proactively manage technological change and future workforce requirements.

This finding resonates with Nankervis *et al.* (2019) [29], who argue that in resource-constrained organizations HRP often becomes a problem-solving function rather than a strategic anticipatory system. It also reflects Armstrong and Taylor’s (2022) [1] caution that HRP loses its strategic value when it becomes detached from long-term organizational planning. Nevertheless, internal alignment was seen as one of HRP’s most tangible contributions to performance. Clearer role definition and workload redistribution were reported to have improved efficiency and reduced operational bottlenecks:

“At least now people know what they are responsible for. Before, tasks overlapped and accountability was unclear.”

Thus, HRP at Zamtel contributes to organizational performance primarily through stabilisation and coordination rather than strategic workforce transformation.

4.2 Training and Development as the Core Strength of HRP

Training and development emerged as the most visible and institutionalised dimension of HRP. Participants acknowledged that Zamtel has invested significantly in technical training, particularly in areas related to network operations, digital systems, and customer service platforms.

“If there is one area where HR planning is really working, it is training. People are more technically competent than before.”

This finding aligns with Human Capital Theory, which frames training as a direct investment in organizational

productivity (Becker, 1964; Noe, 2020) [3, 30]. Participants associated training with improved confidence, service quality, and task efficiency:

“You can see the difference in how people handle systems now. The errors have reduced.”

However, respondents also noted that training was heavily skewed toward technical competence, with limited attention given to leadership development, communication skills, or emotional intelligence.

“We are strong on technical skills, but very weak on soft skills. That affects teamwork and supervision.”

This imbalance suggests that HRP is oriented toward operational competence rather than holistic workforce development. As Otoo *et al.* (2021) [33] observe, training yields maximum performance benefits when it integrates both technical and behavioural competencies.

Thus, while training strengthens Zamtel’s technical capability base, it does not fully support leadership continuity, organisational learning, or succession sustainability.

4.3 Weaknesses in Succession Planning and Leadership Continuity

Succession planning emerged as one of the weakest components of HRP. Participants indicated that leadership transitions were rarely planned systematically and often depended on ad hoc decisions.

“We do not really prepare people for leadership. When someone leaves, we scramble.”

This undermines HRP’s strategic role as described by Armstrong and Taylor (2022) [1], who emphasise succession planning as central to workforce sustainability.

Several respondents linked this weakness to institutional uncertainty:

“Promotions depend on many things beyond performance. That makes planning difficult.”

This finding reflects McGaughey and Hart’s (2017) [27] argument that SOEs face structural barriers to institutionalising leadership pipelines because political and bureaucratic influences weaken merit-based progression systems.

As a result, HRP at Zamtel protects current operations but struggles to secure leadership continuity.

4.4 Leadership Behaviour as a Mediating Force in HRP Effectiveness

Leadership commitment emerged as a decisive factor shaping HRP outcomes. Where managers actively supported training, mentoring, and role clarity, HRP practices were experienced as empowering and performance-enhancing.

“When your supervisor believes in development, you feel motivated to improve.”

Conversely, where leadership engagement was weak or inconsistent, HRP was perceived as symbolic rather than

transformative.

“Some managers treat HR planning as paperwork. It doesn't change how they manage.”

This supports Yukl's (2013) ^[41] argument that leadership legitimacy determines whether HR systems are enacted meaningfully or ritualistically.

Leadership behaviour therefore mediates HRP's translation into organizational performance.

4.5 Organizational Culture as Both Enabler and Constraint

Participants described Zamtel's culture as simultaneously collaborative and hierarchical. Teamwork and informal cooperation supported HRP implementation, especially in training and task coordination.

“People help each other. That makes learning easier.”

However, rigid hierarchies limited open communication and feedback:

“Some issues are not discussed because of rank.”

Schein's (2017) ^[34] assertion that culture defines what forms of action are legitimate is clearly reflected here. HRP initiatives were effective when aligned with collaborative norms but constrained by hierarchical authority structures.

4.6 Labour Market Constraints and Reactive HRP

Participants consistently highlighted external labour market pressures. Skilled professionals were difficult to retain due to competition from private firms.

“Once someone gains experience, they are quickly attracted elsewhere.”

This aligns with ILO (2020) ^[21] and World Bank (2021) ^[38] findings on skills mobility and wage competition in African technology sectors.

As a result, HRP at Zamtel functions defensively, focusing on internal training to replace losses rather than building long-term talent pipelines.

4.7 Summary of Results

Collectively, the results show that HRP at Zamtel:

- Operates primarily as a coordination and stabilisation mechanism rather than a strategic forecasting system.
- Strengthens organizational performance through technical training and role alignment.
- Is weakened by fragile succession planning and inconsistent leadership engagement.
- Is mediated by organizational culture and institutional hierarchy.
- Is constrained by external labour market volatility.

HRP therefore functions as a strategic but bounded capability, effective in operational performance enhancement but limited in long-term institutional transformation.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine Human Resource Planning (HRP) not merely as a technical workforce management

function but as a strategic, cultural, and institutional practice through which organizational performance is shaped. By situating the findings from Zamtel within the Resource-Based View (RBV), Human Capital Theory (HCT), and Contingency Theory, this discussion demonstrates that HRP in a state-owned enterprise (SOE) context operates as a bounded strategic capability: it enhances performance, but its transformative potential is mediated by leadership authority, organizational culture, and labour market structures.

5.1 HRP and the Resource-Based View: From Strategic Asset to Stabilisation Mechanism

The RBV posits that organizations achieve sustained competitive advantage by possessing resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991) ^[2]. In strategic HRM, human capital is conceptualised as one such resource, and HRP is the mechanism through which this resource is protected, reproduced, and enhanced (Wright *et al.*, 2001; Boxall & Purcell, 2020) ^[39, 6].

At Zamtel, the findings suggest that HRP partially fulfils this RBV logic. Workforce alignment, role clarification, and technical training contribute to stabilising operational performance and protecting existing competence. In this sense, HRP functions as a resource preservation mechanism. It prevents performance erosion by maintaining service reliability and internal coordination, echoing Becker and Huselid's (1998) ^[4] argument that HR systems strengthen organizational efficiency by ensuring consistency in employee capability.

However, RBV also assumes that organizations possess the strategic autonomy required to deliberately cultivate unique resources. The Zamtel case challenges this assumption. HRP was found to be largely reactive, responding to immediate staffing gaps rather than proactively shaping future capabilities. This indicates that HRP under SOE conditions is constrained in its ability to create “rarity” or “inimitability” in the RBV sense.

Thus, Zamtel extends RBV by showing that in public-sector contexts, HRP often functions less as a competitive advantage generator and more as an institutional stabiliser. It protects existing performance rather than producing sustained strategic differentiation. This refines RBV by highlighting that the strategic value of human capital depends not only on its intrinsic characteristics but also on the governance structures that regulate its development.

5.2 Human Capital Theory: HRP as Developmental Infrastructure

Human Capital Theory conceptualises education, training, and experience as investments that yield returns in productivity and organizational performance (Becker, 1964) ^[3]. Contemporary extensions of the theory show that skill development strengthens employee engagement, service quality, and adaptability (Noe, 2020; Otoo *et al.*, 2021) ^[30, 33].

The findings strongly support this perspective. Zamtel's investment in technical training enhanced operational competence, reduced errors, and increased employee confidence. This confirms HCT's core claim that training produces measurable organizational value.

However, Zamtel also reveals the limits of narrow human capital investment. Training focused primarily on technical skills while neglecting leadership, communication, and

succession competencies. As a result, HRP strengthened operational capacity but failed to secure institutional continuity.

This suggests that in SOEs, HRP must be understood as developmental infrastructure rather than a simple training function. It must build not only technical competence but also leadership capacity, cultural cohesion, and strategic succession. Zamtel therefore extends HCT by demonstrating that human capital investment becomes strategically meaningful only when it is structurally integrated into leadership pipelines and organizational governance systems.

5.3 Contingency Theory: HRP as Context-Bound Practice

Contingency Theory argues that the effectiveness of management practices depends on alignment with contextual variables such as organizational structure, leadership authority, and environmental uncertainty (Fiedler, 1964; Donaldson, 2001) [18, 16].

Zamtel powerfully illustrates this principle. HRP effectiveness varied according to leadership commitment, cultural openness, and labour market pressure. Where supervisors actively supported development, HRP was experienced as empowering and performance-enhancing. Where leadership engagement was symbolic, HRP was reduced to bureaucratic procedure.

This confirms Boxall and Purcell's (2020) [6] argument that HR systems only become strategic when they are socially embedded in managerial practice. It also supports Schein's (2017) [34] claim that organizational culture determines which managerial actions are considered legitimate.

Zamtel therefore refines Contingency Theory by showing that in SOEs, contingency is not merely environmental but institutional. HRP effectiveness is conditioned by political authority, bureaucratic regulation, and cultural hierarchy.

5.4 Organizational Culture as HRP's Invisible Architecture

Schein (2017) [34] describes culture as the "invisible infrastructure" that shapes organizational behaviour. Denison (1990) [14] demonstrates that involvement and adaptability cultures strengthen HR system effectiveness.

At Zamtel, collaborative norms enabled peer learning and technical skill transfer, supporting HRP success. Yet hierarchical structures restricted open feedback and succession planning transparency. This duality shows that culture simultaneously enables and constrains HRP.

This contributes theoretically by showing that HRP is not culturally neutral. It is filtered through organizational assumptions about authority, hierarchy, and legitimacy.

5.5 Leadership as the Translation Mechanism of HRP

Yukl (2013) [41] and Northouse (2021) [31] emphasise that leadership determines whether strategy becomes practice. Zamtel demonstrates that HRP requires leadership legitimacy to move beyond paperwork.

Where leaders invested in mentoring and development, HRP became transformative. Where leadership was disengaged, HRP remained procedural.

Thus, leadership is not simply a support variable; it is the translation mechanism through which HRP becomes operationally meaningful.

5.6 Labour Market Constraints and HRP as Institutional Self-Protection

The ILO (2020) [21] and World Bank (2021) [38] show that African technology sectors face persistent skills shortages and wage competition. Zamtel's reliance on internal training reflects HRP's function as institutional self-protection.

HRP becomes a buffering strategy that compensates for fragile external labour markets. This reframes HRP not as an efficiency tool but as a survival mechanism in unstable skill ecosystems.

5.7 Theoretical Contributions of the Zamtel Case

This study extends strategic HRM theory in four ways:

- It reframes HRP as a bounded strategic capability in SOEs.
- It reconceptualises HRP as developmental infrastructure, not merely workforce planning.
- It demonstrates that HRP effectiveness depends on institutional and cultural legitimacy, not just technical design.
- It shows that HRP functions as organizational self-protection in volatile labour markets.

Zamtel thus becomes a theoretical site that reveals how strategic HRM operates under structural constraint rather than managerial freedom.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study set out to examine Human Resource Planning (HRP) as a strategic practice within a state-owned enterprise operating under conditions of technological change, institutional constraint, and labour market volatility. By analysing HRP at Zamtel through the lenses of the Resource-Based View (RBV), Human Capital Theory (HCT), and Contingency Theory, the article has demonstrated that HRP in African SOEs functions as a bounded strategic capability: it contributes meaningfully to organizational performance, yet its transformative potential is mediated by leadership legitimacy, organizational culture, and structural labour market conditions.

Rather than confirming dominant strategic HRM models developed in private-sector and Western contexts, the Zamtel case shows that HRP in public-sector environments must be understood as an institutional practice shaped by political authority, bureaucratic governance, and socio-economic realities. HRP at Zamtel does not primarily generate competitive differentiation; instead, it stabilises performance, preserves technical capacity, and buffers the organization against systemic vulnerabilities in skills supply. This reframing positions HRP as both a strategic and a protective mechanism: strategic in its capacity to enhance operational performance, and protective in its function of sustaining institutional continuity in constrained environments.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings extend the Resource-Based View by demonstrating that the strategic value of human capital is not determined solely by its intrinsic characteristics but by the institutional conditions governing its development and deployment. While RBV assumes managerial autonomy in cultivating rare and inimitable resources (Barney, 1991; Wright *et al.*, 2001) [2, 39], the Zamtel case shows that in

SOEs, HRP often operates under restricted strategic discretion. HRP protects existing competencies rather than actively constructing new forms of sustained competitive advantage. This suggests that RBV must be re-theorised for public-sector contexts to account for political authority, bureaucratic regulation, and hybrid performance mandates (OECD, 2018; McGaughey & Hart, 2017) ^[32, 27].

Human Capital Theory is refined by showing that training investment becomes strategically meaningful only when it is embedded within broader institutional structures of leadership development and succession planning. While Becker (1964) ^[3] and Noe (2020) ^[30] conceptualise training as productivity-enhancing investment, the Zamtel findings reveal that technical training alone is insufficient to secure organizational continuity. Human capital accumulation must therefore be understood as multi-dimensional, encompassing leadership identity, institutional memory, and cultural integration.

The study also advances Contingency Theory by demonstrating that “context” in SOEs is not merely environmental or technological but deeply institutional. While Donaldson (2001) ^[16] emphasises structural and environmental fit, Zamtel shows that HRP effectiveness is contingent upon cultural legitimacy, leadership authority, and governance arrangements. HRP is thus not transferable across organizations without considering institutional form and political economy.

Collectively, these insights reposition HRP as a socio-institutional capability rather than a universally technical management instrument.

6.2 Practical Recommendations

Several practice-oriented implications emerge from the findings.

First, HRP frameworks within SOEs must be explicitly repositioned from operational coordination tools to strategic governance mechanisms. Armstrong and Taylor (2022) ^[1] emphasise that HRP achieves strategic value only when aligned with long-term organizational direction. Zamtel should therefore integrate HRP more directly into corporate strategy formulation and performance monitoring processes. Second, succession planning must be institutionalised as a core HRP function. As Nankervis *et al.* (2019) ^[29] argue, leadership continuity is fundamental to workforce sustainability. Zamtel should develop transparent leadership pipelines, mentoring systems, and competency frameworks that decouple promotion from ad hoc decision-making and embed merit-based progression.

Third, training strategies must be broadened beyond technical competence. While Noe (2020) ^[30] highlights the centrality of skills development, Zamtel’s experience shows that leadership capacity, communication, and emotional intelligence are equally critical. HRP must therefore integrate technical, managerial, and behavioural competencies into a unified development architecture.

Fourth, leadership accountability mechanisms must be strengthened. Yukl (2013) ^[41] and Northouse (2021) ^[31] emphasise that leadership legitimacy determines whether HR strategies are enacted meaningfully. Performance appraisal systems should include measurable indicators of managers’ commitment to workforce development, mentoring, and succession planning.

Finally, HRP must be treated as a retention strategy. Given labour market competition (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2021)

^[21, 38], Zamtel should align HRP with career progression pathways, recognition systems, and internal mobility structures to reduce talent outflow.

6.3 Policy Relevance

The findings carry important implications for public-sector governance and national human resource development policy.

At the institutional level, SOE regulatory frameworks should recognise HRP as a strategic governance function rather than an administrative compliance activity. The OECD (2018) ^[32] argues that effective SOE governance requires clarity in performance mandates and managerial accountability. Embedding HRP within corporate governance codes would strengthen workforce sustainability and leadership continuity.

At the national level, the Zamtel case highlights the urgency of aligning higher education, vocational training, and professional certification systems with public-sector skill requirements. The World Bank (2021) ^[38] and ILO (2020) ^[21] stress that skills ecosystems in developing economies must be coordinated to reduce labour market fragmentation. HRP at SOEs should therefore be linked to national workforce planning frameworks and digital skills strategies. Furthermore, policy frameworks governing SOE leadership appointments should prioritise professional competence and institutional continuity over political affiliation. Without governance reform, HRP cannot function strategically regardless of technical design (McGaughey & Hart, 2017) ^[27].

6.4 Study Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations.

First, the single-case design restricts statistical generalisability. However, as Yin (2018) ^[40] and Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) ^[17] argue, case studies aim for analytical rather than numerical generalisation. Zamtel serves as a theoretically illuminating site rather than a representative sample.

Second, the qualitative design relies on self-reported perceptions, which may be shaped by institutional loyalty or political caution. While triangulation enhanced credibility (Denzin, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[15, 13], some dimensions of HRP effectiveness may remain underreported.

Third, the study focused primarily on HR and Finance departments. Including operational, technical, and customer service units in future research would deepen understanding of HRP’s organization-wide impact.

6.5 Directions for Future Research

Future research should pursue four main directions.

First, comparative studies across multiple SOEs would clarify how institutional variation shapes HRP effectiveness. Such work would advance context-sensitive strategic HRM theory (Brewster *et al.*, 2016; Kamoche *et al.*, 2012) ^[10, 23].

Second, longitudinal studies could examine how HRP reforms influence organizational performance over time, addressing the dynamic dimension emphasised by Armstrong and Taylor (2022) ^[1].

Third, mixed-methods designs combining qualitative insights with performance metrics would strengthen causal inference between HRP and organizational outcomes (Bryman, 2016) ^[11].

Fourth, future studies should explicitly theorise HRP as a governance practice within public-sector political economies, extending strategic HRM into institutional and policy analysis domains.

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that HRP in African state-owned enterprises must be reconceptualised as a strategic, cultural, and institutional capability. Zamtel shows that HRP enhances organizational performance not by creating competitive advantage in the classical sense but by stabilising competence, buffering labour market volatility, and preserving institutional continuity. In doing so, the study repositions HRP from an administrative instrument to a central mechanism of organizational sustainability in constrained public-sector environments.

7. References

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