Research Article

Effectiveness of Strategic Communication Tools in Enhancing Local Authorities Operations, the Zimbabwean Experiences

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Abstract: The study sought to evaluate strategic communication tools in Zimbabwe with the City of Bulawayo as a case study. Bulawayo City Council was the first local authority to set up a service call centre in 2012 to cover all municipal service faults and queries. The focus of the call centre was to ensure efficient service delivery and also customer relationship management. The study sought to examine the role of the strategic communication tools to a municipal's overall strategy. It also aimed at assessing the role of the call centre since its formation as well as evaluate the importance of the call centre in enhancing service delivery. As the first local authority to set up a call centre there has been increased interest from other local authorities in learning from Bulawayo's experiences. In conducting the study, 100 questionnaires were sent to internal respondents who were members of staff for the City of Bulawayo and 290 questionnaires were distributed to all the 29 wards in the city. Purposive sampling was used in the distribution of questionnaires for internal respondents and non - probability convenience sampling used for the external respondents. The study established that the call centre has been an influential strategic communication tool contributing towards the enhancement of service quality and delivery. The study further revealed that there is need for the local authority to match services provided at the call centre to the services provided by other service departments. The study indicated that the call centre as a strategic communication tool could be successfully implemented by other Zimbabwean local authorities although it was noted that this should be after careful research and analysis. The study recommended that organisations wishing to set up call centres should be able to match customer service demand with the actual delivery of services.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Communication Tools, Call Centre, Effective Service Delivery, Customer Relationship Management, Strategy, Service Quality

INTRODUCTION

The use of call centres has been a growing trend in Southern Africa and in the world with various municipalities setting them up in a bid to interact with their rate payers and also increase customer satisfaction. Various local authorities in Southern Africa, with most in South Africa (Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town) have set up call centres as part of good corporate governance and also for effective service delivery (BOWSER End of Project Report, 2013).

According to the City of Bulawayo Senior Public Relations Office (Mpofu, 2012) the idea of setting up a call centre in Bulawayo was mooted as far back as 2002 when the City came up with the strategic plan but limited funding hindered the implementation of the call centre. The Council had noted that there was need to have a well-managed and focused channel of communication in order to respond to the needs of the residents. The call centre was meant to ensure that the City of Bulawayo is responsive to the service delivery of the residents.

The City of Bulawayo Call Centre is internally managed and was conceptualized under the Bulawayo Water and Sanitation Emergency Response (BOWSER) project in its second phase. BOWSER was funded by the Australian Government Aid (AusAid) Programme and implemented in June 2010 to December 2012 in a collaborative partnership of the Bulawayo City Council, World Vision and Dabane Trust (Mpofu, 2012).

The BOWSER project was set up after the city and the country had to face up to the alarming combined possibility of cholera and a failed water supply and sanitation system. Davies (2014) states that the Bulawayo Sewage Task Force was set up in 2008 by the Bulawayo City Council (BCC), two NGOs (World Vision Zimbabwe and Dabane Trust), together with a group of private businesses in the civil engineering and water-related fields. World Vision agreed to seek funding from possible donors and this later led to an AusAID agreement to fund an emergency response programme. This thus gave birth to the Bulawayo Water and Sanitation Emergency response (BOWSER) project from which the water and sanitation projects were conducted and carried out in Bulawayo.

The Call Centre was set up under the second phase of the BOWSER project to consolidate the gains of the first phase and provide support for the upgrading of information technology systems and improving Council's institutional capacity. In the first phase, the

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project improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene following the national cholera outbreak. Although Bulawayo was not as adversely affected as other local authorities and towns, poor and dilapidated infrastructure and the harsh economic environment made it almost impossible for the local authority to implement urgent interventions to the cholera epidemic (Mpofu, 2012).

Mpofu (2012) states that the Call Centre is a centralized system for receiving customer complaints, feedback and queries and then channelling them to the relevant people for actioning and feedback. She adds that the Call Centre was set up to provide a tracking mechanism of service and service standards within the Bulawayo City Council with the aim of improving response times for the implementation of services. The Call Centre was established because of the City's recognition of the importance of the customers and the rate payers and the need to ensure that they are satisfied with the services offered by the municipality.

Mpofu (2012) highlights that with the setting up of the Call Centre, Bulawayo residents are able to dial in to the Call Centre using a Toll Free number and make enquiries, report anomalies or request for emergency services for cases of fire or ambulances. "The Call Centre is fully furnished with top of the range high-tech PABX and Radio equipment for speedy, excellent services" (Mpofu, 2012).

Research Questions
The study was guided by the following research questions:
- What is the role of the call centre as an effective strategic communication tool in Bulawayo?
- How can call centres contribute towards efficient and effective service delivery?
- What lessons can be learnt in the setting up and management of the City of Bulawayo call centre which can be used to assist other Zimbabwean local authorities?

Theoretical Framework
The definitions for strategic communication are wide and varied although most of the scholars agree on key points in the definitions. Argenti *et al.* (2005) define strategic communication as "communication aligned with the company's overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning." They add that strategic communication is inextricably linked to the corporate strategy of an organisation advising executives on their communication strategies and tactics. Cornish *et al.* (2011) define strategic communication as a "systematic series of sustained and coherent activities conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels that enables understanding of target audiences and identifies effective conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour".

The scholars emphasise the importance of linking strategic communication to the overall corporate strategy which is also emphasised by Hallahan *et al.* (2007). Hallahan *et al.* (2007 cited in Mahoney, 2011) define strategic communication as the "purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission". Mahoney (2011) further argues that strategic communication is about information provision, persuasion, discursiveness and relational communication towards the achievement of an organisations' mission. Hallahan *et al.* (2007 cited in Tindall & Holtzhausen, 2012) state that "all of these disciplines involve the organisation, defined in its broadest sense, communicating purposefully to advance its mission. This is the essence of strategic communication". Hallahan *et al.* (2007) argue that strategic communication is emerging as a term and is increasingly gaining acceptance over the world with Europe, South Africa, Australia and North America using strategic communication to describe the units and service that they perform. They add that the adoption of strategic communication has mostly been because there is increasing need for organisations to differentiate themselves. There is also increasing expectations from the audiences in the way they view organisations, including their product, service offering and competence as well as social commitment and social responsibility.

Hallahan *et al.* (2007) highlight that in an analysis of strategic communication; the questions that may arise could be on the conjunction of strategic communication to describe the current formal communication practice. Hallahan *et al.* (2007) argue that the role of communication is to ensure that there is transference of information from the supervisor to the subordinate in order to gain compliance and establish networks that ensure an organisation' power relations with the public. This should include the concept of the strategic messages, design, management of culture and total quality management. They note that the mention of strategic communication usually invokes the one sided approach to management and the top down approach to communication. Hallahan *et al.* (2007) highlight that despite criticism of the top down approach, strategic communication does not imply power and control but includes stakeholder communication, change management as well as participatory communication.

Role of Strategic Communication
The role of strategic communication in any organisation is dependent on the influence and effective coordination across and beyond an organisation to achieve strategic goals. Thorson (2013) highlights that strategic communication entails various other communication fields and is developing as a subfield within communication. He notes that it explores the capacity of all organisations for engaging in purposeful communication. According to Thorson (2013) the strength of strategic communication is that it places

emphasis on strategy rather than specific tactics and understands communication holistically in an organisation. Hallahan *et al.* (2007) add that the coordination of the administrative function to product promotion and relationship building all involve the organisation communicating its mission. They add that in essence this is the strategic communication which highlights that an organisation's employees have to make a deliberate effort to communicate on behalf of the organisation, its causes and also social movements.

Hallahan *et al.* (2007) argue that in an increasingly complex world, organisations vie for attention, admiration and allegiance with their constituents. This has resulted in companies making strategic decisions about their businesses. Thorson (2013) adds that the increasing complexity of the global and digital society has challenged the capacity for organisations to engage in long term strategic planning. Organisations have thus started exploring the extent to which professional communication can be aligned to the organisational strategies, the effectiveness of communication and the role of the organisation in the society.

Argenti *et al.* (2005) add that when an organisation takes a strategic approach to communication, communication becomes an integral part to the formulation and implementation of its corporate strategy. As a result it is necessary that the organisation sees strategic communication as imperative in the organisation and as a differentiator and thus a driver for strategy. They further emphasise that for strategic communication to be a success in any organisation it is necessary to have its leadership or its Chief Executive Officer have an inherent understanding of how communication can play a great role as a driver of the organisation strategy.

Mahoney (2011) adds that strategic communicators are charged with the responsibility of counselling senior management, guiding and managing reputations and relationships with important stakeholder groups. He adds that it is necessary for management to be part of the communication process and also champion the organisational cause. Phillips (2012) highlights that for several years the debate surrounding the practice of strategic communication has been centred on how it could help senior leaders achieve their objectives emphasising the important role that leaders have to play in the achievement of the organisation's strategic role. McCarty (2010) in his analysis of the United States government highlights that strategic communication has a top down capability arguing that if it is not working at the top it cannot be fixed from the bottom up. He notes that there is need for the strategic communication tools selected by the organisation to have top management or top leadership support and buy in adding that these have to be in line with the organisations strategic goals and plans. He further highlights that the senior leadership in an organisation need to have a strong conceptual understanding of strategic communication. According to McCarty (2010), the usual first step with most organisations is to provide the leadership with tools to oversee how strategic communication is designed and implemented.

Strategic communication focuses on public, audiences and stakeholders through the various communication tools available. Integrated communication has become key in addressing issues of cultural divergence and change in an organisation. Tindall and Holtzhausen (2012) emphasise the importance of the audience highlighting that strategic communication focuses on the audience centred approach where the audience is the centre of the communication activity. They add that the audience is the one that determines the messages and tactics that the organisation can use to best communicate with the audience. It is emphasised that there should be a high level of professionalism with the practitioners to ensure that communication is done effectively.

Mahoney (2011) highlights that in most multinational corporations and government agencies strategic communication experts are developing programmes to help repair the carnage which has affected organisations' reputation. He adds that this is not an easy task as strategic communication is a multidisciplinary "intentional" communication that requires a purposeful actor, who is rational and also a deliberate decision maker. He argues that strategic communication is a bridging activity between the organisation and its stakeholders that should be institutionalised. It is for this reason that various scholars have emphasised that strategic communication exists to enhance the strategic positioning of a company. It is necessary therefore for strategic communication to have a long term orientation in which practitioners meet the short term needs and also remain focussed on the long term needs of the organisations. Mahoney (2011) further highlights that strategic communicators are concerned with leadership, management and counselling. They counsel management on "responses on political issues, reputation protection, crises and long range organisational positioning" (Mahoney, 2011).

Mahoney (2011) argues that the business environment is changing with companies coming under greater scrutiny. This has prompted them to have a changed approach to corporate social responsibility and is being restructured to account for the new environment. He argues that this is in line with the demands from government to restore reputations and also be socially responsible. Strategic communicators as a result are concerned with the impact of change, restoration of organisational values and perceptions of the reputation by the organisational publics.

Mahoney (2011) also highlights that relationship building and maintenance is fundamental for effective change to take place. He argues that small incremental changes create disturbances in the system and create their own dynamics which should be controlled through effective communication. He adds that communication with stakeholders during change should be high on the list to ensure success. He emphasised the role of chief executive officers in a change environment to ensure success of restructuring. Alexander (2006 cited in Mahoney, 2011) highlights that chief executive officers need to be competent communicators with external stakeholders, understanding communication practice and the link to the business goals.

Cornish *et al.* (2011) note that in each organisation there are drivers or there should be drivers of strategic communication that companies and businesses need to take note of in the development of tools or strategies. They note the following drivers for communication that companies need to be cognisant of in the development of strategic communication plans:

- Organisational complexities – In most organisations, the growth in size drives the company to adopt strategic communication in order to communicate to a diverse and rapidly expanding array of constituents while also remaining relevant.
- The need to increase credibility - Corporate crises both internal and external are also drivers for organisations to reconsider how they communicate. Cornish *et al.* (2011) also note that bursting of bubbles and crises motivate management to adopt strategic communication in order to maintain credibility.
- Aligning communication with strategy - Corporations have multiple constituents to whom it should be responsive to all of them. They note that the organisation should align communication to the strategy so as to communicate it frequently.

In an analysis of strategic communication, Cornish *et al.* (2011) also note that for successful strategic communication to take place there are lessons that need to be learnt by the organisation.

They emphasise the need for senior management to be involved in planning. According to Cornish *et al.* (2011), the top leaders of the organisation's organogram must understand the importance of communication and leverage communications strategically for the constituents. They further argue that not only should management be involved but there is need to ensure that communication is integrated. It is important to note that communication in an organisation is not a separate function and it is hard to separate from the daily business processes.

Strategic Communication in Local Government and Service Quality

Communication is important for local governments to function and ultimately achieve their objectives. Communication acts as a unifier of organizational activities, while manpower interprets and utilizes the communication to achieve the local government objectives. Gaster (1996) highlights that there have been various questions on the relevance of service quality to the public service organisations. Local governments since the mid 1990's have been in an excellent position to demonstrate the real meaning of quality in public services due to developments which have taken place over the years.

Gaster (1996) states that there has been increasing demonstration for change and innovation at local government level to the communities they serve and this has led to increased adoption of service quality. She notes that while quality is feared by government and quasi government organisations, the language of "conformance to specification", "zero defect" and "customer care" has been imported from the private sector to the government and public service organisations. She however notes that in some cases it has been argued that attempts for quality control in government organisations are part of window dressing although it has been influential in improving existing services and addressing challenges in service delivery.

Gaster (1996) highlights that quality does not have to be an alien concept in organisations as it is based on the values which underpin the notions of public service. New management concepts in public organisations have created services which are tailored to give power and authority to those close to consumers. In quality provision, these are the front line managers who try and do that and the concern for the service organisations have been to try and give the best customer service experiences.

She further argues that quality management in organisations should also be owned to ensure that it is not tokenistic in organisations. There should be management buy in of the quality assurance, total quality management and customer care in the organisation. She argues that local governments can adopt recommendations from the private sector who are known as quality gurus. The aim of private sector organisations is to try and ensure that services provided have very little variance and also conform to specifications and this should be adopted by public service organisations.

In quality service provision, there is need to involve customers and citizens as they are the judge of the public service act. Gaster (1996) notes that communication plays an important role in local governments as it will ensure that the organisation is aware of the public reactions and expectations. She adds

that strategic decisions in local authorities are made to ensure that they cater for the various groups of people in communities.

The importance of communication towards ensuring efficiency in service delivery as well as the quality of services provided by an organisation has become an issue today. Malhotra & Mukherjee (2003) highlight that there is need to understand the organisational commitment when dealing with the service quality relationship in a service organisation context. They note that over the years the growth of attention from goods marketing to services marketing has brought about increased attention on the interaction between the customer and the employee in the service industry. The services industry has seen increased competition which has led to public service organisations emphasising the importance of service quality in a bid to achieve competitive advantage. They add that companies have realised the need to adopt a people oriented approach compared to profit oriented towards improved customer service. In this instance organisational commitment of frontline employees has been gaining importance in determining quality of service delivered to customers.

They add that management should thus develop the strategic and operational targets to ensure provision of quality service. They further note that the companies that pay more attention to customers are able to achieve the desired profit and market share goals. They further add that successful service managers recognise the importance of crucial factors that drive profitability such as investment in people and technology that supports frontline workers. They add that as call centres are increasingly important for customer relationship management, customer contact employees are increasingly important to the link between companies and customers.

Malhotra & Mukherjee (2004) note that the services industry has seen widespread use of call centres in the frontline of customer service management. Call centres have been used to facilitate human encounters remotely and have grown due to the technological advances integrating the telephone and computer technology. They note that the growth of call centres has seen a rise in service quality issues and technological advances have led to call centres becoming important for customer relationship management.

Malhotra & Mukherjee (2004) argue that call centres as tools for strategic communication have the potential to replace communication in organisations and customer contact. They thus will represent companies and directly influence the perceptions of the customer. In organisations that are adopting a people oriented approach "the quality of service delivered cannot be separated from the quality of the service provider,"

(Lewis, 1989; cited in Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004). Malhotra & Mukherjee (2004) add that as service delivery occurs through human interaction, customer contact personnel during the service encounter determine the level of service quality which is delivered by the organisations hence the need to evaluate the role that call centres play in an organisation.

Call Centre Background

Limited research has been made on Call Centres and their operations in local authorities and government although notable research has been carried out for call centre operations in private sector organizations.

Furniss (1998) defines a Call Centre as a "physical location where calls are placed or received in high volume for the purpose of sales, marketing, customer service, or other specialized business activity". Dawson (2004; cited in Jourbert du Preez, 2008) defines a call centre as "a physical (or virtual) location where calls are placed or received in high volume for the purpose of a business function or activity". He adds that at its core call centres constitute a set of resources – typically personnel, computers and telecommunications equipment.

Massey (2000) states that "like many revolutionary technologies, the call centre has a creation myth". He traces its origins to 1973 when the US firm Rockwell Galaxy allowed Continental Airlines to run a telephone booking system. The basic features of the modern call centre could be recognised in the mid 1960's when Private Automated Business Exchange (PABX) began to be used to handle large numbers of customer contacts.

Massey (2000) highlights that the term Call Centre was first used in 1983, in the *Data Communications* magazine in this sentence. "Each of these "**call centers**" is staffed with agents who work with Honeywell…." (Massey, 2000). He notes that developments in information technologies in the 1970's saw improved computer and telephone systems. This allowed organisations to transfer tasks traditionally handled by employees to technology based systems. It was with the emerging technology, that customer service could be delivered far more efficiently and economically than in the past.

Cawley (1999) states that the growth of the Internet spurred the growth of the Call Centre which became essential tools in dealing with customer services and technical support. He adds that it has become an invaluable business facility for decades. Jourbert du Preez (2008) highlights that the business function of the call centers has spurred due to the growth of globalization and technological growth. He highlights that it can perform various duties which include customer service, help desk, emergency response

services, sales and telemarketing among others. "The latest telecommunications and information technology allow a call centre to be viewed as a virtual embodiment of several geographically dispersed operations. Most centres are linked to a corporate data network including main frames, microcomputers and Local area networks (LANs)" (Jourbert du Preez, 2008).

Call Centres and their Strategic Role

Early call centres, according to Jourbert du Preez (2008) were seen as cost centres providing poor and unsatisfactory results. Modern call centres have however been approached in a different way with emphasis on the alignment to organisation strategic objectives and are seen as performance centres and revenue drivers. Call centres are often the largest and only channel used to access customers or for customers to access the organisation. While dynamic in nature, there is need to also take into consideration the environments that are imperative for the calls centres to run effectively and efficiently.

Jourbert du Preez (2008) highlights that there is need to also ensure that the call centre designs are integrated with the proposed organisational workforce and performance management models. He adds that call centres are increasingly an important part of modern day business and perform an important role in the strategic and operational activities of an organisation. Call centres are deemed as important in the value chain of a company's business processes. They play an extremely important part in the operational and performance of a business to ensure its success. According to Jourbert du Preez (2008) there seems to be constant battles between managing relationships between people, processes and technologies that can be found in a call centre environment. It is important to keep these factors aligned and working properly in order to gain maximum business values and service levels. He further notes that at the same time it is important to also manage the relationship between efficient performance at the lowest cost but delivering the best customer service.

He highlights the importance of call centres in business by arguing that companies that do not take the appropriate steps to design call centres effectively or to manage and configure them properly will find that there is lost revenue, increased costs and dissatisfied customers. There is thus need to ensure that all parties understand the dynamics and other factors that drive the service levels.

In an understanding of strategic communication tools in companies it is also important to understand the way that call centres operate and improve their day to day operations. Evenson *et al.* (1999) highlight that for companies it is necessary to ensure that they possess the right skills and tools to react to any changes or disturbances quickly and efficiently. They argue that it is necessary for companies to develop and implement these skills in order to develop and maintain a high performance call centre that can be viewed as a strategic asset.

Jourbert du Preez (2008) states that the basic business environment consists of a market, customers and the channels that customers use to access the market. The call centres are used by organisations as a mechanism in the customer access area and serves as a link between customers and the market as well as between the market and the customers. He adds that organisations have to also consider the environmental changes which ensure change in the role and functioning of the call centre as well.

As - Saber & Hossain (2004) note that the use of call centres in the public sector and government are in embryonic stage and plagued with significant challenges they have an opportunity and potential to provide better, more democratic option compared to other service delivery systems. They provide companies and government organisations with the improved access to information, enhanced two way communication and encourage democracy through citizens' participation in decision making. They argue that it could the model of using call centres for e-governance.

As-Saber & Hossain (2004) states that the management objective of the call centre combines a number of challenges which include cost, service quality and employee satisfaction. Evenson *et al.* (1999) highlight that in the operations of an organisation in order to achieve customer experience there is need for service delivery to be influenced by the quality of the personnel, information technology, internal process, human resources practices as well as the organisation's change orientation. As-Saber & Hossain (2004) add that the flexibility of the ICT has been a notable enabler in the creation of flexible improvements of the public sector performance with better citizen access to public services and improved quality of service delivery.

As-Saber & Hossain (2004) show that in many developing countries poor governance has been undermining the service delivery and development initiatives undertaken by the majority of developing countries. Government and quasi government organisations have started using e-governance in a bid to engender change in their governance systems for achieving development goals and offer better service. One of the tools used to ensure accountability and responsiveness have been the call centres, with arguments that it presents better service delivery at reduced costs and increases public sector efficiency.

As-Saber & Hossain (2004) highlight that in government institutions, call centres together with other service delivery channels could consequently be considered as an important e-governance tool which

could complement widespread dependence on Internet based operations. They add that call centres have the potential to facilitate better service provision and they could provide government departments with opportunities to deliver better service to citizens as well as engage them in policy making and implementation dialogues.

Curry & Lyon (2008) state that figure 1 shows the importance of strategic communication management and the relationship with organisational strategy and communication culture. Their proposal is that the model should assist in the evaluation of public service call centres in the future due to the fact that it is generic and encapsulates managerial enablers and results, relevant to best practice call centre management and operation. They note that strategy and communication play a significant role in the operations of the call centre and also creating a service quality oriented climate in any organisation.
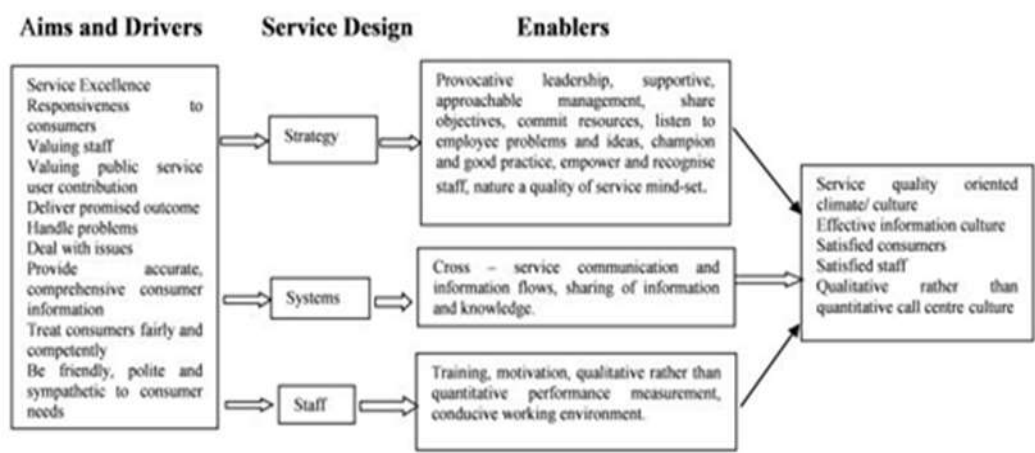

Figure 1: Evaluation of Call Centre
Source: Curry & Lyon (2008)

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODODOLOGY

The research utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods in data gathering. The mixed methods approach was used as it provided variation in data collection which leads to greater validity in research. It was also used to ensure that questions are answered from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Jogulu & Pansiri (2011) highlight that in management research; the mixed method approach has gained prominence and has become known to be a profoundly comprehensive technique for research in social sciences through the integration of thematic and statistical data. The focus was a case survey (case study and survey) focusing on the City of Bulawayo call centre. The research design used in this research uses a combination of the case study and the survey design. Larson (1993) states that case surveys bridge the gap between surveys and case studies in a bid to combine their respective benefits in carrying our cross sectional and in-depth analysis. The research area includes a case study of the City of Bulawayo call centre. The case study method was however not exhaustive as the research also focused on evaluating not only the system but also sought to understand the perception of the residents and staff members on the call centre. The research also did not seek to provide a detailed analysis of the call centre but focused on surveys that highlight its role and link to strategic communication. In a bid to cover the sample population, the research utilised questionnaires and interviews which are based on the survey design of research.

The study utilised two data collection instruments, that is, questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were used in a bid to collect quantitative data as well as qualitative data. The researchers utilised two types of questionnaires during the research. These included internal questionnaires which targeted municipal staff and external questionnaires which were meant for the rate payers of Bulawayo. Internal questionnaires were designed for municipal staff and were distributed across all six municipal departments. The researchers sent ten questionnaires in each of the wards through research assistants who assisted in the collection of the data. In-depth interviews were held with the City of Bulawayo staff from the Engineering Services department, Financial Services (IT Section) and the Town Clerk's Department (Public Relations Section) and also staff from World Vision and Australian Aid. Interviews were conducted with resident association leaders for the two residents associations that are operational in Bulawayo. The researchers interviewed residents' association leaders with regards to the residents' use and customer satisfaction of the call centres. All interviews were conducted in person.

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Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the sample population for the internal data collection. The aim was to select the members of staff who have been directly affected by the setting up of the call centre in their day to day operations. It also included internal population that made use of the call centre and was representative of all 6 departments of the City of Bulawayo. The researchers targeted municipal staff in their various workstations for the distribution of internal questionnaires.

Convenience sampling method was chosen for external respondents because of the relative cost and time required to carry out a convenience sample are small in comparison to probability sampling techniques. Latham (2007) highlights that this enables the researcher to achieve the sample size they desire in a relatively fast and inexpensive way. In the gathering of external data the researchers chose household representatives that were easily accessed for the study. The use of Municipal Offices and ward offices were seen as convenient, because residents visit Municipal Offices on a daily basis. Residents consult on all services provided by BCC in those offices daily. Convenience sampling was used because the population is too large and as such impossible to include all the households.

Sample Size

Bulawayo City Council has 29 wards in which all the 160 000 accounts are located. The researchers distributed a total of ten questionnaires in each ward (290 questionnaires) using research assistants. The researchers used the Roscoe's rule of thumb in determining the sample size. Roscoe (1975 cited in Norazuwa, 2008) proposes a rule of thumb in determining the sample size. He states that sample sizes larger than 30 and less than 500 are appropriate for most research. The researchers thus used the rule of thumb in determining the sample size of 290. A total of 215 questionnaires were completed. In collecting internal data, the researchers utilised the Call Centre monthly reports in a bid to check which sections and departments had the most reports. This assisted in determining the sample population and selection of respondents to the questionnaires and interviews. The City of Bulawayo has 6 administrative departments and a total of 100 questionnaires were distributed in their various sections and stations to tally with usage of the Call Centre and 68 were returned.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Oulton (1995) states that interpreting one's research findings is a creative process as it involves trying to make sense of and impose a structure on the set of data collected. He adds that in the data analysis process one should consider how they will analyse the data before the data collection process. Hence the presentation and analysis of qualitative data involved organising the data and breaking it into manageable units in the process searching for common patterns according to the research questions. This process made it easy to discover important ideas and what to report. Microsoft Excel software package was used to analyse quantitative data into tables and figures. The data was coded first, entered into the system, and analysed.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Role of the Call Centre as an effective strategic communication tool

The first section of the research study sought to evaluate the role of the Call Centre as an effective strategic communication tool.

Call Centres as Strategic Communication Tools

The results indicate that the majority of the respondents within Council (97.6%) and outside (88%) Council felt that the call centre was an important strategic communication tool. The rest (2.3% within Council and 12% outside Council) felt that it was not necessarily so, due to lack of knowledge of new information communication technologies. Some of the respondents in the community felt that the Call Centre as a new information communication technology was out of the reach of some of the members of the community especially the elderly. They noted that it may be difficult for them to utilise the call centre. Other respondents in the 12% felt that the operational challenges which included lack of customer care hindered their feelings that the call centre was a strategic communication tool.

The study sought to ascertain what the residents thought was the role of the call centre in the City of Bulawayo. The majority of the respondents (both internal and external) felt that the Call Centre is an important strategic communication tool. However, a minority felt that those out of touch with new technology (especially the elderly) are not seeing it as a strategic communication tool.

Call Centre Contribution to the Local Authority Strategy

Respondents were also requested to give their opinions on whether the call centre contributed to the overall local authority strategy.

Figure 2: Call Centre Contribution towards Local Authority Strategy (External)

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Figure 2 above reflects the external respondents' feelings on the role of the call centre and its contribution towards local authority strategy. The majority of the respondents (56%) felt that communication was very important to the development of the strategy. They noted that the call centre contributed to the local authority strategy by ensuring easy access to the municipality. They also added that it ensured accountability (32%) within the local authority through the reference numbers given by the call centre whenever residents made reports. They added that this had made it easy for residents to follow up on calls made to the call centre and also if their faults had been attended to as well as gain feedback on the progress.

The respondents also highlighted that it was also a strategic tool for council as it managed the communication relationship between the municipality and the rate payers. It ensured that the municipality was aware of the needs of the rate payers and as such could tailor messages that communicated with them and also gave them feedback on developments taking place in the City. The Call Centre Office (City of Bulawayo) highlighted that council had been able to draft adverts for residents during the water shedding period from what the rate payers had queried at the Call Centre. The Office said that queries such as the water quality and also the water shedding schedule were the frequent questions which were asked. During the water shedding period, these questions contributed to a weekly column in the Sunday News which ran from Sunday, 12 August 2012 to the 25th November 2012. It added that the questions which were raised at the call centre with regards to water, water quality among others were developed into further articles to develop communication messages to the residents.

Figure 3: Call Centre contribution towards Local Authority Strategy (Internal Respondents)

The internal respondents felt that the call centre was a strategic tool as it contributed towards improved service delivery, decision making and also communication between Council and its stakeholders. Fifty seven percent (57%) highlighted that the call centre had led to improved service delivery. They noted

that it was an important tool in the municipality for bringing together various stakeholders and 14, 4% saw it as communicating council activities to the residents. They added that the local authority had various services which people did not fully understand and it was thus necessary for the call centre to bridge the information gap. It was also noted that it provided information for decision making. This was through its mandate of ensuring accountability as the queries or service faults were easy to trace.

The respondents further highlighted that the call centre was a strategic tool and also contributed to the local authority strategy by ensuring that the municipality was accountable to residents and also to its stakeholders. At least 28.6% of the respondents noted that the call centre contributed to decision making. The internal and external respondents both acknowledged that communication was crucial for the development of the municipality's strategy. The results therefore show that the Call Centre is contributing towards the local authority strategy of improving service delivery. This links up with studies done by others like Thorson (2013); & Hallahan *et al.* (2007). Thorson (2013) highlighted that call centres were the key for the development of information which could be used to influence and ensure effective coordination in organisations in a bid to achieve strategic objectives. Hallahan *et al.* (2007) also noted that communication was key in building relationships and in ensuring that the organisation communicated its vision and values.

Role of the Call Centre
This section of the questionnaire first sought to ascertain the means that residents preferred for reporting faults and also which alternative means they would utilise in reporting service faults.

Forty eight percent of the external respondents noted that the call centre provided a place where they could liaise with the municipality and 44% highlighted that it was a place where they could report faults. Of the external respondents, 8% highlighted that they did not know the role of the call centre in Bulawayo. Members of staff highlighted that the call centre had various roles and these were also linked to the organisational strategy and service delivery. They noted that its role was strategic and important for the mobilisation of the resources. Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents noted that the call centre was essential for customer service. They highlighted that it was an important part of the local authority by providing a channel through which the council received calls from the public. These included complaints from residents and reports pertaining to services. They noted that the call centre was thus necessary as the centre of communication also providing channels through which the municipality could make decisions.

The rate payers who highlighted that they did not know of the role of the call centre, implied that the local authority should take a deliberate approach ensure that all of its communication material carries information on how the call centre may be contacted. Steyn *et al.* (2001) highlighted that the role of call centres is strategic in organisations. He highlighted that their role in organisations was to ensure that strategic information of stakeholders and issues for the external environment feed into the strategic intelligence of the organisations. They add that call centres are thus not functional but entail the identification of strategic issues. The lesson the City Council could learn from these results is that a good percentage of rate payers still do not have adequate knowledge about the Call Centre.

Achieving Customer Satisfaction

The research also sought to understand respondent's perceptions on the role played by the call centre in achieving and ensuring customer satisfaction. The external respondents noted that the City of Bulawayo required the call centre in a bid to achieve customer satisfaction as the call centre ensured quick response to the faults. They also noted that the availability of the toll free numbers made it easily accessible to the residents as they could make reports without any credit on their mobile phones. Some of the respondents however noted that while the call centre was necessary for the City of Bulawayo, the rate payers did not always get positive assistance. Others highlighted that they faced challenges of getting their phone calls answered as they had to wait for a long time to get an agent to assist them.

Five percent of respondents felt that the City of Bulawayo did not need the call centre to achieve customer satisfaction as they highlighted that they were not aware of the contact centre numbers and as such had failed to make reports through the call centre. They noted that it was thus not a necessary tool as they had never received any assistance. Some of the respondents also noted that the call centre was too far away from the community in terms of its location and hence those who did not have telephones or their contact numbers could not seek assistance.

All internal respondents noted that the call centre was necessary and required for the council to achieve customer satisfaction. The respondents highlighted that through the call centre the community had found a toll free platform to communicate with council as the service provider. They however noted that there were various operational challenges which needed to be addressed by the municipality in order to achieve customer satisfaction with regards to response time. Some of the respondents highlighted that while they felt that the call centre was important for the achievement of customer satisfaction, it was necessary for it to incorporate other municipal functions. They highlighted that the current operations were too focused

on water and sanitation and emergency services but needed to include other municipal services for effectiveness and efficiency. The Call Centre Office noted that there were plans in the municipality to include these services although they required a lot of labour and technical expertise.

The Engineering Department noted that the importance of the call centre as a monitoring tool and strategic tool could be used for decision making in the local authority. It highlighted that the call centre had the potential for the management of not only financial resources but even human resources to ensure efficacy and efficiency. The Department also added that the strategic function of the call centre was also emphasised through its location in the Town Clerk's department which served as Council's strategic department.

Some of the respondents noted that while the call centre was an important tool for ensuring customer satisfaction within the municipality, it seemed focused on water and sanitation and did not include all the municipal services. They noted that the specifications of water, sanitation and emergency services had been included in the call centre. The classification of all services as "other" limited the scope of queries which could be attained as well as the information that other departments required. They also added that the staff was a let-down as they were not fully conversant of all municipal services and thus could not knowingly respond to all customer queries. Tindall & Holtzhausen (2012) argued that when organisations set up call centres they should ensure that there is integrated communication. They added that in a bid to ensure customer satisfaction in organisations it is necessary for customer contact agents to be fully aware of all the organisations' products. Cornish e*t al*. (2011) noted that in most call centres, clients are not assisted at the first call and this may lead to the company losing clients. The reasons given for this is that clients would not have had the satisfaction they deserve when they contact the customer contact centres. They added that for the strategic communication tools to thus be effective there is need for everyone to have a stake in the bigger picture.

Zarfass (2009) in previous research argued that that in the management of call centres as strategic communication tools in organisations there is need to ensure that they are not only resident in one department but should cover the whole organisation as a whole. He added that strategic communication should be deeply rooted in the genes of the organisation as a whole to ensure that they emerge stronger after a crisis. Zarfass & Sherzada (2015) also added that the strategic communication tools should be supported by the CEO's or board members of companies and cascaded to the rest of the organisation for effectiveness and efficiency.

The results highlighted that the local authority had made a good decision in setting up a call centre. It was however concluded that Bulawayo City Council was still not fully utilising the information presented by the call centre in the management process and in the strategy implementation process.

How the Call Centre Can Contribute Towards Efficient and Effective Service Delivery

The section sought to evaluate how the Call Centre can contribute towards efficient and effective service delivery.

Call Centre Usage

The study also sought to understand if the respondents utilised the call centre and the reasons for its usage. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents reported that they utilise the call centre. Of the 20% who responded that they did not utilise the call centre, they noted that the members of staff resident there seemed to be ignorant of municipal duties or there were delays in accessing the required service. They noted that while some of the calls were reported there were delays in council attending to the complaints, with some reports of sewer bursts not being attended to for more than a week. These responses indicated that the members of the public did not separate the municipal issues in accordance to departments, but felt that after reporting complaints to the call centre, the complementary municipal services should attend to the complaints. It thus indicated that the call centre was a service which should be complimented by other services in a bid to gain customer loyalty and trust.

Some of the respondents highlighted that there was poor customer care and no knowledge of the municipal services. In any organisation, the first call to the call centre determines whether or not the customer would come back and as a result organisations need to ensure that the first impression created, will also build an everlasting relationship to the consumers. It is noted that despite 20% being a small number compared to 80% of the respondents who highlighted that they would use the call centre, it is important for the local authority to ensure that the call centre and its operational departments create good impressions with each service encounter. Some of the residents however highlighted that they had not utilised the call centre as they did not know about it.

The majority of the respondents (80%) responded that they made use of the call centre as calls were responded to promptly. They noted that the access to toll free numbers ensured that even those residents without credit on their telephones could make calls at no cost to the municipality. Some however noted that despite the promptness of the receiving of calls, there were challenges in ensuring that the service also requested was delivered promptly to the residents. This thus calls on the local authority to match services provided by the call centre to services delivered by the sister departments. Results clearly indicate that while the majority of the respondents made use of the Call Centre the City Council has not improved its response to problems raised through the Centre. It therefore means it has to improve its response in order to improve service delivery.

Call Centre Rating

In this section internal respondents were requested to measure themselves in accordance to when they had received calls and also when they had delivered the service. They were also requested to take into consideration the rating of the actual call centre service in a bid to ensure that the local authority achieves customer satisfaction.
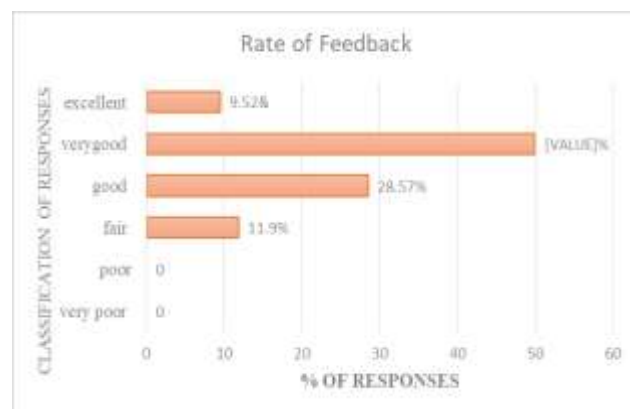

Figure 4: Call Centre Rating (Internal Respondents)

The above figure shows the rate of feedback from the call centre to the residents by the internal respondents. The internal respondents noted that the reports which came through the call centre were classified as urgent by the various sections as they were easy to track and also ensured accountability. They noted that the service level standards also prompted them to address the concerns in an effort to ensure that the call centre did not need to issue a second reminder.

Respondents who consisted of 11.9% felt that as a relatively new system in the local authority and also in the local government sector there was still a lot that needed to be done to improve its performance and also ensure availability of information for the various municipal departments. They noted that reports that also took a very long time to address were due to challenges in availability of stock and materials to conduct the job.

The World Vision End of Project Report highlighted that the response rate to water and sewer bursts was one of the challenges which were facing the municipality. The call centre was thus brought about in a bid to ensure accountability through the tracking of service faults reports. The respondents also noted that if the service level standards are part and parcel of the call centre, this would ensure that all the reports that are made are attended to as per the expected times. The

respondents also noted that the reports made from the call centre were also given priority as it also handled emergency services. This was due to the fact that emergency services required that all calls had to be received and dispatched immediately as the call centre also ensured accountability and transparency.
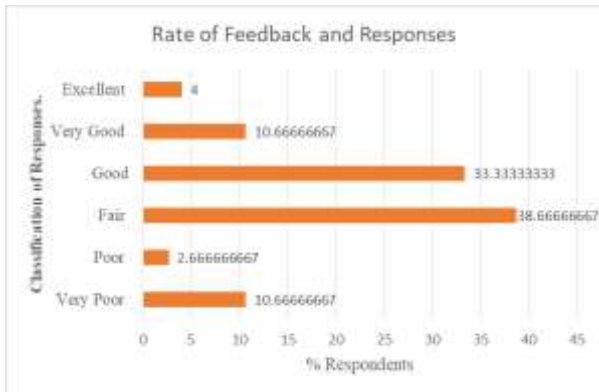

Figure 5: Call Centre Rating by External Respondents

The above figure shows the reactions of the community to the services delivered at the call centre. The residents classified some of the services provided at the call centre as poor, noting that in some instances there were serious delays in attending to the reports made. Some of the respondents who rated the service as very poor indicated in the questionnaire that they did not know about the call centre. They noted that the service was thus very poor if not all the residents of Bulawayo were not aware of its services. They noted that for the call centre to achieve its service delivery mandate and also ensure customer care, it was necessary for all the residents of Bulawayo to know where they could report faults and emergencies.

The external respondents differed from the internal respondents in that the majority of the external respondents classified the call centre operations as fair due to some service delays. Of the respondents who filled out the questionnaire, 33,33% classified the service as good, and 10,7% highlighted that the service was very good and 4 % of the respondents highlighted that the service was excellent. The respondents who gave good reviews highlighted that their reports had been attended to on time in each instance that they had made reports to the call centre. The results show that the Call Centre is doing well but a lot needs to be done to match Call Centre performance with overall service delivery.

Efficient and Effective Service Delivery

The respondents noted that the call centre contributed in various ways towards efficient and effective service delivery. They noted that the call centre was necessary in monitoring and improving system performance within Bulawayo City Council. The respondents highlighted that the call centre was

required within Council to ensure the monitoring and evaluation of service delivery.

They further noted that it can be an influential tool if the response times to faults were also adhered to. Some of the respondents also noted that the effectiveness of the call centre had to be in line with service level standards. It is a useful tool for reducing the response times to customer complaints. The respondents also added that for efficient and effective services, resources had to be matched with service delivery. The respondents noted that there was need to ensure that the call centre and all municipal services were in line with international standards. The respondents also highlighted that the call centre contributed towards effective service delivery by expanding the information available at the call centre and also ensuring availability of the feedback to the rate payers. The rate payers noted that communication was important in also ensuring feedback as it was a two way form of communication. The respondents added that the call centre provided a two way process of communication and also provided centralisation of information for the local authority. The internal respondents noted that for the call centre to achieve effectiveness and efficiency it is supposed to be coupled with customer care and training of the personnel. It was also noted that the call centre contact details should be further communicated to all rate payers for them to be effective and relevant to the various stakeholders. Little & Dean (2006) emphasise the importance of the employee in the delivery of quality services. They argue that the quality of the service offered will depend on the service climate in the organisation.

The Call Centre Office noted that for efficiency of the services that were currently provided there was need for the local authority to note the structural challenges and also rid the bureaucratic systems within the municipality. It added that the operations at the call centre required the local authority to make prompt decisions and thus stringent policies affected its operations and its ability to deliver efficient services.

The Office further highlighted that for efficiency in the call centre there was need to ensure that the channels of service and the operations were not hindered by the policies and internal controls which had been set by the organisation. It noted that there was need for the municipality to have these operationalised to the call centre for all services in the municipality as well as incorporate organisational change in order to ensure efficiency. This was also highlighted by the Engineering Department which highlighted that when the local authority set up the call centre it should also have taken into consideration the structural changes and as such have adjusted them accordingly. It added that the current structure did not ensure effectiveness in the operations of the call centre and service delivery. While

the call centre ensured that all reports were received and dispatched as per the service level standards, there had been no increase in the number of plumbers or vehicles to ensure the speedy addressing of the faults.

The study highlights that the respondents are clear on the role of the call centre. In conclusion, there is however need for the municipality to incorporate all other municipal services in the system for efficiency and effectiveness. The study concluded that the call centre has raised employee and customer expectations of service delivery. The study also noted that call centres were an influential tool in monitoring and evaluation and also for accountability purposes in organisations.

Lessons Learnt in the Setting up and Management of City of Bulawayo Call Centre
This section sought to examine the lessons learnt in the setting up and management of the Call Centre.

Local authorities setting up call centres in Zimbabwe
The City of Bulawayo Call Centre being the first call centre to be launched by a local authority has been popular with many towns and cities visiting the local authority to learn from its operations. The interviewee respondents noted that local authorities wishing to set up call centres would need to look into their current systems and also how these can be improved. They noted that there would be need for the local authorities wishing to set one up to also learn from other local authorities and municipalities who had set these up. The Engineering Department noted that when council was thinking of setting up a call centre it managed to learn from other local authorities who were already running these such as Ethekwini and Cape Town.

All the respondents internally and externally noted that they would encourage local authorities wishing to set up a call centre to do so. They noted that while the call centre set up was expensive, it was necessary in ensuring good service delivery for local authorities. The service delivery challenges facing most local authorities may become a thing of the past. The residents association leaders also noted that the adoption of call centres by local authorities in Zimbabwe would lead to adoption of higher standards at a nationwide level.

They noted that the call centre in Bulawayo had prompted the local authority to change its operations and also service delivery standards. Due to its accountability and monitoring aspect, it had led to changes in the way services were delivered in Bulawayo. The resident's associations highlighted that rate payers also had found a platform for reporting calls without any challenges and at no costs. They further

applauded the local authority for the toll free numbers noting that it was a pro poor mechanism that allowed people of all walks of life to have access to the service.

Recommendations
The research recommendations are drawn from the conclusions which have been made in the research. There are several issues which arise which indicate a potential for improvement in the operations of the City of Bulawayo call centre.

Role of the Call Centre as an effective Strategic Communication Tool
Bulawayo City Council should increase toll free access to cover all networks and not only two (TelOne and Econet) as it does currently. This would increase its coverage of the city and also increase customer satisfaction.

The municipality should explore the opportunities provided by the call centre for council management and cost saving. The information gathered from the platform provides data that can be used for human resource management, financial management and input for the decision making process.

Bulawayo City Council should conduct change management strategies to curb resistance to change. There is need for the local authority to communicate with its members of staff and ensure adoption of the call centre system and the opportunities it provides for staff. This is because the success of the service transactions is dependent on staff behaviour.

City of Bulawayo should intensify its awareness campaigns towards ensuring that all the residents are aware of the call centre contact details. It also emphasises that all municipal communication material should carry the call centre details so as to ensure that residents have access to the call centre. The concerns which were raised by some of the respondents that the call centre was out of the research of the elderly could thus be addressed.

How the Call Centre Can Contribute ttowards Efficient and Effective Service Delivery
The City of Bulawayo should train its staff members in customer care to ensure that the services provided guarantee customer interface and interaction. The study indicated that the call centre agents should also be capacitated with knowledge of all municipal services and provided with the relevant information to address residents' concerns.

Council should also focus on empowering frontline staff through training and ensuring management involvement in call centre challenges. This would assist the local authority in making concrete decisions on the operational challenges for the call centre. It would also ensure that the city balances the

use of technology and personal service delivery in a bid to maintain value addition of the call centre.

Bulawayo City Council should also craft and finalise all departmental service level standards in a bid to monitor and also ensure accountability of municipal services. This would also provide a further opportunity for service delivery and governance for the local authority.

The research also recommended that Bulawayo City Council should review its current operational structure and policies and develop those that would match the call centre and all municipal services. The study revealed that structural changes and change of operational policies must be done to ensure that the call centre achieved its service delivery mandate.

The call centre and all municipal services should work together in reducing the waiting period for service provision. It should further improve on its accountability and contribute towards strategic management.

Lessons Learnt in the Setting Up and Management of City of Bulawayo Call Centre

Council should utilise its twinning relationship with Durban (Ethekwini) to learn on how to address its challenges and also how it can further utilise the opportunities presented by the call centre. The twinning relationship also offers an opportunity for Bulawayo to send some of it staff for further training.

The local authority should also utilise the opportunity of being the first local authority to provide guidance to other local authorities wishing to set up call centres. This would impact on the national service delivery benchmarks.

Council should also use the call centre in creating and enhancing a customer service interface that would also contribute towards improved billing and ownership of infrastructure. The local authority also needs to fully utilize the call centre to ensure accountability and also the matching of services to resources.

Bulawayo should also invest in further research on call centre systems and information communication technologies that would ensure the growth of the call centre.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research should look into the opportunities presented by GIS and Call Centre integration, challenges and if Zimbabwean quasi government organisations have the capacity to run both systems. It should also explore the network challenges and what government requirements should be implemented to ensure its efficiency. Local government

organisations thinking of setting own systems would also need to analyse the cost benefits of linking these two systems.

CONCLUSION

The study focused on evaluating the City of Bulawayo Call Centre as a strategic communication tool. The research explored how the call centre contributes to effective and efficient service delivery. The study focused on internal respondents who comprised of municipal staff and external respondents who were the residents based in all 29 wards of the city. Information was collected through self-administered questionnaires and interviews for municipal management and residents associations. The study noted that the implementation of the call centre provided an opportunity for the attainment of customer satisfaction and effective delivery of service by Bulawayo. It also increased awareness on customer issues and also managed to ensure accountability and management of municipal reports. The local authority should however implement the necessary change management strategies, and institutional policies to complement the running of the call centre.

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