

The Role of Politics in Staff Recruitment and Selection in Ebonyi State Local Government Councils: A Study of Ivo Local Government Area

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ABSTRACT

Recruitment and selection are pivotal human resource functions designed to attract and appoint quality man power to organizational vacancies. This empirical survey investigates the influence of politics on staff recruitment and selection in Ebonyi State Local Government Councils, focusing on Ivo Local Government Area as a case study. Primary data, collected via structured questionnaires, were analysed using descriptive statistics. Key findings reveal that despite the council's formal adherence to recruitment protocols, such as advertisement of job openings and interviews, political considerations predominate over merit-based criteria which is bound to compromise the quality of service delivery. To mitigate this, we recommend that the Federal Government implement mechanisms to enforce merit-based recruitment principles in the public sector, particularly at the grassroots level. Additionally, local government authorities should prioritize the recruitment of qualified personnel to enhance the quality of service delivery.

Keywords: Politics, Recruitment, Selection, Bureaucracy, Public Service

INTRODUCTION

The existence of local government has always been defended on the basis that it is a crucial agency for development and intensification of mass participation in the decision-making process of government at the grassroots. Local government serves a two-fold purpose. The first purpose is the administrative purpose of supplying goods and services and the second is to represent and involve citizens in determining specific local public needs and how these local needs can be met. In order to efficiently carry out its objectives, the local government was set up to function strictly in line with bureaucratic principles to ensure the coordination of the complex public activities which includes uniformity of operations, stability, orderliness and accountability needed to ensure smooth transition from one political regime to another.

The services rendered by governments in the world over are being provided through a group of individuals known as the public servants under an umbrella of a system called the public service. In Nigeria, public servants comprise of senior and junior staff, as well as executive and administrative cadres who are largely distinguished based on their educational qualifications, training, skills, ranks and the duties they discharge. This bureaucratic orientation makes public service ideal to administer public affairs of any country.

To ensure that the local government effectively carries out her cardinal functions, there is need for her to engage quality workforce as research has shown that human capital is directly linked to continuous development, overall performance, and the success or failure of any organization (Omisore and Okofu, 2014). Employee performance plays a critical role in organizational success as high-performing employees contribute to the achievement of organizational goals, improve productivity and efficiency, and enhance overall business outcomes (Arulsamy et

al., 2023). The availability of the pool of qualified and competent personnel does not just happen except through effective recruitment and selection exercise. It is therefore obvious that organizational service delivery depends on individual candidates and their performance and recruitment and selection process is at the epicentre of Human Resource Management - HRM (Oaya Ogbu, & Remilekun, 2020).

It is therefore not surprising that organizations strive to have effective recruitment and selection practices to retain well qualified, experienced, and skilled employees for specific positions. Hence, candidates' professional and technical qualifications should be given priority over political, familial, religious, ethnic, or other factors in the selection and employment processes, which include competitive exams, interviews, and the presentation of pertinent certificates attesting to the candidates' qualifications and competencies for the position. Research have shown that the employees without any essential skill would not perform effectively (Gamage, 2014). Failure in this critical process of hiring suitable candidates results in low performance and workplace failure.

However, contrary to expectations, it has become obvious that the Nigerian civil service recruitment and selection exercise has been politicized with consequential and dysfunctional effects on the institutional and employee enhanced productivity, quality decisions, programme execution and quality of public service delivery (Ejumodo, 2011). In the face of the indispensability of the Public service as the bedrock for execution of government policies and programmes in Nigeria, it is disturbing to note that the recruitment system is bedevilled by factors that are hindering and stilling the climate of meritocracy that is critical in the actualization of administrative efficiency, organizational effectiveness and socio-economic development.

According to Abara (2016), cases of politicization of appointment in the public service are noticeable as recruitment and appointments into public sector organizations are based on the concept of "godtherism" by the political class to the detriment of the merit criteria. This practice is linked to the quest to compensate party loyalists with appointment into the public sector. Party affiliation has thus become the basis for recruitments and appointment into the key public office positions rather than merit. It also appears that the political class is investing greater effort and attention in steering the public service to conform to their partisan policy preferences (Onah 2006, Onwe, Abah and Nwokwu, 2015), rather than their traditional neutral posture. When vacancies are advertised, the political gladiators (ministers, governors, senators, commissioners etc) usually clamour for employment slots for their friends and relatives. Such slots are usually given by heads of establishments who wish to be in the good books of the ruling class without regard to the professional considerations or level of experience expected from candidates. This practice was buttressed by Onwe, et al (2015) who noted that the political heavy weights more often than not take advantage of their privileged positions to reward their political supporters and thugs who campaigned for them to ensure their emergence during the electoral process with appointment into the state civil service.

A lot of research has been carried by scholars on the role of politics in recruitment and selection of personnel at the federal and state levels of government with scanty literature at the grassroots. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to ascertain the extent to which politics interfere with the recruitment and selection of staff in local government councils in Ebonyi state with a special emphasis on Ivo local government area.

Conceptual Clarifications

Local Government

Over the years, scholars have defined local government in diverse manner. Appadorai (1975) cited in Okereke et al (2016) defined it as a body of popular elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the inhabitants of a particular district or place. It is a sub set of government below the central, regional or state government established by law to exercise political authority through a representative council within a defined area (Olisa *et al.* 1990). Lawal (2000) added the proximity factor by conceptualizing local government as that tier of government closest to the people, which is vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of the people in its domain.

It is viewed as a grassroots democratic process, wherein a nation is subdivided into smaller administrative units, enabling residents to actively participate through elected representatives who execute functions under the overarching authority of the national government (Oluwale, 2018). This definition identifies and highlights the democratic elements inherent in local administration.

In all, there are common strands observed in all the above definitions; local government is a creation of the state granted autonomy to carry out the activities of government at the grassroots. The local government decongests government at the central and sub-national levels, thereby freeing national leaders from the cumbersome details and unnecessary involvement in local issues. In addition, this arrangement helps people understand and participate in political and economic development. The 1976 local government reform brought about the administrative devolution which involves the transfer of governmental or political authority to lower-level tiers of government, thereby empowering them to engage in policy decision-making that impacts their peculiar jurisdictions.

In essence, according to (Kalu et al 2010), the establishment of the local government by the Nigerian government was hinged on the following objectives:

- (a) To make appropriate services and development activities responsive to local wishes and initiatives by developing and delegating them to local representative bodies.
- (b) To facilitate the exercise of democratic self-governance close to the local level of our society and to encourage initiative and leadership potential.
- (c) To mobilize human and material resources through the involvement of members of the public in their local development.
- (d) To provide a two-way channel of communication between local communities and government.

There is no gainsaying the fact that a knowledgeable and qualified crop of professionals are required to translate these objectives to reality.

Recruitment and Selection

The failure in hiring suitable candidates or when the wrong candidates are hired, has a direct consequence on the level of performance in the workplace. Hence, employees without any essential skill or harsh attitude would not perform effectively (Gamage, 2014). Studies (Akintunde, 2017, Onah 2006) have linked recruitment system to the quality of performance and overall service delivery. In order to achieve organizational strategic goals, recruitment and selection practice ensure that the organization hires the right number of employees with the capability, knowledge, experience, and skills (Eva, 2018). Recruitment and selection as the first step in HRM, (Oaya, Ogbu, & Remilekun, 2020) is defined as the process of generating a pool of capable people to apply for employment in an organization (Secim and okoro, 2016, cited by Fakorede et al, 2025). Recruitment is the *process* of attracting the candidates and making them to apply for the job (Mahmud (2024). Crawford (2024) gave a more detailed insight by defining recruitment as the process of attracting individuals on a timely basis, in sufficient numbers and with appropriate qualifications, developing their interest in an organisation and encouraging them to apply for jobs within it.

Selection on the other hand is defined as the process by which an organization identifies individuals that measure up to the eligibility requirements for the advertised post from a list of potential participants involved in the recruitment activity (Abu 2015). It is therefore seen as the process of choosing the best applicant(s) for the open position(s) from a pool of candidates. It is the bridge that connects a candidate with a job to achieve organizational goals (Bature, 2019). From the above definitions, it can be inferred that recruitment and selection are decisive advancements in identifying the best applicants from a pool and matching them to skilled work in the organization. This critical process determines which candidate will be given which position based on written examinations and other factors.

The difference between recruitment and selection is that whereas recruitment is the process of locating individuals for employment and encouraging them to compete for positions inside the company, selection is the

procedure of screening applicants to identify the most qualified applicants for open positions. Hence, the primary goal of recruitment is to build a competency pool of applicants, while the primary goal of the selection process is to choose the best possible applicant to replenish the multiple functions available within the organization.

Politics and its Role in staff recruitment and selection.

We encounter a great difficulty when we try to define the term politics. This difficulty is hinged on the fact that there is not just one legally accepted definition of politics but a wide range of definitions. In other words, the term has a great number of acceptable and legitimate meanings. Thus, politics is a loaded term. It involves decision making and the wielding of power and authority. This study adopted the definition by Harold Laswell (1958, in Nwachukwu, Achori, Gogo and Ncheyachukwu 2019) as “who gets what, when and how”. It therefore goes without saying that the motive for engaging in political activity in any society, either civilised or otherwise is to seek control of power and the utilization of same as an instrument to harness, organise and deploy available resources to achieve group or individual interests. Therefore, the primary motivation for all groups or individuals in engaging in politics, is to try to change the way power is distributed to suit their stated interests. It goes without saying that such interests may be for or against the general good of the citizenry.

In the Nigerian context, politics has become a veritable arsenal deployed with maximum effect in the allocation of social services, amenities and the filling of job vacancies. It then follows that the degree of ones’ participation in the political turf should determine the spoils accruable to one by the end of the day. It is therefore not out of place for governors, members of the state house of assembly, commissioners and special advisers to the governor to be given the privilege to nominate people to fill vacancies at the local government councils. In simple terms, politics has been reduced to the process of sharing the resources of the state by office holders to loyalist owing to their immense support during elections. (Geofrey & Kungu, 2020). Sometimes some of these politically motivated appointments are not borne out of the need for such officers, but as compensation to political cronies and appendages. In such cases, appointments are not made in line with clearly demarcated division of labour that define government bureaucracies; rather offices are created to suit political intensions and interests.

Igbokwe (2015) has identified politicization of recruitment and selection as a major problem facing recruitment in the Nigeria public sector and this development has created difficulties as the right persons are not usually placed on the right jobs based on the principles of merit and equal opportunities for all citizens. He noted that suitable and qualified candidates are not encouraged to compete for appointments into the public sector thereby leaving those positions to incompetent people to occupy.

In this sense, recruitment and selection process in the local government system is being heavily influenced by politics rather than merit (Lasisi & Asa, 2020). Onwe, Abah and Nwokwu (2015) also noted that politically motivated appointments of unqualified and wrong calibre to positions and heads of government establishments place puppets and stooges in headship positions and this leads to gross inefficiencies. Hence, whereas the purpose of recruitment and selection is to hire and place the best people to meet the need of the workplace to develop and maintain service quality (Ashraf, 2017), politics on the other hand is seen by local folks as an instrument of sharing resources including employment slots to party loyalists.

Effects of politicization of appointments.

1. Politicization of appointments seriously distorts the administrative terrain of the local government and their performance since they are clogged with appointees that neither fit into their structure nor accountable to it. This scenario has far reaching implications on productivity, quality decisions, and programme exercise and quality of public service delivery (Ejumodo, 2011, Oyedeji 2016).
2. Experience shows that political appointees respond more to the interests and dictates of those that appointed them than to rational rules and regulations (Onwe et al, 2015) especially when there is a conflict between the two. The end result is that the chain of command is jettisoned as staff are most likely to take instructions from their political godfathers rather than their superior officers. It is common

knowledge that political interests usually prevail over rules and regulations in local government operations in Nigeria.

3. Political considerations in appointment and recruitment often give rise to overstaffing due to the fact that these politicians often prevail on career civil servants to create job openings to compensate their cronies through employment. This in turn hinders strategic manpower planning and management by over bloating the service (Cole, 2002). Hence, in addition to constituting a waste of government resources, it creates problems of overcrowding and overlapping of functions in the local government sector.
4. The politicization of appointment and recruitment plays a significant role in the high level of brain-drain in local government sector because instead of engaging the services of technically qualified personnel, those with connections, godfather, etc. are appointed to head positions in public organizations and their qualified counterparts are left with no other option than to scout for greener pastures elsewhere (Onyemesim, 2009)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study, which used a descriptive survey research approach, was conducted in Ivo local government area of Ebonyi state which is in the South Eastern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The study area is a typical rural setting and the major economic activities of the people are; mining, trading and farming. Using Taro Yamane formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 206 was drawn from a population of 425 serving staff of the council. Structured questionnaire was used to elicit data from the 200 questionnaires retrieved from the respondents. This was analysed using descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Table 1: Vacant posts are usually advertised before selection of job candidates.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	142	71
No	58	29
Total	200	100

Source: Field work

From the table above, 71% Of the respondents reported that the council usually advertise for applicants to fill vacant posts while 29% reported to the contrary.

Table 2: Staff recruitment and selection in the council is based on merit

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agreed	26	13
Agreed	38	19
Disagreed	24	12
Strongly Disagreed	112	56
Total	200	100

Source: Field work.

Table 2 shows that 56% of the respondents strongly disagreed that staff recruitment is based on merit, 19% agreed, 13% strongly agreed while 12% disagreed. This shows that recruitment in the council is not based on merit.

Table 3: The workforce of the council comprises of qualified professionals.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agreed	28	14
Agreed	42	21
Disagreed	88	44
Strongly disagreed	42	21
Total	200	100

Source: Field work.

From table 3, 44% of the respondents disagreed that the staff of the council are qualified professionals, 21% strongly disagreed and agreed respectively, while 14% strongly disagreed. This shows that most of the workers reported that even though the council has qualified staff, most of the are not qualified professionals.

Table 3: Political “godfatherism” is a major determinant of who gets job in the council

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly agreed	86	43
Agreed	34	17
Disagreed	55	27
Strongly disagreed	25	13
Total	200	100

Source: Field work.

Table 3 shows that 43% of the respondents strongly agreed that political “godfatherism” is the major determinant of who gets a job in the local government, 27% disagreed, 17% agreed and 13% strongly disagreed. This shows that politicians are a major factor in the determination of who gets job in the local government council.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results indicate that although Ivo local government council engages in normal HRM practice of advertising to fill job openings, such vacancies are usually filled by candidates of appointed or elected political godfathers without due regard for merit. This finding is in consonance with Lasisi and Asa (2020) who reported that recruitment and selection process in the public offices is being heavily influenced by politics rather than merit. It is commonplace for job applicants to use their political godfathers to secure jobs in the local government sector.

Similarly, results indicate that Ivo local government council has more of unqualified candidates filling job vacancies than professionals that are strongly needed at that sector for efficient service delivery. This finding agrees with Oyedele (2016) and Onwe et al (2015) who stated that that there is significant correlation between politicization of the Nigerian civil service and its level of efficiency. The dismal performance being recorded in the local government can be traced to the faulty recruitment prevalent in that tier of government.

In all, this study has implicated recruitment and selection as the instruments that can be deployed by local government councils in Nigeria to ensure that the right candidates are hired to ensure its continuity and efficient service delivery. Therefore, any employment decision that is not hinged on objective and merit based recruitment procedures makes the achievement of the organizational goals difficult if not impossible. There is therefore need for this trend of politicization of recruitment and selection to be addressed to achieve the cardinal development objectives of the local government reform act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recruitment and selection are core human resources management functions and should be competently handled by experts in the field of human resources management. Therefore, local government commission should be composed of professionals in human resources management. Where possible, local government can outsource the recruitment and selection exercise to professionals.
2. Appointments and recruitments should be based on existing vacancies in order to address the challenge of overstaffing and monitoring of employees with a view to ensuring reduced cost of governance, efficiency and indiscipline in the service.
3. The federal government should implement mechanisms already put in place to ensure that local government administrators are allowed to fully control staff appointment and recruitments to conform to their specific needs at any given time without undue interference by the political class.

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