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TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED HRM IN THE MALAWI POLICE SERVICE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE ADOPTION AND UTILIZATION OF DIGITAL HR TOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates a critical paradox within the Malawi Police Service (MPS): a workforce that recognizes the potential of digital Human Resource (HR) tools remains trapped in a cycle of analog administration. Against the backdrop of a global shift towards Technology-Enabled HRM (e-HRM) and Malawi's own ambitious National Digitalization Policy, the MPS continues to grapple with pervasive inefficiencies rooted in manual, paper-based systems. These outdated processes cause significant delays in promotions and transfers, data inaccuracies, and diminished morale, directly impeding the Service's operational effectiveness.

Employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, this research integrates quantitative survey data from 93 MPS personnel with rich qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. Framed by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the analysis reveals a stark contrast between high awareness of digital tools' benefits and their starkly limited utilization. The findings identify a critical hierarchy of barriers. Inadequate technological infrastructure—characterized by unreliable internet and a scarcity of hardware, particularly in rural formations—emerges as the most formidable obstacle, closely followed by budgetary constraints.

Crucially, the study debunks the common assumption that resistance to change is a primary impediment. The data reveals that perceived resistance is largely a symptom of inadequate facilitating conditions and a history of failed digital initiatives, not an inherent cultural defiance. In a significant finding, the perception of these barriers is unified across all ranks, from junior officers to senior command, providing a rare consensus for change.

The study concludes that the path to digital HR transformation in the MPS is not primarily cultural but systemic. It underscores the necessity of decisive leadership, strategic investment in foundational infrastructure, and comprehensive, phased change management tailored to address a digital literacy divide. By embracing e-HRM, the MPS can revolutionize its HR function, transforming it from a source of frustration into a strategic asset for the 21st century, thereby enhancing transparency, boosting officer morale, and fortifying its capacity to deliver effective public safety services

KEYWORDS: Technology-Enabled HRM (e-HRM), Malawi Police Service, UTAUT, Public Sector Digital Transformation, Systemic Barriers.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Topic

Human Resource Management (HRM) is a critical function in any organization, responsible for attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining a capable workforce. In the 21st century, the advent of technology has profoundly transformed traditional HRM practices, leading to the emergence of "Technology-Enabled HRM" or "e-HRM" (Stone & Dulebohn, 2013). This paradigm shift involves the strategic adoption of digital tools such as Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS), performance management platforms, and Employee Self-Service portals to streamline processes, enhance efficiency, and foster data-driven decision-making (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2009). For public sector organizations, particularly uniformed services like the police, the stakes are even higher. Efficient HRM directly impacts operational readiness, service delivery, and public trust (Berman et al., 2010).

The context of Malawi provides a compelling case study. The Government of Malawi, through initiatives like the National Digitalization Policy (2023-2028), is actively committed to strengthening digital infrastructure and promoting ICT adoption across sectors (Malawi Government, 2023). However, within this national push for modernization, the Malawi Police Service (MPS) a vital institution responsible for maintaining law and order continues to grapple with pervasive HRM inefficiencies. The Service remains heavily reliant on manual, paper-based systems for core HR activities such as recruitment, payroll, performance management, and record-keeping (Phiri, 2018). This analog approach results in excessive delays in personnel actions like promotions and transfers, increased susceptibility to data inaccuracies and loss, and hindered strategic workforce planning, all within an institution

already facing a significant manpower deficit (Malawi Human Rights Commission, 2021). These challenges create a critical gap between the potential of national digitalization policies and the on-the-ground reality within a key security agency.

Despite the recognized benefits of e-HRM and the broader digitalization agenda in Malawi, there is a notable void in empirical research focusing specifically on the adoption and utilization of digital HR tools within the MPS. Previous studies have touched on general motivation or ICT in service delivery (Mwale, 2017), but a focused examination of technology-enabled HRM is lacking. This gap is significant because the unique operational context, hierarchical structure, and existing HR challenges of the MPS present distinct drivers and impediments to technological integration.

Therefore, this article aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of this phenomenon. Its purpose is to move beyond assumptions and provide empirical evidence on the current landscape, identifying not only the barriers but also the potential enablers for digital HR transformation within the MPS. By doing so, it seeks to shift the discourse from *whether* digital tools are needed to *how* their adoption can be effectively realized in a resource-constrained public sector environment.

Objectives of the Research

Guided by the overarching aim to explore the adoption and utilization of digital HR tools in the MPS, this research is driven by the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the current state of HRM practices within the Malawi Police Service.
2. To identify the digital HR tools available for adoption and evaluate the level of awareness among MPS personnel.
3. To investigate the specific technological, organizational, and cultural factors that influence the adoption and effective utilization of these digital tools.

This study is delimited by specific boundaries to ensure a focused investigation. The content scope is exclusively concerned with the adoption and utilization of digital HRM tools for core HR functions such as recruitment, record-keeping, payroll, and performance management. Theoretically, the analysis is primarily framed through the lens of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which provide a robust framework for understanding individual and organizational acceptance of technology.

Methodologically, the research employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey data from 133 MPS personnel with rich qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. While the study captures a national perspective, data collection was strategically concentrated within the Central Region of Malawi to provide a detailed, contextualized snapshot of the issue at the time of the study (2024-2025). This scope allows for a deep, nuanced understanding of the adoption dynamics within the specific institutional context of the MPS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Technology Adoption

The exploration of technology adoption within organizations is grounded in several dominant theories. This study is primarily framed by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which provide complementary lenses for analysing individual and organizational behaviour.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), is a foundational theory that posits an individual's intention to use a technology is determined by two key beliefs: Perceived Usefulness (PU), the degree to which a person believes using the system will enhance their job performance, and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), the degree to which using the system will be free of effort (King & He, 2006). While powerful in its simplicity, TAM has been critiqued for its limited consideration of broader social and organizational influences.

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) emerged as a more comprehensive model, integrating elements from TAM and seven other theories (Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). UTAUT identifies four core determinants of intention and usage:

- **Performance Expectancy:** The degree to which an individual believes that using the system will help them attain gains in job performance (aligning with TAM's PU).
- **Effort Expectancy:** The degree of ease associated with the use of the system (aligning with TAM's PEOU).
- **Social Influence:** The degree to which an individual perceives that important others (peers, supervisors) believe they should use the new system.
- **Facilitating Conditions:** The degree to which an individual believes that an organizational and technical infrastructure exists to support system use.

These relationships are moderated by variables such as age, gender, experience, and voluntariness of use. For instance, the effect of effort expectancy on intention is stronger for older users and women, especially during early stages of use (Williams, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2015). In the context of a hierarchical organization like the Malawi Police Service (MPS), UTAUT provides a critical lens to assess how factors like seniority (experience) and leadership directives (social influence) impact the willingness to adopt digital tools.

However, to fully capture the organizational-level challenges, this study also acknowledges the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990). The TOE framework posits that technology adoption is influenced by the technological context (available innovations), the organizational context (firm's size, resources, structure), and the environmental context (industry, regulations). This macro-level perspective is essential for understanding how factors like the MPS's budgetary constraints (organizational context) and Malawi's national digitalization policy (environmental context) create the ecosystem in which individual acceptance, as explained by UTAUT, either flourishes or fails. The integration of UTAUT's micro-level analysis with the TOE framework's macro-level perspective offers a holistic analytical lens for this research.

Overview of Previous Research: e-HRM in Context

Extensive literature documents the potential of Technology-Enabled HRM (e-HRM) to streamline HR processes, reduce administrative burdens, improve data accuracy, and foster strategic decision-making in both private and public sectors (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Bondarouk & Rüel, 2009). In the public sector, e-HRM is linked to greater transparency, accountability, and better alignment with national development goals (Grant & O'Toole, 2007).

However, the successful implementation of e-HRM is not universal, particularly in developing economies. Research within African public sectors reveals a stark contrast between potential and practice. Studies consistently identify a common set of barriers, including inadequate technological infrastructure (e.g., unreliable internet, power instability), chronic budgetary constraints, and a perceived resistance to change among personnel (Adebayo & Oluwagbemi, 2021; Osei-Bonsu & Tweneboah-Koduah, 2022). Recent empirical work provides nuanced insights; for example, a study on the Nigerian Police Force found that while officers had high performance expectancy regarding e-HRM, adoption was crippled by a lack of facilitating conditions like reliable electricity and internet (Adebayo & Oluwagbemi, 2021). Similarly, research in Kenyan county governments suggested that resistance is often a rational response to poorly managed change processes, rather than inherent technophobia (Chepkwony & Oluoch, 2023).

The context of law enforcement introduces additional layers of complexity. Police organizations are typically hierarchical, rigid, and slow to change, which can amplify these challenges (Reddick, Chatfield & Ojo, 2017). Within such structures, digital tools may be perceived as threats to traditional authority or may expose existing inefficiencies, leading to passive resistance (Mwale, 2017). While some research has examined general ICT use for service delivery in the Malawi Police Service (Mwale, 2017), a critical gap remains. There is an absence of focused, empirical research that systematically investigates the adoption and utilization of *digital HR tools specifically* within the MPS, using a robust theoretical framework like UTAUT to understand the interplay of individual perceptions and organizational realities.

This study, therefore, fills this void. It applies the UTAUT framework to dissect the specific drivers and impediments to e-HRM adoption within the unique operational environment of the MPS. By doing so, it not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also tests the applicability of these dominant technology adoption theories in a hierarchical, resource-constrained public security institution, thereby contributing to both theoretical discourse and practical implementation strategies.

DISCUSSION

Research Methodology: A Mixed-Methods Approach

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to provide a holistic understanding of the research problem. The quantitative strand involved a structured survey administered to MPS personnel, selected via stratified random sampling to ensure representation across ranks and departments. The qualitative strand comprised in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants, including senior HR managers, IT staff, mid-level commanders, and frontline officers. This approach allowed for triangulation: the quantitative data quantified the patterns and relationships, while the qualitative data provided the rich, contextual narratives explaining *why* these patterns exist. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics (including Pearson Correlation and ANOVA tests), while qualitative data underwent rigorous thematic analysis.

The Analog Anchor: Manual Systems and Systemic Inefficiency

The findings paint a stark picture of the current state of HRM in the MPS, unequivocally confirming a pervasive reliance on manual, paper-based systems. This is not merely an outdated practice but the primary source of significant organizational dysfunction. The most acutely felt consequence is the excessive delays in critical personnel actions, including promotions, transfers, and allowance processing.

The qualitative data vividly illustrates the human and operational cost of this system. The physical movement of paper files between stations, divisions, and headquarters creates immense bottlenecks. This leads to data inaccuracies, lost files, and a profound sense of powerlessness among officers. This inefficiency represents a fundamental breach of the psychological contract between the officer and the institution, directly eroding morale and operational readiness.

The Paradox of Potential: High Awareness vs. Starkly Limited Utilization

A critical paradox lies at the heart of this study: while a significant majority of respondents (91%) were *aware* of digital HR tools, their actual utilization was minimal and fragmented. Awareness was often confined to knowledge of a partial e-payroll system at headquarters, which was described as poorly integrated and unsupported. This highlights a critical chasm between the recognition of technology's potential and its effective, integrated implementation. The organization suffers from "islands of automation" isolated digital processes that increase workload without delivering the promised benefits, as one participant explained: *"It's the worst of both worlds. We have to do the manual work and now also the computer work, without any of the promised time savings."* This gap between awareness and use is the central problem that the analysis of barriers seeks to explain.

Deconstructing the Barriers: A UTAUT Perspective on Stagnation

The analysis, framed by the UTAUT model, reveals a clear and compelling hierarchy of barriers to adoption.

Facilitating Conditions as the Primary Barrier: The Missing Foundation

The most formidable obstacle, by a significant margin, was the lack of adequate technological infrastructure. This UTAUT construct the belief that organizational and technical support exists was severely lacking. Officers universally cited unreliable internet connectivity, a critical scarcity of hardware (computers, printers), and frequent power instability, particularly in rural stations. This was closely followed by budgetary constraints which reflect a strategic mis-prioritization where technology is viewed as an operational expense rather than a strategic investment. These factors are not just barriers; they are the absolute prerequisites that prevent any other positive perceptions from taking hold.

The Undermined Promise: Performance and Effort Expectancy

Quantitatively, officers acknowledged the potential usefulness of digital tools (Performance Expectancy) for improving efficiency and transparency. However, the qualitative data reveals that this belief is abstract. In practice, the absence of facilitating conditions directly sabotages Effort Expectancy (ease of use). A tool cannot be perceived as easy to use if it constantly crashes due to poor internet, or if there are not enough computers to access it. Thus, the potential for positive performance and effort expectancy is neutered by the debilitating lack of foundational support, creating a cycle of disillusionment.

Social Influence and the Myth of Inherent Cultural Resistance

A crucial finding that challenges common assumptions is the relatively moderate score for resistance to change. The qualitative data explains this nuance: what is often labelled as resistance is, in fact, a rational reluctance rooted in past experience and fear. It is not an inherent cultural defiance but a symptom of the systemic failures. A clear generational divide exists, but it is characterized by anxiety among senior officers about digital literacy. One senior officer confessed, "For us who are used to the paper file, this computer screen is a foreign language. The fear is not of the tool itself, but of looking incompetent in front of our juniors" (Participant 501). This is a fear of diminished status, not a rejection of progress.

A Unified Diagnosis: Organizational Consensus on Systemic Barriers

A powerful statistical finding from the ANOVA tests was the lack of significant difference in how barriers were perceived across different ranks. From the most junior constable to the most senior officer, the entire organization is aligned in its diagnosis: the primary obstacles are systemic (infrastructure, budget), not cultural. This consensus is a hidden strategic asset. It eliminates the potential for a divisive "us versus them" narrative and provides a unified foundation for a change management strategy. The entire MPS can rally around a single message: "We all recognize the problem; now we must build the solution together."

The Cycle of Digital Stagnation: A Self-Reinforcing System

These findings can be synthesized into a model of a self-reinforcing cycle of digital stagnation (as illustrated in Figure 24 of the original thesis). The lack of facilitating conditions leads to the failed implementation of digital tools. These failures suppress perceived usefulness and fuel rational reluctance, which in turn makes it politically and financially difficult to secure the investment needed to improve the facilitating conditions. This cycle explains why ad-hoc technological interventions in the MPS have historically failed and why only a decisive, systemic intervention can break the deadlock.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data yielded several critical findings that collectively depict the complex reality of digital HR adoption within the Malawi Police Service (MPS). These observations move beyond simple metrics to reveal the underlying dynamics and tensions that characterize the current situation.

The Pervasiveness of Manual Processes and Their Human Cost

The most fundamental observation is the overwhelming confirmation of a manual, paper-based HR system. Quantitatively, the heavy reliance on manual systems was strongly affirmed. The most severe consequence of this was identified as excessive delays, particularly in processing promotions, transfers, and financial claims. Qualitatively, these delays were not seen as mere administrative hiccups but as a significant source of demoralization. The emotional impact was captured in interviews, with officers describing feelings of powerlessness and frustration, indicating that the inefficiency of the HR system directly damages the psychological contract and morale within the service.

The Central Paradox: High Awareness vs. Minimal Effective Utilization

A key insight from the study is the stark disconnect between awareness and use. While 91% of survey respondents were aware of digital HR tools, their actual utilization was found to be minimal, fragmented, and often ineffective. This finding points to a critical implementation gap. The existence of "islands of automation," such as a partial e-payroll system, actually exacerbated the problem by adding digital tasks to analog workflows without delivering efficiency gains. This paradox indicates that the challenge is not a lack of knowledge about potential solutions, but a failure to create the conditions under which these solutions can succeed.

The Hierarchy of Barriers: Infrastructure as the Primary Gatekeeper

The statistical analysis provided a clear hierarchy of impediments. The most significant barrier is inadequate technological infrastructure, encompassing unreliable internet, a scarcity of hardware, and power instability. This was closely followed by budgetary constraints. Crucially, these two systemic factors were perceived as far greater obstacles than human-centric factors like resistance to change or insufficient training. This hierarchy fundamentally re-frames the problem: the main barriers are not attitudinal but systemic and resource-based.

Resistance as Rational Reluctance, Not Cultural Defiance

A vital qualitative insight explains the moderate score for resistance. The data revealed that what might be labelled as resistance is more accurately described as rational reluctance. This reluctance is a pragmatic response to a history of poorly supported technological initiatives. Officers, particularly those with less digital experience, expressed anxiety about being set up to fail with tools that lack reliable infrastructure or adequate training. This observation challenges the common narrative that a conservative culture is the primary impediment, suggesting instead that resistance is a symptom of deeper institutional failures.

A Unified Organizational Diagnosis Across Ranks

A powerful statistical finding from the ANOVA tests was that there were no significant differences in the perception of these barriers between junior and senior officers. The p-values for all barriers (technological infrastructure, training, resistance, and budget) were well above 0.05, indicating that the entire organization, from the lowest to the highest ranks, shares a common diagnosis of the problem. This consensus is a significant observation, as it reveals a unified front that identifies systemic issues, rather than internal cultural conflict, as the core challenge.

The Generational Divide: A Gap in Confidence, Not Desire

The qualitative data highlighted a clear generational divide, but not in the expected way. Younger, "digital-native" officers expressed eagerness for modernization, while older officers exhibited anxiety. However, this anxiety was rooted not in a rejection of technology but in a fear of diminished competence and status due to a lack of confidence and skills. This observation suggests that the need is for targeted, supportive training that addresses confidence gaps, rather than overcoming outright opposition.

The Aspiration for Transparency and Meritocracy

Beyond efficiency, a recurring theme in the qualitative findings was the desire for digital tools as a mechanism for institutional fairness. Officers directly linked digital systems with their automated workflows and audit trails to the potential for reducing opaque practices, "missing" files, and perceptions of favouritism in promotions and transfers. This positions e-HRM not just as an operational tool, but as a potential catalyst for a more meritocratic and transparent organizational culture.

In summary, the findings observe that the MPS is caught in a cycle where systemic barriers (infrastructure, budget) prevent the effective use of digital tools, which in turn suppresses their perceived usefulness and reinforces the status quo. The path forward is not to overcome cultural resistance, but to break this cycle by addressing its foundational, systemic causes

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the adoption of digital HR tools in the MPS is stalled not by cultural resistance but by systemic barriers. The transition to e-HRM is a strategic necessity for improving HR efficiency, transparency, and officer morale.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- **For MPS Leadership:** Champion a dedicated Digital HR Strategy backed by targeted investment in infrastructure (internet, hardware, power solutions) and a phased, pilot-based implementation approach.
- **For Policymakers:** Integrate MPS digitalization into the national digital agenda to secure funding and technical support.
- **For Implementation:** Prioritize high-impact processes (e.g., digital leave applications), couple technology rollout with comprehensive, tiered digital literacy training, and establish a dedicated support system.

Future research could conduct a longitudinal study on the impact of e-HRM post-implementation or explore the potential of mobile-first solutions for remote stations. By addressing the systemic barriers identified in this study, the MPS can harness technology to build a more efficient and effective police service for the 21st century.

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