

Unveiling Strategic Human Resource Training and Development Challenges in Zimbabwe's Local Authorities: Pathways to Sustainable Governance

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Abstract

This study examines the barriers to strategic human resource training and development (HRTD) within Zimbabwe's local authorities and proposes context-driven strategies to strengthen workforce capacity and governance. The study is anchored in the High-Performance Work Performance Systems (HPWS) theory. The study adopted a positivist philosophical stance and a descriptive survey design within a quantitative methodological approach. Data was collected using structured questionnaires which were analyzed using SPSS version 21.0. The sample comprised 312 respondents, selected through stratified sampling from 25 local authorities distributed across the country. Findings reveal that strategic HRTD is hindered by internal misalignments, leadership inertia and limited HR capacity. It is further exacerbated by external challenges such as technological disruption, economic instability and regulatory volatility. In response, the study advocates for a governance framework that is contextually responsive, leveraging digital innovation, institutional partnerships and diversified funding to reposition HRTD as a catalyst for resilience and improved service delivery. The research contributes to HRTD theory by illustrating how institutional and environmental constraints influence capacity-building in local governance and introduces a hybrid model that reconceptualizes HRTD as a strategic instrument through innovation-driven, context-sensitive approaches. While the study offers valuable insights, its geographic focus on Zimbabwean local authorities may limit the broader applicability of its findings, suggesting the need for future comparative research across diverse regional contexts.

Keywords: strategic human resource training and development, local authorities, sustainable development, public sector, institutional challenges, service delivery

Introduction

Local authorities in Zimbabwe are central to translating national policies into meaningful community outcomes, particularly in advancing sustainable development. Both urban and rural councils have made strides in localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet challenges such as institutional fragmentation and chronic resource constraints continue to hinder effective service delivery. This study investigates the organizational and environmental barriers to strategic human resource training and development (HRTD) within Zimbabwe's local governance sector. Its dual objectives are: (i) to identify the key internal and external impediments to strategic HRTD and (ii) to propose context-sensitive strategies that can strengthen service delivery across local authorities.

Strategic HRTD is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of public performance. In high-risk, mission-critical environments such as municipal firefighting, targeting training enhances employees' knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), directly impacting safety and operational effectiveness (Ithnin et al., 2022). Broader HR frameworks involving mission definition, talent acquisition and performance management aim to align human capital with institutional goals (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). However, their integration into Zimbabwe's local governance requires adaptation to complex political, financial and regulatory realities (Tsara & Zinyama, 2022).

Despite growing interest in public sector reform, most scholarship focuses on national-level HR strategies or private-sector models. The unique dynamics of municipal workforce development in African contexts remain underexplored. This study contributes to filling that gap by advocating for comprehensive, embedded HRTD programs tailored to the operational realities of local authorities.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) Theory

The High-Performance Work Performance Systems (HPWS) theory, introduced by Pil and MacDuffie (1996) and elaborated by Appelbaum and Berg (2001), offers a robust lens for examining how strategically aligned human resource training and development (HRTD) drives public-sector performance. HPWS posits that integrated bundles of HR practices rather than isolated interventions unlock enhanced organizational outcomes. Core practices include rigorous recruitment and selection processes that secure high-caliber talent, targeted training and continuous

professional development initiatives, systematic performance management systems aligning individual objectives with organizational goals, structured internal promotion pathways paired with comprehensive career planning, and participatory decision-making mechanisms that foster employee engagement (Cotton et al, 2021; Dimple & Kuriakose, 2025). These interrelated practices and workplace conditions maximize performance (Waseem et al., 2025).

Some studies suggest that higher levels of High-Performance Work Systems are associated with better financial outcomes, faster adoption of innovations and improved change management. These effects have been observed even in bureaucratic and resource-constrained public institutions (Bryson & White, 2021; Qureshi & Tasneem, 2021). Moreover, configurational studies underscore the necessity of contextual fit, showing that effective HPWS bundles must be tailored to local cultural norms, regulatory requirements and environmental contingencies (Assanti, 2025).

In Zimbabwe's public sector, HPWS theory has underpinned the cultivation of collaborative team cultures, the strengthening of HR union partnerships and the institutionalization of Integrated Results-Based Management (IRBM) and Results-Based Budgeting (RBB) systems. Persistent implementation challenges such as funding shortfalls, technological gaps and entrenched administrative traditions, highlight the value of HPWS both as a diagnostic tool for persistent HR obstacles and a blueprint for holistic, context-sensitive reforms aligned with public-sector governance dynamics (Munyade, 2022).

Strategic HRTD in Local Government: Concepts and Relevance

In the wake of accelerating socioeconomic transformations, local authorities in emerging economies such as Zimbabwe confront pressing demands to synchronize their human capital interventions with both immediate service delivery needs and broader developmental agendas (Tsara & Zinyama, 2022). Traditional distinctions characterize training as short-term skill acquisition for current roles, whereas development targets long-term capacity building for future responsibilities and leadership (Armstrong & Tailor, 2023; Torrington et al, 2020). Strategic HRTD transcends this binary by embedding both training and development with an explicit organizational strategy ensuring that learning initiatives reinforce the institution's mission, vision, values and measurable objectives (Noe, 2017).

Tembo et al. (2024) define strategic Human Resource Training and Development (HRTD) as “deliberate and planned efforts by an organization to enhance the knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies of its workforce in alignment with its strategic objectives.” The process involves

four key stages: identifying the skills needed to meet strategic objectives; designing training programs to build those skills; delivering the training through various methods like classes, online learning and coaching; and finally, evaluating the results using performance metrics to see how well the training worked (Noe, 2017; Tembo et al., 2024).

Embedding HRTD strategically with local governance yields multiple, mutually reinforcing benefits. First, it ensures a cadre of fully competent staff equipped to deliver timely, high-quality public services (Tsara & Zinyama, 2022). Second, it accelerates the adoption of technological innovations and process optimizations vital in an era of e-governance and data-driven decision making (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). Third, by aligning learning paths with clear career trajectories, strategic HRTD bolsters employee morale, mitigates resistance to change and fosters organizational commitment (Dachner et al, 2021). Finally, it cultivates a culture of continuous improvement, where reflective practice and knowledge sharing become institutional norms rather than episodic events (Dachner et al, 2021; Noe, 2017).

Despite clear imperatives to professionalize local government workforces, authorities in developing countries frequently encounter systemic obstacles that undermine capacity-building, including policy inconsistency, where uneven application of training guidelines across councils leads to fragmented skill development (Assanti, 2025; Mhaka, 2024); a lack of structured career pathways, as the absence of coherent succession planning erodes motivation and retention (Ramolobe, 2023; Tsara & Zinyama, 2022); strategic misalignment, evidenced by HR practices operating in silos and disconnected from broader municipal priorities (Mhaka, 2024) and chronic underinvestment in learning ecosystems, whereby both formal accredited programmes and informal modalities such as peer coaching and communities of practice suffer from inadequate funding and institutional support (Munyade, 2022; Ramalobe, 2023).

Overcoming these challenges requires a holistic workforce planning framework that integrates talent management, succession planning and rigorous skills-gap analysis. Local authorities must consciously allocate resources to both core training interventions and emergent development opportunities such as leadership rotations and cross-departmental projects that reinforce strategic agility (Ramalobe, 2023). Proactive investment in HRTD thus becomes not only a mechanism for enhancing day-to-day operational capacity, but also a cornerstone for fulfilling the developmental mandate of local government in alignment with national and global sustainability goals (Noe, 2017).

Comparative research underscores the imperative of embedding human resource training and development within broader digital transformation agendas, advocating for innovation for the adoption of agile learning platforms that deliver on-demand, just-in-time training to municipal workforces (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). Regional partnerships exemplified by South Africa's Local Government Sector Education Training Authority (LGSETA) further illustrate the advantages of cross-border collaboration in co-creating curricula finely tuned to the operational realities of local government (Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023; LGSETA, 2024). Moreover, emerging evidence indicates that synchronizing HRTD with Environmental, Social and Governance objectives not only fosters greater public trust, but also deepens community engagement, thereby reinforcing the social licence under which municipalities operate (Abilla-Buame, 2025; Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023).

Role of Local Authorities in Achieving Sustainable Development

Local authorities around the world constitute the tier of government most proximate to citizens, entrusted with translating overarching development agendas into context-specific initiatives (Munyade, 2022). Whether through municipal councils in Europe and Latin America, district assemblies in Asia or country governments in North America, these bodies facilitate decentralized governance, deliver essential public services and foster participatory decision-making (Ansell et al., 2022). Across virtually every region, local governments coordinate infrastructure maintenance, water and sanitation provision, public health programming, primary education support, housing development and environment management (Bvirindi & Chikwawawa, 2022; Torrington et al., 2020). Their community-level mandate positions them as frontline agents in poverty reduction, gender equality advancement, youth inclusion and climate resilience planning (Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023). Furthermore, many increasing numbers of councils now conduct voluntary performance reviews and benchmarking exercises to ensure alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and complementary regional frameworks such as the European Green Deal or ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community vision thereby reinforcing strategic coherence and accountability (Ansell et al., 2022).

Under the 2013 Constitution, Zimbabwean local authorities operate within a distinct legal framework that empowers them to decentralize governance across urban and rural districts and to uphold equitable service delivery, participatory governance and fiscal accountability (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013; Mukushwa et al., 2021). The country's 92 councils align their strategic plans with the National Development Strategy 1 (2021 - 2025), the African Union's Agenda 2063 and

the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Mutambisi & Chavunduka, 2023). As statutory development and planning authorities, they oversee and guide all governmental, non-governmental and private sector development activities within their jurisdictions (Bvirindi & Chikwawawa, 2022).

Their comprehensive service portfolios include infrastructure maintenance, domestic, commercial and industrial water provision, housing and transport management, waste disposal, cemetery and burial-ground administration, street lighting, municipal policing, clinics and ambulance services, educational facilities, road upkeep, sanitation, land-use regulation and other critical services essential to community wellbeing (Mukushwa et al., 2021; Munyade, 2022). To strengthen institutional capacity, the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works in Zimbabwe, in partnership with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), has convened workshops and capacity-building initiatives focused on strategic planning, risk mitigation and inclusive governance (Makiva & Tashu, 2023). However, a persistent top-down approach by central government, limited devolution of fiscal authority, uneven policy integration and underinvestment in institutional capacity, continue to hamper local authorities' financial autonomy and strategic alignment (Makiva & Tashu, 2023; Widerberg et al, 2023).

Thus, the capacity of local authorities to drive sustainable local development is inextricably linked to their ability to build and maintain competent, motivated and strategically aligned human resource systems. Yet persistent top-down governance, limited fiscal devolution, fragmented policy integration and underinvestment in local institutions continue to constrain financial autonomy and strategic coherence (Bvirindi & Chikwawawa, 2022; Mukushwa et al., 2021).

Institutional Challenges in Strategic HRTD in Local Authorities

Institutional challenges pose enduring barriers to the effective implementation of human resource training and development (HRTD) in local authorities worldwide. These obstacles emerge at organizational, policy and procedural levels, producing fragmented initiatives, limited impact and weakened capacity for sustainable governance (Makiva & Tashu, 2023; Moagi & Nhede, 2025; Mofokeng et al., 2025). A central institutional constraint is the lack of integrated, evidence-based HRTD planning (Lau & Manning, 2023). Empirical research on South African and European municipalities reveals that many councils operate without comprehensive workforce strategies or dedicated departmental HRTD frameworks (Cloete, 2023; Ndou & Agbenyegah, 2022). Consequently, the disconnection between individual development plans and broader HRD interventions creates a misalignment between organizational objectives and staff capabilities,

undermining professionalization efforts and stalling transformative service delivery (Mofokeng et al., 2025; Munyade, 2022). In addition, institutional silos in which HR policies remain decoupled from performance management systems, integrated development plans and broader transformation agendas, exacerbate these implementation gaps (Lau & Manning, 2023; Mojaki, 2024).

Furthermore, institutional challenges undermine the foundations of robust human resource training and development in local authorities. Studies report pervasive managerial apathy towards staff development, deficient internal communication, ambiguous accountability structures and inadequate recognition of employee contributions as critical impediments to sustained capacity building (Cloete, 2023; Munyade, 2022; Ndou & Agbenyegah, 2022). Furthermore, inconsistent interpretation and enforcement of HR policies, the absence of formal succession planning and misaligned job descriptions and competency frameworks, are especially acute, particularly in resource-constrained and smaller municipalities (Herath, 2025). These institutional shortcomings are not confined to the Global South; even well-resourced local councils in OECD member countries struggle with organizational inertia, political interference and a regulatory emphasis on compliance rather than on strategic capacity enhancement (Ahn, 2024).

Professionalization efforts, while promising, face significant challenges, such as fragmented initiatives, inconsistent standards and insufficient inter-institutional coordination (Moagi & Nhede, 2025). The South African Local Government Association's professionalization framework, for example, emphasizes standardized capacity development, ethical compliance and stakeholder collaboration, yet concedes enduring gaps in institutionalization and implementation (Cloete, 2023; Mofokeng et al., 2025). Mofokeng et al. (2025) further argue for embedding anti-corruption safeguards within professionalization programmes to bolster ethical standards and public trust. Moreover, Moagi and Nhede (2025) advocate establishing a centralized competency registry to harmonize accreditation processes and eliminate duplication across municipalities. Emerging research also highlights the promise of cross-sectoral peer-learning networks and digital certification platforms in strengthening coordination and ensuring consistent application of professional standards (Qureshi & Tasneem, 2021).

Environmental Challenges Affecting Strategic HRTD

Environmental constraints shaping human resource training and development in local government extend well beyond organizational boundaries, encompassing macro-level economic, political, social, technological and ecological forces. Resource scarcity manifesting as limited financial budgets, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient training materials or technologies, undermines

the capacity of local authorities to design and deliver comprehensive HRTD programmes (Lance, 2022; Makiva & Tashu, 2023). Many municipalities, particularly in developing contexts, operate within volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, where rapid policy shifts, demographic pressures and labour market volatility complicate workforce planning and skills development (Lance, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges by accelerating retirements, disrupting international recruitment, exacerbating digital divides and compelling a swift transition to virtual service and training modalities (Lance, 2022; Mukushwa et al., 2021).

Economic instability, inflationary pressures and shifting macroeconomic indicators directly affect employee retention, recruitment, compensation and staff development budgets, forcing local governments to balance austerity measures with the necessity of strategic HRTD investments (LGSETA, 2024). Resource constraints are especially acute under fiscal austerity, where municipalities struggle to compete with national and private entities for scarce talent pools (Munyade, 2022; Tsara & Zinyama, 2022). The need to balance cost-cutting with strategic investment in training presents enduring dilemmas.

Technological transformation represents a double-edged sword: while digitization and e-learning offer scalable and flexible training solutions, many local authorities lag in adopting new platforms due to deficient digital infrastructure, limited digital skills and low organizational agility (Moagi & Nhede, 2025). The pace of Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and data analytics is outstripping the training and adaptation capacity of current HR systems in many municipalities, risking obsolescence and growing digital divides (Mofokeng et al., 2025). Moreover, the rapid advance of artificial intelligence, automation and data analytics outpaces the adaptation capacity of existing HR systems, heightening the risk of skill obsolescence and widening digital divides (Mofokeng et al., 2025).

Societal trends including demographic transitions, evolving workforce expectations, demands for inclusion and diversity, and an aging labour force, further complicate HRTD planning delivery (Rekha, 2024 as cited in Nugroho, 2025). Policies must increasingly address intergenerational dynamics, mental health and well-being and lifelong learning to meet shifting community needs (Mukushwa et al., 2021). In particular, gender equity, mentorship programmes and supportive networks emerge as vital components of comprehensive HRTD strategies (Mojaki, 2024).

Political, legal and policy developments such as new governance mandates, performance standards, employment equity requirements and expanded service delivery obligations demand

adaptive HR strategies that rapidly update training content and compliance frameworks (Munyade, 2022). The rollout of South Africa's Municipal Staff Regulations illustrates both the potential and challenges of standardizing HR practices across diverse municipal environments. Failure to remain compliant with evolving legal frameworks exposes local authorities to regulatory risk, legal sanctions and reputational damage (LGSETA, 2024; Ndou & Agbenyegah, 2022).

Finally, the growing imperative to integrate environmental and social sustainability through climate change adaptation, resource efficiency and community engagement, requires innovative training content and new cross-sectoral partnerships, placing additional strain on existing HRTD systems (Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023). To thrive amid these macro-level challenges, resilient local authorities must continuously scan the external environment, anticipate emerging trends and adapt their HRTD strategies accordingly (Lance, 2025).

Effects of Inadequate HRTD on Sustainable Governance Outcomes

The intersection between human resource training and development (HRTD) and sustainable governance is systemic: the inadequate HRTD weakens every facet of local government effectiveness and erodes citizen welfare. When municipalities underinvest in HRTD, competency frameworks remain underdeveloped, producing skill mismatches, workforce gaps and sluggish responsiveness to evolving community needs (Bryson & White, 2021). In Ghana and Brazil, councils that lack robust in-service training for engineers and financial officers have increasingly outsourced these functions, drained scarce municipal funds and stalled integrated development plans (Abilla-Buame, 2025; World Bank Group, 2021). At the same time, downsized headcounts, ineffective onboarding and minimal opportunities for up skilling, further diminish the capacity for timely, quality service delivery, eroding public trust and undermining community outcomes (Yassine & Youssef, 2024).

Poorly trained and unsupported staff struggle to contribute meaningfully to democratic representation, policy formulation, financial oversight and civic education, which are pillars of sustainable governance. Evidence from Malawi and South Africa shows that administrative and political acumen among local officials correlate with mismanagement, weak accountability and ethical lapses, all of which fuel corruption and governance crises (Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023). In OECD member states, municipalities with comprehensive HRTD frameworks report higher citizen satisfaction and lower incidences of procurement irregularities (Ahn, 2024).

A growing body of research confirms a positive relationship between well-structured HRTD and organizational performance (Wei, 2022), including efficiency, effectiveness and accountability (Makiva & Tashu, 2023). In China's municipalities, for example, targeted leadership development programs boosted service delivery metrics by nearly 20 percent over three years (Wei, 2022). Conversely, local authorities that neglect ongoing training face declining employee motivation, stagnating morale, higher staff turnover and widespread disengagement dynamics that compound operational failures and erode the likelihood of sustainable, responsive programs (Wei, 2022).

When crises strike, be they pandemics, economic shocks or environmental disasters, local governments devoid of continuous learning cultures are ill-equipped to adapt, absorb external shocks or foster innovation (LGSETA, 2024). The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) found that cities without regular HRTD for risk managers and planners saw recovery times from extreme weather events increase by 40% (Aronsson-Storrier, 2023). Since they lack mechanisms to capture, share and apply institutional knowledge, these municipalities suffer organizational amnesia, faltering generational succession and suboptimal decision-making that jeopardize both present and future capacities to meet sustainable development objectives (Ahn, 2024).

Moreover, underdeveloped HRTD systems often fail to integrate inclusion initiatives, diversity training and gender-responsive planning, thereby exacerbating social inequalities and weakening the social contract between authorities and citizens (Ahn, 2024; Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023). In Latin America, municipalities that omitted diversity modules in their training saw female participation in local councils stagnate below 15%, compared to over 30% in jurisdictions that mandated gender-sensitivity workshops (Aronsson-Storrier, 2023; Nieto et al, 2022). This shortcoming not only undermines equity, but also diminishes the legitimacy and resilience of governance systems (Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023).

Pathways to Sustainable Governance through Enhanced Strategic HRTD

Literature demonstrates that transforming local authorities into engines of sustainable governance hinges on the institutionalizing comprehensive, strategically aligned human resource training and development (Bryson & White, 2021; Khunoethe & Reddy, 2023; Rekha, 2024). Meta-analyses of high-performance work systems show that integrated HPWS principles into HR frameworks can boost service delivery efficiency and citizen satisfaction by up to 15% across European and Latin

American cities (Herath, 2025; Nieto et al, 2022), leveraging digital transformation and anchoring in robust governance and oversight structures.

Success also depends on leveraging digital transformation to redesign administrative processes, enabling data-driven HR decision-making, remote learning and real-time workforce analytics (World Bank Group, 2021; Yassine & Youssef, 2024). Embedding HRTD within robust governance and oversight structures ensures training initiatives align with legal mandates and policy objectives, fostering transparency and minimizing political interference (Herath, 2025; Lau & Manning, 2023).

Decentralization of HRM decision-making, empowered by digital platforms, allows local managers to tailor learning and development programs to evolving community needs, enhancing agility and responsiveness (Rekha, 2024 as cited in Nugroho, 2025). Equitable, performance-linked reward systems have been shown to increase employee motivation, reduce turnover by 20% and cultivate a culture of excellence in municipal administrations across Asia and Africa (Cotton et al, 2021). Meanwhile, strengthened stakeholder oversight, underpinned by clear legal and policy frameworks, reinforces accountability, curbs patronage and bolsters public trust (Ahn, 2024; Makiva & Tashu, 2023).

Collectively, these measures align organizational culture, individual aspirations and policy objectives, offering a credible pathway to attaining Sustainable Development Goals, fulfilling Agenda 2063 targets and building inclusive, prosperous local communities (Akinola & Matlosa, 2025; Aronsson-Storrier, 2023; Herath, 2025).

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy and Design

Anchored in a positivist philosophical orientation which posits that objective reality can be empirically observed and measured (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023), the study adopted a quantitative descriptive survey design to systematically examine patterns in strategic human resource training and development across Zimbabwe's local authorities. This design was selected for its suitability in capturing observable trends, enabling statistical analysis and supporting generalizability across diverse administrative contexts. It also offered cost-effective and time-efficient collection of baseline data while enhancing reliability through standardized measurement tools (Babbie, 2020).

Sampling Strategy

The target population included both managerial and non-managerial employees from urban and rural councils spanning all ten provinces of Zimbabwe. The study was conducted between January and June 2025, a period marked by intensified decentralization reforms and renewed emphasis on institutional capacity-building. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across council types, geographic regions and functional departments. From a sampling frame of 25 local authorities, a total of 312 respondents were systematically selected. Strata were defined based on council size, location and administrative category. Table 1 below presents the sampling framework used in this study.

Table 1: Sampling Framework

Administrative Category	Targeted Councils	Sample Size	Completed Questionnaires
City Councils	Bulawayo; Gweru; Harare; Mutare; Masvingo.	65	64
Municipal Councils	Bindura; Chegutu; Chitungwiza; Kariba; Redcliff.	65	61
Town Councils	Chiredzi; Gokwe; Karoi; Rusape; Zvishavane.	65	63
Local Boards	Chirundu; Epworth; Hwange; Ruwa; Lupane.	65	61
Rural District Councils	Beitbridge; Chirumanzu; Rushinga; Manyame; Umuguza.	65	63
Total	25	325	312

Source: Survey Data (2025).

Instrument Development and Validation

Data was collected using structured questionnaires comprising five-point Likert-scale items (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The instrument was developed through a rigorous process involving literature review, expert consultation and alignment with government policy documents and council performance audits. It operationalized 19 internal and external barriers and eight innovative strategies, each mapped to thematic constructs relevant to strategic HRTD. To ensure face and content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject matter experts in public administration and human resource management. A pilot test involving 30 respondents from non-sampled councils was conducted to refine item clarity, structure and

relevance. Reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, all exceeding the 0.70 threshold (Izah et al, 2023) across major constructs.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary data was gathered through both in person and electronic administration of questionnaires to accommodate geographic dispersion and respondent preferences. Secondary data was sourced from government reports, council performance audits and policy documents provided by the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works. These sources enriched the empirical foundation and contextual relevance of the study.

Data Analysis

Survey data was processed and analyzed using SPSS version 21.0, following a structured four-step protocol to ensure data integrity and alignment with the study's objectives. First, the dataset was screened for completeness and missing values were addressed using listwise deletion or mean-value imputation, depending on the extent and pattern of missingness (van Ginkel, 2023). Second, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations and frequency distributions were computed to summarize respondent characteristics and item-level responses. Third, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component extraction with varimax rotation was conducted to examine the underlying structure of the multi-item constructs and to validate dimensionality (Field, 2024). Fourth, multiple regression analysis was employed to assess the predictive relationships between identified internal/external barriers and the adoption of innovative HRTD strategies across local authorities. Findings were presented in tabular form, with effect sizes reported where appropriate to enhance interpretability (Lakens, 2022). Key patterns and trends were further illustrated through graphical displays to facilitate visual interpretation and support policy-relevant insights (Wickham et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) Research Ethics Committee and the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works. Informed consent was secured from all respondents, who were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, anonymity and data confidentiality. Data collection protocols adhered to ethical principles of respect, beneficence and justice, with safeguards in place to protect participant privacy and minimize potential risks.

Results

Demographic Information

Table 2 presents the demographic breakdown of respondents. Stratified random sampling ensured proportional representation across council types, geographical regions and administrative roles.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 312)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Council Type	City Council	64	20.5
	Municipal Council	61	19.6
	Town Council	63	20.2
	Local Board	61	19.6
	Rural District Council (RDC)	63	20.2
Gender	Male	178	57.1
	Female	134	42.9
Role	Top Management	40	12.8
	Middle Management	58	18.6
	Operational Management	104	33.3
	Non-Managerial	110	35.3
Years of Service	< 5 years	72	23.1
	5–10 years	104	33.3
	> 10 years	136	43.6

Source: Survey Data (2025)

As shown in Table 2 above, the sample of 312 respondents was evenly distributed across council types and gender, with males comprising 57.1% and females 42.9%. Most participants held operational (33.3%) or non-managerial roles (35.5%), while top and middle management accounted for 12.8% and 18.6% respectively. Experience levels are well stratified, with 43.6% of respondents having over a decade of service, suggesting that data is informed by seasoned institutional knowledge, while newer voices (23.1% with less than 5 years) contribute fresh perspectives on reform and innovation.

Constraints to Strategic HRTD Implementation

The first objective sought to identify the principal internal and external constraints affecting the implementation of strategic human resource training and development (HRTD) within Zimbabwe local authorities (LAs). It was assessed through 19 Likert-scale indicators capturing internal and

external barriers. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3 below, with visual comparison in Figure 1.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Strategic HRTD Barriers (N = 312)

Barrier Type	Barrier	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness
Internal	Strategic misalignment	4.11	0.716	-0.687
	Inadequate leadership support	4.00	0.713	-0.912
	Limited HR professional capacity	4.07	0.817	-1.015
	Bureaucratic procedures and red tape	4.04	0.768	-1.008
	Poor performance management integration	4.03	0.708	-0.758
	Deficient learning culture	3.54	1.023	-0.430
	Limited comprehensive training policy	4.09	0.725	-0.698
	Resource constraints	4.07	0.746	-1.100
	Evaluation and feedback shortfalls	3.78	0.833	-0.608
External	Governmental appointment processes	3.98	0.902	-0.777
	Economic instability and hyperinflation	4.00	0.816	-0.781
	Regulatory and policy volatility	3.38	1.017	-0.495
	Infrastructure deficits	3.79	0.931	-0.826
	Donor dependency and funding shifts	3.65	0.895	-0.707
	Socio-cultural constraints	3.70	0.871	-0.658
	Technological lag	4.05	0.822	-0.997
	Lingering pandemic effects	3.54	1.001	-0.746
	Environmental concerns	3.63	0.890	-0.471
	Globalization and competition	3.89	0.845	-0.883
	Valid N (listwise)	312		

Source: Survey Data (2025)

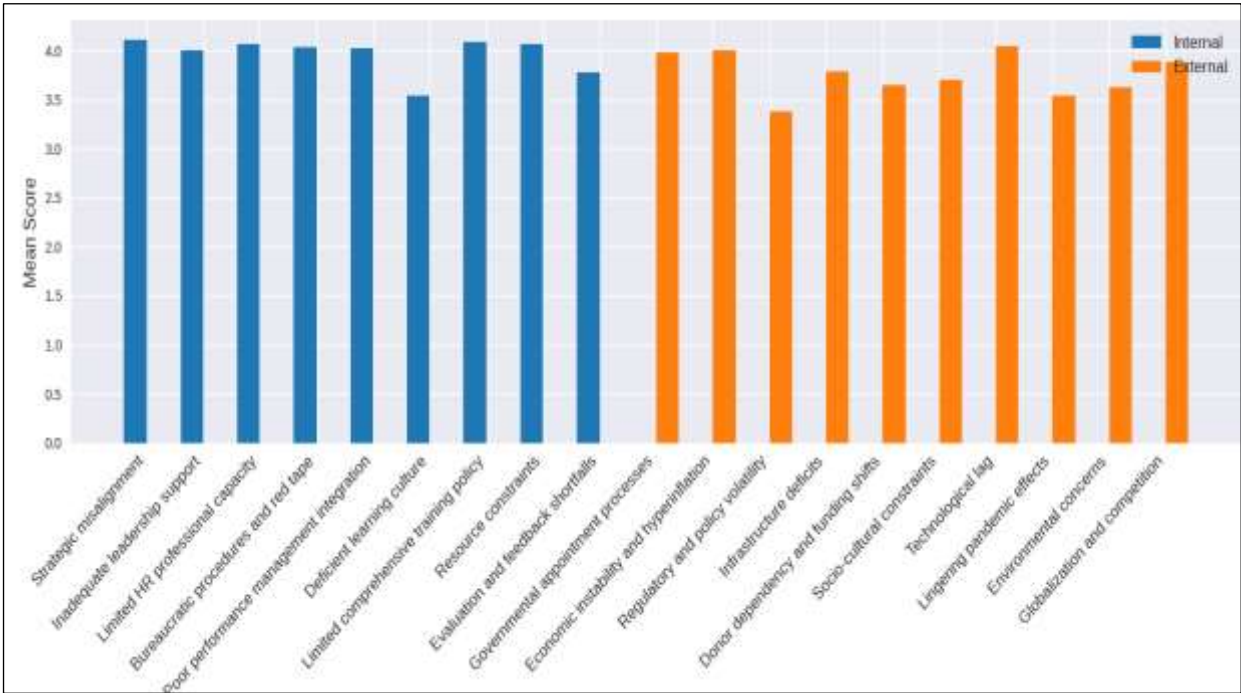


Figure 1: Clustered Bar Chart of Internal vs External Barriers (N = 312)

Source: Survey Data (2025)

As depicted in Table 3 and Figure 1 above, the survey of 25 local authorities with 312 respondents revealed that both internal and external barriers to strategic human resource training and development cluster tightly around high-impact scores, with means mostly above 3.7 and skewness values showing strong agreement that these obstacles are serious. This consensus indicates that training initiatives are not only misaligned with organizational goals, but also hampered by systemic resource shortages and policy gaps.

Internally, strategic misalignment (M=4.11) and the absence of comprehensive training policy (M=4.09) appear to constitute foundational impediments, as fragmented policy guidance inhibits the development of coherent learning pathways. Deficits in HR professional capacity (M=4.07) exacerbate these challenges, since understaffed teams frequently lack specialist competencies in learning needs analysis, institutional design and impact evaluation. Resource constraints (M=4.07) perpetuate this cycle by forcing HRD to compete with core service delivery for limited funds, while bureaucratic approval processes (M=4.04) and weak integration with performance management systems (M=4.03) further attenuate agility accountability. These internal dynamics combine to relegate training to a discretionary activity rather than an imperative driver of performance improvement.

Externally, rapid technological change outpacing institutional capacity (M=4.05) highlights a widening technology-skills gap that impedes the adoption of scalable e-learning and blended modalities. Economic instability and hyperinflation (M=4.00) undermine long-term budgeting for capacity building and politicized appointment processes (M=3.98) disrupt leadership continuity, weakening oversight of strategic HRTD initiatives. Infrastructure deficits, donor dependency and socio-cultural constraints further complicate implementation.

Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA was performed to test whether perceptions of key internal and external barriers differed significantly across the five council categories (City, Municipal, Town, Local Board and Rural District Council (RDC)). Table 4 below depicts the ANOVA results.

Table 4: Summary of ANOVA Results on Barrier Perception by Council Type

Barrier	F-Value	p-Value	Council Type with Highest Concern
Strategic Misalignment	4.21	< 0.05	City Councils
Resource Constraints	3.87	< 0.05	RDCs
Technological Lag	5.02	< 0.01	Town Councils

The ANOVA results revealed significant variation in barrier perception across council types: City Councils expressed heightened concern over strategic misalignment (F=4.21, $p < 0.05$), reflecting their sensitivity to planning fragmentation; RDCs rated resource constraints more severely (F=3.87, $p < 0.05$), underscoring acute rural capacity gaps; while Town Councils reported the highest concern over technological lag (F=5.02, $p < 0.01$), highlighting uneven digital readiness across mid-tier authorities.

Support for Innovative Strategies

The second objective examined context-sensitive strategies capable of enhancing service delivery within local authorities. Table 5 presents the mean scores.

Table 5: Mean Support for Innovative Strategies (N = 312)

Strategy	Mean	Std. Dev.
Participatory budgeting via mobile platforms	4.62	0.51
Micro-PPP initiatives	4.58	0.54
Cooperative service clusters	4.49	0.57
Modular curricula with universities and tech hubs	4.42	0.61
E-procurement and digital supply chains	4.38	0.63
Solar-powered training hubs	4.21	0.68

Innovation labs and hackathons	4.09	0.72
360-degree feedback integration	3.98	0.75

Source: Survey Data (2025)

As presented in Table 5 above, the survey results indicate strong consensus on the relevance of tech-enabled and community-driven innovations in local government reform. Highest-rated strategies “Participatory budgeting via mobile platforms (Mean = 4.62)” and “Micro-PPP initiatives (Mean = 4.58)” reflect a clear preference for inclusive governance and localized partnerships. Mid-tier support for “Modular curricula and e-procurement systems” suggests growing interest in digital integration and academic collaboration. Lower ratings for “360-degree feedback (Mean = 3.98)” may signal limited familiarity or perceived complexity. Overall, narrow standard deviations across items affirm consistent endorsement of scalable, context-sensitive innovations.

In addition, multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess whether perceived barriers predicted support for specific reform strategies. Table 6 presents the results.

Table 6: Summary of Regression Results on Barrier–Strategy Linkages

Barrier Predictor	Reform Strategy Targeted	β (Standardized)	p-Value
Strategic Misalignment	Modular curricula with universities	-0.42	< 0.01
Resource Constraints	Solar-powered digital training hubs	0.38	< 0.01

As indicated in Table 6, strategic misalignment significantly reduces support for modular curricula ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that fragmented planning environments hinder innovation. In contrast, resource constraints positively predict support for solar-powered hubs ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting openness to alternative capacity-building models in under-resourced councils. Figure 3 illustrates the standardized beta coefficients for two key barriers – strategy relationships, highlighting direction and strength of their predictive influence.

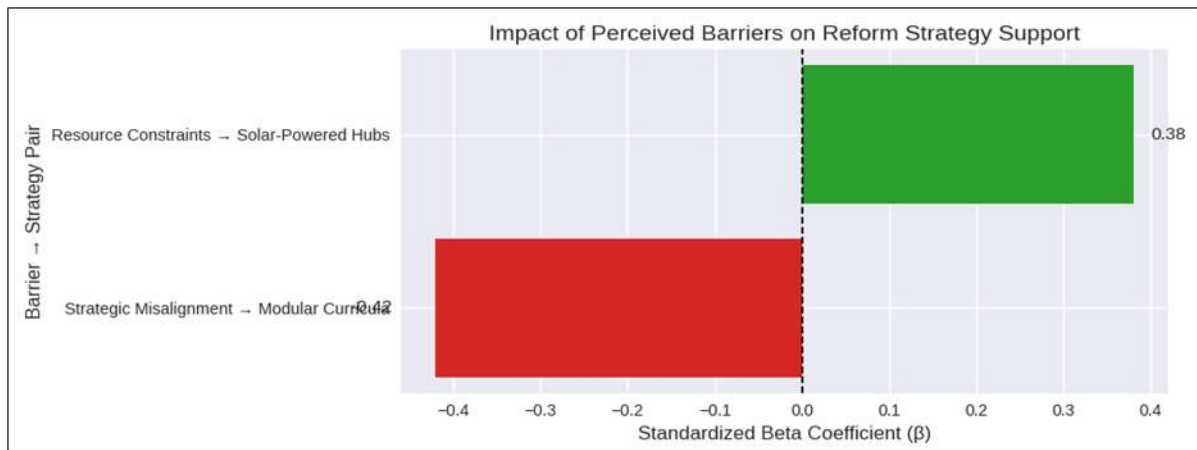


Figure 2: Impact of Perceived Barriers on Reform Strategy Support

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Discussion

Strategic human resource training and development in Zimbabwean local authorities is shaped by a convergence of institutional and environmental constraints that undermine reform coherence and capacity-building momentum. Internally, the absence of integrated, evidence-based training policies and fragmented planning frameworks mirrors findings from South African and European municipalities, where disjointed HRTD strategies have stalled professionalization and weakened service delivery (Cloete, 2023; Lau & Manning, 2023; Ndou & Agbenyegah, 2022). The misalignment between individual development plans and broader organizational objectives exacerbated by siloed HR practices and deficient performance management systems, echoes the implementation gaps identified by Mofokeng et al (2025) and Mojaki (2024). These institutional fissures are compounded by managerial apathy, ambiguous accountability structures and the lack of formal succession planning, which collectively erode strategic agility and diminish the status of HRTD as a core governance function.

Externally, Zimbabwean local authorities operate within volatile and resource-constrained environments, consistent with VUCA conditions documented across developing municipalities (Lance, 2022). Economic instability, politicized recruitment and infrastructural deficits destabilize long-term planning and leadership continuity, while technological lag impedes the adoption of scalable e-learning modalities. The rapid advance of artificial intelligence and automation, outpacing HR adaptation capacity, further risks skill obsolescence and widens digital divides. These challenges are not merely technical but deeply structural, requiring a recalibration of HRTD governance to embed digital transformation, decentralization and strategic oversight.

Despite these constraints, the study reveals a strong appetite for innovation among local authorities. The embracing of participatory budgeting via mobile platforms, micro-PPP initiatives and modular curricula co-developed with universities, reflects a shift towards hybrid governance models that prioritize collaboration, contextual relevance and digital integration. These findings align with emerging scholarship advocating for cross-sectoral peer-learning networks, centralized competency registries and digital certification platforms to harmonize professional standards and strengthen institutional coordination (Moagi & Nhede, 2025; Qureshi & Tasneem, 2021).

Consistent with Ahn's (2024) proposition, this study affirms that decentralized HRM decision-making enabled by digital platforms, can significantly enhance organizational responsiveness, while performance-linked reward incentives and robust stakeholder oversight serve to strengthen accountability and reinforce public trust. Collectively, these measures align organizational culture, individual aspirations and policy objectives, positioning HRTD as a strategic lever for achieving Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling Agenda 2063 commitments.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes a substantive theoretical contribution to the field of strategic human resource training and development by elucidating how institutional and environmental constraints coalesce to shape capacity-building outcomes within local government systems. It reinforces prevailing critiques of HRTD fragmentation attributable to policy incoherence, leadership inertia and chronic resource deficits while advancing the discourse through a proposed hybrid governance model that repositions HRTD as a strategic instrument for organizational resilience and service delivery excellence. The integration of context-responsive, innovation-led mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, micro-PPP frameworks and digital training hubs, enriches adaptive governance theory and foregrounds the transformative potential of technology-enabled learning in volatile public sector environments. Furthermore, the findings extend the High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) framework by advocating a contingent model attuned to low-resource, high-uncertainty contexts. This model emphasizes decentralization, technological adaptation and inter-organizational collaboration as critical enablers of strategic HRTD, challenging the universalist assumptions of conventional HPWS applications.

Managerial Implications for Local Authorities

This study highlights critical managerial levers for embedding human resource training and development (HRTD) within local governance systems. Local authorities are urged to institutionalize evidence-based training policies, digitize approval and evaluation workflows to enhance responsiveness and cultivate partnerships with academic institutions and technology hubs for curriculum co-design and impact assessment. Diversified financing mechanisms such as public-private partnerships and social impact bonds can stabilize funding streams, while merit-based recruitment and performance-linked incentives promote accountability and leadership continuity. Innovation-driven platforms, including hackathons and professional learning consortia, offer scalable models for collaborative curriculum development and accreditation harmonization.

Strategic Recommendations

To reposition HRTD as a strategic lever for sustainable governance in Zimbabwean local authorities, the following are recommended:

- Institutionalize a National HRTD Framework aligned with strategic planning cycles.
- Professionalize HR Units through specialist training in needs analysis, instructional design and evaluation.
- Digitize Bureaucratic Workflows to enhance agility and transparency.
- Invest in ICT Infrastructure and Digital Literacy to support scalable e-learning.
- Forge Strategic Partnerships with universities and tech hubs for localized, modular curricula.
- Diversify Funding Streams via local revenues, micro-PPPs and donor alignment.
- Promote Merit-Based Recruitment to ensure leadership continuity and reduce politicization.
- Adopt a Contingent HPWS Model tailored to low-resource, high-volatility governance contexts.

Limitations of the Study

The study's focus on Zimbabwean local authorities limits generalizability to other governance contexts. Reliance on cross-sectional, self-reported data introduces perceptual bias and constraints insight into behavioural change over time. Future research should adopt mixed-method, longitudinal designs and pursue comparative analyses across varied local government systems to

assess the transferability of the HRTD framework. Exploring regional learning networks, digital certification platforms and competency registries may further illuminate scalable mechanisms for institutionalizing HRTD in decentralized settings.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that strategic human resource training and development in Zimbabwean local authorities is constrained by institutional fragmentation and external volatility, limiting its integration into governance and service delivery systems. Despite these challenges, strong support for innovative, context-sensitive strategies such as participatory budgeting and digital training hubs, signals readiness for reform. A hybrid governance approach that leverages digital tools, cross-sectoral collaboration and targeted capacity-building can reposition HRTD as a driver of resilience and performance. These findings offer a foundation for future comparative research across decentralized public sector systems.

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