
HIV/Aids at the Workplace: A Study of Corporate Responses to the HIV/Aids Pandemic in Zimbabwe

Abstract

Zimbabwe has one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world, and they continue to increase. About one million people (10 percent of the population) had been infected with the HIV virus by December 1995 (SAFAids 1997: 1). By 2005 1.2 million people will have died of Aids, and cases of Aids will probably only begin to decline after 2010, about eight years after HIV prevalence rates begin to decline (IDS 1999: 34). The HIV/Aids epidemic has, perhaps inevitably, been perceived primarily as a health problem. However, as the magnitude of the problem becomes clearer, so does the recognition of how far-reaching and comprehensive the impact of HIV/Aids will be at the workplace and in the wider community. This is largely because infection is highest among the economically most productive groups. Chitiyo (1990 quoted by Jackson 1992) states that 90 percent of people infected with HIV are employed. As the Aids threat continues to affect the workplace, employers will increasingly require policies and mechanisms for dealing with personnel issues such as absenteeism, sick leave, ill health and early retirement.

HIV/Aids as a Business Issue

It makes good business sense for companies to respond to the epidemic because of the direct impact of Aids on business. HIV/Aids affects people who are in their most economically productive years. The devastating effect of HIV/Aids on the economy occurs largely

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through absenteeism and lowered output as infected persons become more susceptible to opportunistic infection and

eventually are unable to work at all (Mbengeranwa 1997: 8). Along with the resulting loss of experience and skills that may take many years to replace, HIV/Aids also has implications for many other aspects of employment such as training, recruitment, sickness benefits, pensions and insurance. In many developing countries there is already a shortage of

skilled labour and a narrow, underdeveloped industrial base, exacerbated by lack of resources to overcome these problems. There is evidence that the pool of people who will make up the next generation of skilled workers is already shrinking (Panos Institute 1992: 69). The psycho-social environment of the workplace is seriously affected when some employees have a serious and, ultimately terminal, health condition, and this impacts on the morale and productivity of all workers.

For all these reasons it makes good business sense for companies to adopt HIV/Aids policies, and to take not only reactive but also proactive measures to limit the spread of HIV and its effects in the workplace and in society at large. HIV/Aids affects both productivity and profitability. The effects of HIV/Aids on productivity include :

- increased absenteeism due to workers' own poor health or to the workers' need to care for others who are sick or to prepare for and attend funerals
- high staff turnover, which forces companies to spend more and more time recruiting and training new staff instead of focusing on productivity goals
- lower worker morale as workers see their colleagues getting sick and worry about their own health.

The impacts of HIV/Aids on profitability include:

- increased costs due to sick leave, funeral benefits, recruiting and training replacement staff and the higher costs of health insurance
- declining investment as the increasing impact of Aids on the business climate deters new investment
- shrinking demand as more and more consumers die of Aids.

These impacts are already visible in many parts of the world. However, despite the scale of the threat posed by HIV/Aids, the business community has been slow to respond. There are various reasons for this. For one thing there is a lingering feeling in the business community that HIV/Aids is essentially a health issue and should therefore be dealt with by health professionals. There is also a perception that HIV/Aids programmes are not worth the expense and that HIV/Aids activities during working hours will disrupt productivity. Many businesses also feel

they lack the resources or the knowledge to develop effective HIV/Aids programmes. Finally many proprietors and senior managers feel that HIV/Aids is simply too sensitive an issue to raise with their workers or colleagues.

External Regulation

In the face of the reluctance of the business community, regional as well as national policies and laws have been developed in order to promote openness about HIV/Aids and to end discrimination and stigma. In 1994 the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) began formulating HIV guidelines for the employment sector. The SADC Code on Aids and Employment, which has been adopted as a regional Code of Practice, spells out the rights and responsibilities of employers in relation to prevention and management of HIV/Aids at the workplace. The code prohibits pre-employment testing for HIV alone and states that HIV alone cannot be a cause for termination, transfer or promotion. It asserts that people with HIV (whether workers or managers) should be treated in the same way as non-infected employees and that workers or managers with Aids or Aids-related illnesses should be treated like anyone else with a life-threatening illness.

In Zimbabwe Statutory Instrument 202 of the Zimbabwe Labour Relations (HIV and Aids) Regulations of 1998 calls for education of employees on HIV/Aids, prohibits testing for HIV as a precondition of employment and states that employees cannot be required to have HIV tests or to disclose their HIV status. It prohibits termination of employment on the grounds of HIV status alone, and states that no employee is to be discriminated against in relation to promotion, transfer, training, status or eligibility for occupational or other benefit schemes on account of HIV status. With regard to sick leave Statutory Instrument 202 also makes it clear that an employee with HIV/Aids is subject to the same conditions as an employee with any other illness. Finally it makes it an offence subject to fine or imprisonment to contravene any provision of the regulations.

Corporate Social Responsibility in the Age of HIV/Aids

Businesses do not operate in a social vacuum. They have an obligation to help deal with the problems affecting the society of which they are part. Thus Cushman (1978, cited in Carroll 1981: 184)

argues that business 'must... for its well-being be willing to give serious consideration to human needs as it does to the needs for productive profit.' Society provides businesses with the resources and the environment to make profits. In return society expects businesses to be good corporate citizens by obeying the laws of the land and refraining from activities that have negative social consequences. In other words businesses should not just exist to make profits but should be involved in finding solutions to society's problems and improving the quality of life of their workers and the communities in which they exist. As Cushman implies it is also in the interest of business to be socially responsible. In order to survive today's businesses must be more attuned to social needs, especially with the Aids scourge severely affecting all facets of life. It therefore makes economic sense for industry and commerce to adopt HIV/Aids policies which are not only reactive but also proactive. For example the costs of education programmes to limit the spread of HIV among the workforce is minimal compared to the costs of replacing scores of workers who die of the illness.

According to Sawyer (1979) the concept of corporate social responsibility evolved as the strains and frictions of the imperfect operations of industrial capitalism became more and more evident. It became necessary to define more clearly the relationship between business and society in the interest of the general welfare. This is the antithesis of the classical doctrine of profit maximization as the *raison d'être* of business as developed by theorists such as Adam Smith, Milton Friedman and Peter Drucker. Friedman and Drucker argue that the overriding responsibility of business is simply to achieve profitability and growth (Abt 1977: 154). They contend that since business operates in a world of scarce resources, economic efficiency is the top priority and should be the sole mission of business. Likewise, according to Adam Smith, managers are answerable to shareholders only. In contrast the proponents of corporate social responsibility argue that engagement in social issues by business is merely a recognition that economic objectives are only one part of the whole framework of business activity (Davis 1980: 22). They therefore insist that businesses must be

both economically and socially productive.

There can be no disputing that the implementation of socially oriented policies is costly for business. However there is substantial evidence that those businesses that have been most socially responsible have also achieved the greatest financial success. Although more empirical research needs to be done in this area, a preliminary review of the most socially responsible and the most financially productive corporations in the United States suggests a strong correlation. It can also be argued that business has the capacity to lead the way by enlisting the resources of an economy in solving national problems. Business must assume the responsibility of this leadership, if we are to avoid chaos (Stolk, cited in Steiner 1972: 171). According to Maphosa (1996: 11) the most important social responsibilities of businesses are to their own workers, who are the ultimate resource of any business organisation. The responsibilities of a business to its employees include fair remuneration, healthy, safe working conditions and a democratic work environment through worker participation in ownership and decision-making. As Rockefeller (1971, cited in Anshen 1980: 2) argues:

[i]t is vital that social accountability became an integral part of corporate conduct, rather than a philanthropic add-on . . . [for] only in that way will corporations assure the healthy social climate vital to their own future economic prosperity.

Businesses cannot escape from society, and society cannot exist without business (Davis 1980: 6). This leads to the argument by Carroll (1981:21) that management must be concerned with short-term as well as long-term capacity to respond to social problems.

Nevertheless there has been little research done on managing Aids at the workplace in the Southern African region. Most business managers seem to have accepted the concept of corporate social responsibility only in principle, especially regarding the issue of the HIV/Aids menace within and

outside the workplace. A UNAIDS survey in 1998 found that only a few companies had established comprehensive HIV/Aids prevention, care and support interventions in their workplaces. It found that many small-scale and medium-scale enterprises in particular have little interest in HIV/Aids issues. This does not mean that businesses have done nothing in response to the HIV/Aids epidemic; it is the extent of their HIV/Aids activities that has been inadequate, considering the scope and urgency of the problem.

However there is evidence of a growing realisation by companies throughout the world of the need to respond to the HIV/Aids crisis. As a result increasing numbers of companies are developing and implementing workplace and community HIV/Aids programmes aimed at mitigating the effects as well as preventing the spread of HIV/Aids. Many business organisations are also forming national, regional and global coalitions to pool resources and help each other to better respond to the HIV/Aids epidemic. Such coalitions now include the Global Business Council on HIV and Aids and the Corporate Task Force on Aids in Africa. Within Zimbabwe the National Employment Council of the Transport Operating Industry (NECTOI) is an example of a national sectoral coalition to fight HIV/Aids, which is particularly rampant in the transport industry.

Research Issues

Notwithstanding the progress that has been achieved so far, there is still need for more research on how businesses can best respond to HIV/Aids. For example more evaluative research is required to assess the true effectiveness of various types of workplace and community HIV/Aids programmes implemented by business organisations. The extent and value of community involvement in workplace HIV/Aids programmes also needs to be studied, and the same can be said for worker participation, especially in the formulation and implementation of workplace HIV/Aids programmes. The issue of compliance with state or regional policies and regulations is another area that

requires more research, especially in relation to discrimination on the basis of a worker's HIV status. Anecdotal evidence suggests that discrimination remains a serious problem in many businesses. Finally the issue of networking is one that has also been neglected. More needs to be known about the extent to which individual businesses are willing to join coalitions of businesses concerned with HIV/Aids as well as the extent to which they can or will network with national, regional and international HIV/Aids organisations from the state and NGO sectors.

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