

Novelty in the sphere of health human resources in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

A success story is reported on converting a manual recruitment scheme to a fully automated online scheme by the Human Resources (HR) Coordinating Division of the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Department of Examinations, Ministry of Education, and the University of Moratuwa. This collaboration has successfully validated the educational qualifications of the applicants online and the procedures have been simplified for the applicants to complete the application within five minutes. The E manual published with details and prospects of courses on offer has greatly enhanced the intelligent course selection. This innovation has been internationally acclaimed and it had helped the Ministry of Health to address the shortage of nursing, professions supplementary to medicine, and paramedical categories in a positive manner.

As per a Cabinet decision, Human Resource (HR) Coordinating Division was established in 2017 in the Ministry of Health, Nutrition, and Indigenous Medicine, fulfilling a long-felt need. Positioning of the HR Coordinating Division was done as a “staff function” in the organizational context of the Secretary of Health and Director General of Health Services (DGHS) interface, where the Head of the Division reports to the Secretary while consulting the DGHS on relevant issues. One of the key activities of this newly created division was to introduce an online recruitment system to recruit trainees for various training courses conducted by the Ministry of Health (MOH) [1].

The MOH annually trains approximately 4,000 trainees of different categories: nursing; professions supplementary to medicine (PSM) including medical laboratory technologists, pharmacists, occupational therapists, radiographers, and also paramedical services including school dental therapists, health entomology officers, ophthalmic technologists, prosthetists and orthotists, public health inspectors, electrocardiographers (ECG recordists), electroencephalographers (EEG recordists) [2].

The recruitment process for the above categories had been a lengthy and labour-consuming task for the Ministry of Health. Following a notice in

the government gazette calling for applications for the above posts from GCE Advanced Level science stream qualified candidates, the Ministry receives around 20,000 to 30,000 applications by post. Even candidates without minimum qualifications apply. This necessitates significant hours of clerical work, sometimes leading to months; to open the envelopes, to open the applications, and enter the details into an MS Excel database.

Further, traditional paper-based recruitment systems are known for their shortcomings of lack of transparency, cost efficiency, timeliness, non-traceability, manual database keeping, and increased space required for storing paper-based applications [3].

The manual recruitment process took more than one and a half years to complete a recruitment cycle. The long recruitment process also resulted in a low yield of candidates. Further, prospective applicants and even some of the interview panel members had no idea about the courses on offer and their prospects. These flaws in this system contributed negatively to the country's health human resource stock as well as efforts to improve healthcare service delivery. The HR Coordinating Division introduced an online system to expedite the recruitment of trainees in collaboration with the Department of Computer Science and Engineering

of the University of Moratuwa and the Department of Examination of the Ministry of Education. Initially, it was a near-impossible task to convince the Ministry staff to switch from the traditional manual system which had been in operation for nearly 30 years. The new system application interface was user-friendly and log-in was via the Ministry of Health home page. Further, an E manual was published with the online application describing every course on offer in detail, along with the career development pathway for each course. On average it took only five minutes for the applicant to complete the application process. System was linked to the Ministry of Education and candidates' GCE Ordinary Level and Advanced Level results were verified within a few seconds, which earlier took many months. Using the online result verification, applicants without basic educational qualifications were not allowed to proceed from the very first stage. This reduced the work volume and increased the accuracy and transparency of the entire process.

For the first time in the history of the Ministry, the online system also facilitated the fulfilling the vacancies in the second round; created by non-registrants during

the first round. The online system helped to recruit trainees within a short time giving a high yield. The HR Coordinating Division has now successfully completed online recruitment for two cycles for nursing, PSM, and paramedical categories, recruiting around 9,000 trainees. Moreover, the Ministry of Health now has a good database of its future nursing, PSM, and paramedical human resource stock.

Our partners in this innovation acknowledged that they were able to learn how to successfully implement an E-recruitment drive and update their databases. Our staff now extend its fullest cooperation.

There had been many requests to expand the online scheme to other categories such as drivers and minor staff of the Ministry of Health. Several other Ministries too started similar recruitment schemes learning from our success. Continuation of the online system will help to reduce the shortage of PSM & paramedical and nursing workforce in the country.

(Above online recruitment scheme won an international award from Asia pacific Action Alliance on Human Resources for Health (AAAH) in 2020)

Author declaration

Author contributions: DDS conceptualized the online recruitment scheme, developed and implemented it, and wrote the Brief Report based on his experience as the Head of Health HR Unit of the Ministry of Health. SDA provided policy-level advice and edited the manuscript.

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