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Recruiting and compensating civil servants: A field experiment in Zambia

The civil service – public cadres of bureaucrats, local administrators, teachers and health workers – is a key component of the state’s capacity to govern and provide public goods. In the effort to create an effective civil service, states face key questions regarding how to recruit, train and motivate competent agents to ensure their high performance and long-term retention.

In 2010, the Government of Zambia launched a new civil service cadre: the community health assistant (CHA). Recruited from local communities, trained and then posted back in their communities, community health assistants are a policy response to the shortage of formal health workers in rural areas of the country. Together with fellow researchers at Harvard, I have collaborated with the Zambian Government’s Ministry of Health since the inception of the CHA program, when the first cohort of 307 CHAs was recruited from 160 communities in 48 districts across the country. Thereafter, the Ministry of Health will recruit 1,000 community health assistants per year for five years, totaling 5,000 CHAs nationwide.

Using a randomised experiment we evaluate strategies to recruit, motivate and retain agents in this civil service post. The experiment was designed to measure the practical relevance of a particular concern of the Ministry, namely whether providing career opportunities came at the expense of community attachment and interest for the social good, therefore reducing motivation and performance.

The key idea is that pro-social preferences can interact with other sources of motivation such as the attainment of material benefits through financial gain or career advancement. Understanding the nature of this interaction is crucial to identify how best to attract and motivate agents engaged in public services delivery. The observation that material incentives are less common in organizations that deliver public services is consistent with the fact that pro-social preferences can be an alternative source of motivation to material incentives, but it does not provide information on how the two interact. Do material benefits leverage pro-social preferences and attract qualified agents who deliver public services effectively? Or do they crowd out pro-social preferences and attract agents who solely pursue their private interests at the expense of service quality?

To answer these questions we experimentally vary the salience

of career benefits vs. social benefits across all 48 districts when recruiting agents. We then follow the entire first cohort from application to the field and measure impacts at every stage: we collect information on the skills and pro-social preferences of the applicants, analyze how they are selected and, finally, how they perform once hired during the course of one year.

We find that the different recruitment strategies indeed matter at all stages: they attract different types at application stage, they influence panels at selection stage, and they affect performance in the field.

- At the application stage, we find that applicants to both treatments display strong pro-social preferences, thus suggesting that making career benefits salient does not displace pro-social motivation. However, making career incentives salient attracts applicants who are more qualified (as measured by high school test scores) and have a stronger scientific background (measured by the number of natural sciences courses taken and passed). The differences are driven by the fact that career incentives attract more qualified applicants as opposed to discouraging less qualified applicants. This has important implications for the skill level of those who are eventually selected for the job as qualified candidates can be chosen only if they apply.
- At the deployment stage, we compare the performance of CHAs in their main tasks: household visits, community mobilisation meetings and visiting patients at the health post. We find that CHAs recruited with career incentives conduct 26% more household visits and organize twice as many community meetings while seeing the same number of patients at the health post. Supplementary evidence suggests that the difference does not come at the expense of quality measured by the length of the visits, targeting of women and children, or the balance between new and repeat visits

After one year, retention rates are identical in both groups but longer-term data is required to establish the effects on retention in the long-run. If retention is lower in the ‘career’ treatment, the welfare implications of using the career poster rest on the value of strong performers in communities for a shorter period versus weaker performers for a longer period (as well as what happens to strong performers when they leave, and the value they might bring to the health sector if they build further skills and remain within the Ministry of Health). Regardless of the retention outcomes, however, the findings clearly illustrate that there is no tradeoff between career incentives, skills and social values. Providing career opportunities attracts more skilled individuals who perform better and seem to be equally socially motivated.

The findings provide empirical insight into how governments can implement and manage large-scale civil service initiatives. In addition, it is hoped that they will advance theoretical understanding about the complex interplay between job design, incentives, selection and performance.

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