CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON SENIOR STAFF MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE IN THE NIGERIAN POLYTECHNIC EDUCATION SECTOR

Ulabor Ehimen
University of Wales, United Kingdom

Chima Mordi
Brunel University, United Kingdom, and

Afa Ituma
Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

Abstract
Most HR practitioners today face issues such as low levels of motivation resulting in low morale, which bears an impact on performance. The Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector has, therefore, been considered as an empirical site from which to explore the impact that work culture has on employees’ and managerial motivation and performance. Work culture is essential for maximising the value of human capital, and culture management should therefore be a critical management competency as this has become an important challenge for managers through which to determine the most effective culture for their organisation. One of the major challenges for corporate organisations and institutions is, therefore, their adaptation to different socio-economic and cultural contexts of their various available markets, audience and employees. In the light of the above, this paper addresses the issues of cultural diversity and their management in the Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector (NPES) as they affect employee motivation, performance and overall organisational behaviour. Utilising semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 86 respondents purposively selected from 6 Polytechnics in south-west Nigeria, the study uncovered the dominant cultural factors in employee motivation and suggested ideas as to how contemporary managers and practitioners in the NPES can maximise the use of socio cultural diversity in enhancing employees’ performance and organisational behaviour. Suggestions were also made for further studies in this regard.

Keywords: Motivation, organisational culture, polytechnic, organisational performance

Introduction
Managers of present day organisations face not just their immediate and remote environment but also an external environment that is fast changing, complex, uncertain and more vigorously competitive than before (Thomas, 2002). Employees’ cultural diversity and beliefs have been a source of conflict mitigating against this lofty objective. Most HR practitioners today face issues such as low levels of motivation resulting in low morale, which have an impact on job and organisational performance. The Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector has, therefore, been considered as a suitable environment within which to explore the impact that work culture has on employees’ and managerial motivation and performance. Work culture is essential for maximising the value of human capital, and culture management should, therefore, be a critical management competency. An important challenge for managers is to determine the most effective culture for their organisation. Hence, this paper focuses on the impact that organisational and national culture has on both the motivation and performance of employees in the NPES.

Most investigations into culturally related behaviour relationships have focused on variations in behaviour as a function of culture (e.g., Barrett et al. 2004). In contrast, the current research takes a different approach to this relationship by examining culture-based individual differences not only in the behaviour itself but also in the reasons given by actors with divergent cultural orientations for performing similar or related behaviour especially as it relates to their motivation at work. D’Andrade (1992) noted, in the context of anthropology, that there is a need to incorporate the concept of
motivation into the study of culture. This sentiment is also applicable in social psychology, and this current research represents an example of the type of effort D’Andrade (1992) called for. The domain of social influence is particularly apropos for research into motivation and culture, in part because the impact of culture on social influence processes has not been extensively studied, and in part because social influence research has generally not examined individual cultural differences in people’s stated reasons for compliance or rejection of organisational policies, strategies, and procedures (Barrett, et al., 2004; Iguisi, 2009; Sinha, et al., 2010).

Internationalisation of institutions and corporate organisations’ operations results in competitive advantage only when such institutions and corporate organisations are involved in the integration of local differences in human resource management, realising global economies of scale, and effectively transferring knowledge and technology across borders. Without significantly understanding organisational and institutional socio-economic and cultural factors, corporate organisations may not succeed in taking full advantage of available resources and opportunities (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001; Abdullah et al., 2013). One of the major challenges to corporate organisations and institutions is, therefore, their adaptation to different socio-economic and cultural contexts of their various available markets, audience and employees (Tayeb 1998). While the effects of motivation on performance and other organisational behaviour has been studied extensively (Monzoor, 2012), very little has been done in the area of identifying the influence of cultural environment on employees’ perceptions on the effectiveness of the various motivational strategies introduced by managers (Abdullah, et al., 2013). A review of the employee motivation literature reveals that organisational researchers have studied various factors that may influence and shape employees’ perceptions of breach or fulfilment of their expectations on employees’ motivation. In the light of the above, this paper investigates and addresses the issues of cultural diversity and their management in the Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector (NPES) as it affects employees’ motivation and performance. The paper aims to contribute to this undeveloped area by exploring the culturally congruent elements of HR practices that affect employee motivation in the Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector (NPES).

Contemporary concepts of culture and motivational management

Some management researchers subscribed to the view that sees culture as a shared homogenous way of being, evaluating and doing; which are ideas shared by members of a cultural group (Sinha, et al., 2010; Iguisi, 2009). Others see culture as heterogeneously combining differentiated and dynamic subcultures; still, others see culture from a multi-fragmented perspective that brings ambiguity into culture discourse and which is, nonetheless, vital to motivation (Iguisi, 2009). As numerous intercultural scholars have noted, each culture has own unique world-view or means for making sense of the world (Zahama, 2000).

Hofstede (2003) defines culture as the software of the mind, a collective phenomenon, shared with the people who live in a social environment. It is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one social group or category of people from another. Deresky (2003) posits that culture comprises the shared values, assumptions, understandings and goals that are learned from one generation, imposed by the current generation, and passed on to succeeding generations. Valentini (2005) defined culture as the repository of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of the generations through individual and group striving. On their part, Blackwell, Miniard and Enrge (2007) stated that culture has two fundamental components: abstract and material. In terms of abstract components, one may consider values, attitudes, ideas, types of personalities, symbols, rituals and summary constructs like politics and religion.

Hawkins, Best and Coney (2006) argue that the main operational régime of culture starts by earmarking stated boundaries for individual behaviour and by guiding the functioning of such institutions as the family and mass media. In a societal setup these boundaries are termed as norms. Further, norms are derived from cultural values. Given the commonalities among the various authors of culture quoted above, it is obvious that they concur that culture should be defined as that which is shared, harmonious, homogeneous, but the definitions disagree with what exactly is being shared or is harmonious and homogeneous (Iguisi, 2007; op cit., 2009). Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of
culture consists of traditions (that is, historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (op cit, 2009). This implies that national cultures, corporate cultures or professional cultures, for example, are seen as symbolic practices that only come into existence in relation to, and in contrast with, other cultural communities (Iguisi, 2009). Cultural norms and values can play a significant role in the employee perception and expectation formation process and its related logical obligations within a given culture (Kickul, Lester and Belgio, 2004; Oghojafor, et al., 2013). The national cultural context can shape how individual employees receive and process information within their cultural environment (Kickul, Lester and Belgio, 2004). Consequently, culture can influence perceptions about employee expectations and related obligations that usually define an employee’s commitment, dedication, and loyalty to his or her employer (Kickul, Lester and Belgio 2004; Abdullah, et al., 2013).

Usually societies are comprised of familial, economic, religious, and political micro environments and institutions that are closely intertwined with the phenomenon of culture, each of which can strongly and powerfully shape employment practices and how individuals experience them (Castells, 1996; Oghojafor, et al., 2013). For instance, culture may determine acceptable work and family rôles based on gender (Kickul, Lester and Belgio 2004). The extent to which a culture influences whether members perceive motivation and incentives as satisfying and goal orientated, may be a bit cumbersome to measure numerically, factors can, however, be identified around these perceptions and expectations upon which one can sum up the relationship where these identified factors can influence employees’ perceptions and expectations of the various motivational strategies employees are exposed to. Employees from the viewpoint of Vroom’s expectancy theory (1964) live on the promises that an expectation is to be fulfilled if a desired outcome is achieved thereby bringing forth satisfaction. In a relaxed culture (where promises are made and believed based on trust), promises mean that the promise-making parties (employer and employees) will try to do something, meaning the result is not guaranteed (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000).

This perception of the binding and non-binding nature of promises made can certainly affect employees’ perceptions about how promises are fulfilled. In rigid cultures (where promises are made and executed through documents that are enforceable by labour union or law), employee expectations are usually high about complete fulfilment of the promises made by the employer, while expectations of fulfilment of promises are quite low in more relaxed cultures (Rousseau and Schalk, 2000).

Research method
This research adopted a case study approach. Case study is a useful approach of enquiry as it affords organisational researchers the opportunity to comprehensively explore motivations, meanings, experiences, and implications attached to daily events, activities or processes of one or more individuals (Cresswell, 2009). This research, in seeking to study the influence of culture on employees’ motivation, adopted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as major means of gathering relevant information required for the study. Eighty five (85) senior staff and managers were purposefully chosen from three polytechnics in Osun State south-west Nigeria for this study. Each of the three polytechnics chosen represents the three major players in the Polytechnic Education Sector in Nigeria, which are the Federation, State, and privately owned polytechnics. The sections include both face-to-face verbal interviews that lasted for about 30 to 40 minutes each, and three sections focus on group discussions of 10 participants from each institution sampled and visited lasting for almost two productive hours. The selected senior staffs were available and willing to participate in the research study having had the purposes and significances of the study explained to them. Being academic and senior administrative managers holding one management position or another, the participants discussed the subject area freely and the researcher was able to explore the extents to which cultural environment and diversity affect employees’ perceptions of motivation and organisational behaviour. The selected samples consisted of both male and female staff with a wealth of experience within the education industry in Nigeria, cutting across all the major departments in the polytechnic

The demographic representations of the respondents are portrayed below
Table 1 Demography of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Factors</th>
<th>Range/Frequency</th>
<th>Stage (%)</th>
<th>Cumulative (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male:</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female:</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 – 35:</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 – 55:</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 56:</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSc/HND</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 – 5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – 10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Respondents</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings and discussions
This study uncovered four key factors as follows: external work environment, religious bigotry, familial considerations, manager/subordinates relationship and financial stability. These culturally congruent elements of HR practices are presented and discussed below.

The external work environment
Work environment refer to the internal and external social and professional environment which organisational employees interact with each other (Abdullah, et al., 2013). The Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria and the Niger Delta militancy in the south coupled with other violent and volatile sectorial groups in most parts of the Nigerian nation have really made the work external environment a factor for consideration in employee motivation in the Nigerian education sector. Responses from respondents showed that the majority of the respondents preferred to work and stay in the south western part of the country where there is a relative peaceful and harmonious working environment as opposed to any other parts of the country.

Financial stability
Financial and non-financial rewards provided to employees in exchange for their contributions to the organisation are referred to as remuneration (Abdullah, et al., 2013). These include not only salary, bonuses and vacation pay, but also medical allowances or other financial benefits that are part of an employment package (Abdullah, et al., 2013). The Nigerian nation, though not poor but with resources not well managed and corruption in high places has caused social welfare and economic conditions to be in a very poor state (Ituma, et al., 2011; Oke, 2012). This has made employees responsible for their own social welfare and

---

1 The Boko Haram is an Islamic sect in the northern Nigeria clamouring for an Islamic state in northern Nigeria. More than 3000 deaths have been linked to this sect in acts of terrorism and their actions have raised a lot of security issues in present day Nigeria (See BBC report of Boko Haram activities in Nigeria of 19th September, 2013).
economic stability as it affect their individual family; this has also made them place so much emphasis and focus on achieving high, regular, and consistent or secure forms of income in wages and salaries and other related benefits; and therefore, jobs that are well paid and valued are very sought after. In the opinion of one of the federal polytechnic Rectors, the management of the institution aligned the management structure, actions and policies to foster employees’ financial stability, encouraged saving and achieve desirable personal development.

Given the importance of money in family well being, it is not surprising that employees are paying much more importance to it than any other form of motivational strategies.

Manager/subordinates relationship
Another key theme identified in this study is the enhanced manager/subordinates relationship existing within the NPES. This has intertwined in such a way that it can be termed playing to your strength or use what is handy to get what is expected within the generally acceptable societal cultural domain. Scholars and researchers in the HR domain (e.g., Nyameh, et al., 2013; Oghojafor, et al., 2013) have all referred to the fact that relationships existing between cordial managers and subordinates go a long way in employee motivation, inducing efforts, gingering enthusiasm, and improving organisational performance.

Overall, the participants see an enhanced manager/subordinates relationship as a means of employees’ motivation improving performance and organisational behaviour.

Familial consideration
A number of participants and respondents agreed that they enjoyed working with their present employer and were motivated to work because of the flexibility it carries in allowing them to cater for their families. Within collectivist cultures, a family orientation is seen as a dominant trait (Wagner and Hollenbeck, 2005; Hofstede, 1984) and an emphasis on the extended family system in which the strong ties and obligations developed form the basis of a social insurance that often takes priority over personal goals and aspirations where it is the social norm to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of their families. Another important feature is its traditionally gendered social organisation in which men are socialised to become breadwinners while women are expected to engage mainly in domesticity. The implication is that men’s careers are given more attention than those of women (Ituma, et al., 2011; Ulabor and Mordi, 2013).

Conclusions
This study has successfully uncovered five critical themes and elements of human resources practice from the cultural perspective, significantly in the non-western context of south-west Nigeria that can affect employees’ motivation in the Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector. These emerging themes referred to as work environment, financial stability, manager/subordinates relationship, an familial consideration were uncovered as the most significant culturally congruent elements of HR practices in the NPES. The NPES employees’ preference for a peaceful, harmonious, caring and helpful work environment can be said to be consistent with the traits of a collectivist society outlined by Wagner and Hollenbeck (2005) and the conclusion of Oghojafor, et al. (2013).

Despite disparity in pay of the three types of polytechnic players in Nigeria, the majority of the employees had one voice as to their preference and satisfaction to work and remain in the south-west part of Nigeria where there is relative peace and security of lives, compared to other parts of the country where sectorial groups are cropping up daily unabated. This finding is consistent with Rose and Griffin’s (2002) study which found strong links between work environment and employee reactions such as: job satisfaction, commitment, retention, well-being of the employees. These findings also reveal the sharp contrast between collectivist and individualistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, people prefer a more competitive and productive environment rather than a congenial, caring and low performance work environment (Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede, 1993; Abdullah, et al., 2013).

Financial stability also emerged as an important theme in this qualitative study as employees placed very high importance on their financial stability and sustainability through high wages and salaries as well as other benefits from their employers. Maintaining financial stability has always been a major concern for most employees of developing countries unlike in the western and developed countries (e.g., Britain and North America) where employees receive monetary and other forms of social benefits from their governments to support themselves (child benefit, tax relief, disability allowances, housing, and medical benefits, amongst others). Another important theme emerging from this study concerns the importance placed on familial considerations by employees. This was in
alignment with the notion proposed by Ituma, et al. (2011), and Oghojafor, et al. (2013) that people are more concerned about their families in collectivist culture and many of the respondents and participants linked their career goals, motivation, and organisational performance to their family well-being. Overall, this study is part of ongoing research into employees’ motivation in the Nigerian Polytechnic Education Sector and implication, for further and future research can be guided by its findings. It is important for managers to take into consideration their specific organisational cultural context as they can significantly influence employees’ cognitive motivation mechanisms and behavioural outcomes. While this study has generated insights, the findings and contributions are bounded by a number of limitations which, in turn, indicate potentially fruitful avenues for future study. Thus, we culminate with a call for additional research on these intriguing issues in different context.

References


