

HUMAN RESOURCE FUNCTION IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AMONG UNIVERSITY STAFF

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Abstract

Knowledge and human resource management are crucial elements of an efficient university administration; they enable the acquisition and use of resources to create an environment in which knowledge and resources are efficiently and effectively utilized. The university acquires, shares and uses knowledge to build human and institutional capacity to create innovative projects that meets the needs of the society. This paper draws its motivation from the application of knowledge management in Nigerian universities. Literature was explored on Human Resource function in knowledge management and uses content analysis to determine the role HR plays in enhancing knowledge management through recruitment, retention, training and development, reward system and performance management systems of the university.

Keywords: *Development, institutional capacity, knowledge, human resource management, university*

Introduction

University education in Nigeria is aimed at the development of high level manpower. However, this cannot be achieved if universities lack systematic organisation of their staff, technologies and corporate culture. Empirical studies conducted by (Abu-Naser, Shobaki, & Abu Amuna, 2016, p. 30) have shown that the optimum coordination of various components and assets in a university enhances staff productivity. (Ugwu, 2018, p. 49) observed that the application of knowledge management practices in federal university libraries in Nigeria led to increase in organizational performances. It therefore means that knowledge management is effective in the areas of staff

productivity, innovation and organizational performance. The problem is that universities in Nigeria suffer multiple setbacks in the utilization of knowledge management practices due to challenges arising from poor funding, corruption and politicization. (Ojo, 2016, p. 334) noted that though the public perceive Nigerian universities to be centres of knowledge production, unfortunately, they are not the drivers of innovation. For instance, former President Olusegun Obasanjo stated that many Nigerian university lecturers are unproductive and rather seek pleasure with the opposite sex than engage in research and teaching (Ladebo, 2003, p.117). While this statement is contentious, it is a perception that holds sway across boards especially during lecturers' industrial strike actions (Usang, Akuegwu, and Lucy, 2007). The main emphasis of this paper is to bridge the gap in literature to explain the role human resource plays in enhancing knowledge management through recruitment, retention, training and development, reward system and performance management systems in the university.

Recent report by the National University Commission (2017, pp. 4–8) revealed that the number of accredited universities in Nigeria in 2017 stood at 146 with a staff strength of 61,999 and student enrolment of 1,962,364. In these universities, there were 14,801 female academic staff compared to their male counterpart which was 46,557. While the number of students' enrolment in Nigeria keeps increasing, the numbers of qualified academic staff are not increasing proportionately. Consequently, this places higher workload on the few academic staff that are available and negatively impact on their competitiveness in the world. This is a problem that needs solution. To solve this problem, this paper argues that management of universities in Nigeria should integrate human resource functions into knowledge management and come up with innovative projects that solves the problems of Nigerian masses.

Concept of Human Resource Management

Human Resource Management (HRM), in its simplest sense, is the process of managing human talents to achieve organization's objectives (Martin, 2010, p. 12). Beyond this basic definition, Human Resource scholars have defined Human Resource Management (HRM) to cover traditional personnel management to recruitment, selection, training

and development of employees in an organization (Janasz & Crossman, 2018, p. 4). This paper adopts the definition of HRM given by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). According to UNCTAD (cited in Horwitz & Budhwar, 2015, p. 107), Human Resource Management refers to the:

administrative discipline of hiring and developing employees so that they become more valuable to the organization. HRM includes (a) conducting job analyse (b) planning personnel needs, and recruitment (c) selecting the right people for the job (d) orienting and training (e) determining and managing wages and salaries (f) providing benefits and incentives; (g) appraising performance (h) resolving dispute and (i) communicating with all employees at all levels.

UNCTAD's definition of HRM not only describes the concept but also identified the major roles HR play in a 21st century firm. It capitalizes on how HR uses best practices in managing people within an organization with emphasis on performance.

Concept of Knowledge Management

Knowledge management means managing organisational human activity systems, as well as the process or the activities of knowledge workers (Mertins, Heisig, & Vorbeck, 2013, p. 30). It involves knowledge creation, knowledge retention, knowledge transfer and knowledge utilization. Knowledge management (KM) is about developing, sharing and applying knowledge within the firm to gain and sustain a competitive advantage. This study however adopts the definition of Harman and Brelade (cited in El-Farr, 2011, p. 16) who defines knowledge management as the:

acquisition and use of resources to create an environment in which information is accessible to individuals and in which individuals acquire, share and use that information to develop their own knowledge and are encouraged and enabled to apply their knowledge for the benefit of the organization.

In HRM, knowledge is classified to be either explicit or implicit (tacit). Implicit knowledge is basically experiential, while explicit knowledge is expressed. In other words, explicit knowledge is objective, relies on

codified theories and is transmittable (Sass, 2012, p. 112). On the other hand, implicit knowledge is said to be subjective, experiential, personal, context specific, hard to formalise and communicate (Mertins et al., 2013, p. 40). Generally, there are basically two strategies for managing knowledge. These are “codification” and “personalisation”(M. E. Jennex, 2008, p. 80). The former refers to the codification of explicit knowledge in words, numbers and instructions. The information could be stored in data-warehouse and electronic libraries. While personalization refers to individual development of tacit knowledge that is based on personal skills for solving workplace complex problems. The knowledge is usually not stored in a codified retrieval system but can be accessed through person-to-person contact. It is mostly used in solving unique problems.

The question then is how is human resource management (HRM) related to knowledge management (KM)? Scholars such as (Harman & Brelade, 2000, pp. 2–10) argued that the two are interrelated. To them, knowledge is primarily dependent on people while HRM works on people. Hence, HRM goes after the people with specialized knowledge and skills when it comes to recruitment and selection, education and development, performance management, pay and reward, as well as the creation of a learning culture are vital for managing knowledge within firms.

Theoretical Framework

HRM is believed to be a new discipline traceable to the 1980s and as such lacks a long standing tradition of theories like other disciplines (i.e Philosophy). Nevertheless, the field has emerged its own theories that will serve as the framework for this paper. Wright and McMahan (cited in (Bratton & Gold, 2012, p. 44)) categorized Human Resource theories into six different models (resource-based theory, behavioral perspective, agency/transaction cost theory, cybernetic models, institutional theory and power/resource dependence models) but only one of them, that is, resource-based theory, was used in explaining HR functions in knowledge management.

Resource-based theory was adopted as framework for the study because amongst all the models, it gives room for competitive advantage as well as sustained competitive edge in educational environment. Competitive advantage in this sense implies that the firm

is actually implementing a value based knowledge that is beyond the reach of competitors.

The central themes in other theories such as the Behavioral perspective (with reliance on employee behaviour for firm performance); Cybernetic model (which focused the closed and open systems where firms employ technology for results); Agency/transaction cost theory (place emphasis on problems of human behaviour in internalizing the firm's transactions); Non-Strategic Models (this model, according to Wright and McMahan (cited (Bratton & Gold, 2012, p. 49) mean the determinants of HRM practices that are not the result of rational strategic decision making processes, but rather derive from institutional and political forces in the firm); Resource dependence/power models (centres on how management of money, skills and technology become a source of power in an organisation); and lastly, the Institutional perspective (focuses on the believe that not everything that happens in a firm is planned and that not all outcomes are the result of conscious decision processes). From all these, only resource based theory better explains the relationship between HR and knowledge management in a university setting.

HR Function in Knowledge Management

Human Resource Management supports both tacit and explicit knowledge to enhance the job performance of the workforce which invariably leads to organizational performance. Adapting HR function in knowledge management in an organization could be seen from four angles: Recruitment, Retention, Training and development, Reward system and Performance management systems. When HR managers work effectively in these areas, they support innovative knowledge which in turn reflects in the launching of new products, marketing, sales and profits.

HR Function in Knowledge-Based Recruitment

Traditional recruitment process and selection practices in Nigerian universities have the tendency to block knowledge creation and sharing between groups or departments because of its concentration on the functional principle (Yaro, 2014, p. 1101). However, with the increasing demand for knowledge, knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing, Human Resource Management now focus on the recruitment of staff

whose knowledge are central to the university goals. In other words, the traditional function of HR in recruitment which was based on functional experts has changed to recruitment based on knowledge experts. Thus, knowledge based competency measure is central to the recruitment of the most qualified people who have clear focus of what the 21st century university demands. People whose attitude towards knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge utilization are critical factors to be considered by HR managers during the hiring process.

Several scholars highlight the relevance new recruits have on organisation's knowledge culture (Jennex, 2008, p. 13). The function of HR therefore in enhancing organisational culture is to hire suitable personalities with specialized knowledge into the knowledge-based culture of each department in the university.

HR Function in Knowledge-Based Retention

Generally, universities recruit and retain only those people who add value to the school through their knowledge, experience, and technical know-how. HR does not stop here as possession of knowledge only cannot lead to organization performance. Hence, the need to retain only those people that can share their knowledge with the others in the school. This is referred to as shared knowledge. According to Horowitz, Teng, and Quazi, (cited in Christeen, 2009, p. 32) 'this shared knowledge is stored in a central repository accessible to all in the organization'. It all becomes the function of HR to encourage and retain those people who are ready to share knowledge as well as work towards the success of the organization.

HR Function in Knowledge Training and development

Training and development is central to effective and efficient university workforce. Therefore, continuous professional development is seen to be core to professional and knowledge based university workers. High performing university staff now acknowledge that lifelong learning must become a standard in order to remain relevant and competitive in an increasingly competitive university environment. Development of the workforce can take place formally through training courses or informally through learning or development on the job.

The need for lifelong learning among the workers is crucial to knowledge-intensive university environment because the use of their service relies solely on the knowledge, human talent and expertise of department members. When the HR department organizes training for them, it helps them to provide high quality and productive student-centered services. This training and development would result in better job performance and career advancement.

HR Function in Knowledge-Based Reward System

It is common among knowledge-based workers not to share knowledge. However, research studies (Syed, Murray, Hislop, & Mouzoghi, 2018, p. 89), posit that people only share data when they are rewarded for it. To maximize the value of knowledge sharing among employees, HR are responsible to reward based on the following:

- i. The impact and effectiveness of sharing knowledge and their experience as a person,
- ii. The achievement that will be recorded to the firm,
- iii. Management and the sharing of knowledge,
- iv. Remuneration of employees who adopt that new knowledge based culture.

Reward systems means that the university respects and shapes individuals' organization behaviour. Studies on knowledge-based workers have found that they tend to have a high need for independence, affiliation with their professional than a company, and drive for achievement.

HR Function in Knowledge-Based Performance Management Systems

Performance management is one of the many functions of HRM. A performance management is a periodic review of an employee's performance based on assigned duties and responsibilities (Ojo, 2016, p. 130). The appraisal is not based on the employee's personality characteristics; rather, it is based on the performance of the employee which is measured with the accomplishments and shortcoming of the employee. It provides a way to help identify areas for performance enhancement and to help promote professional growth.

Accordingly, performance appraisal is utilized to track individual contribution to achieving the organizational goals. It is also used in

identifying individual strengths and opportunities for future improvements. The success of the performance appraisal process depends largely on the line manager's experience and critical observation of the employee. This enables him/her to complete a constructive and objective appraisal.

HR function in knowledge based performance management identifies employees delivers the critical performance with respect to the firms' strategy and objectives, and ensures that performance is successfully carried out. Performance management systems can enhance knowledge sharing system, as well as manage conflict between different functions set out for employees in the performance agreements.

Conclusion

Training and development of university staff is central to effective and efficient workforce. Therefore, continuous professional development is seen to be core to professional and knowledge based-workers. Universities now acknowledge that lifelong learning must become a standard in order to remain relevant and competitive edge in an increasingly competitive university environment. Development of the teaching academic staff can take place formally through training courses or informally through learning or development on the job.

The need for lifelong learning among the lecturers is crucial to knowledge-intensive university environment because the use of their service relies solely on the knowledge and human talent of people in the university. When the HR department organizes training for academic staff, it helps them provide high quality and productive services and more innovative research and teaching outputs. Thus, training and development would result in better job performances, and, career advancement among Chinese employees.

Recommendations

This paper has demonstrated the relevance of Human Resource function in knowledge management in the university. Identified in the literature were challenges that affect HR function in knowledge management. These included the lack of capacity to implement HRM vis-à-vis knowledge management practices. There is also the problem relating to lack of support from the HR department at the Head Office;

and over reliance on clear on policies and procedures that hinders smooth running of the university. To address these limitations in implementing HRM by university managers, the following recommendations were made:

1. Devolution of HRM practices: the idea of devolution holds that appropriate HRM practices are to be devoluted to Faculties and Departments in order to free up resources in the personnel section. However, such policy requires that Heads of Departments be equipped with the appropriate HRM skills, knowledge and attitudes to effectively manage and develop staff.(Parry & Tyson, 2013, p. 174) examined the attendant effect of devolution of HRM tasks to managers in organizations and found out that it has positive effect on HRM effectiveness.
2. Discretion in Selection Process: the selection and development of university staff in the organisation with appropriate expertise is vital in ensuring that the personnel section is well equipped to take on its HR strategic role. This is in line with the views of Bratton & Gold (2012, p. 9) who posit that discretion in selection process allows the management to fill positions with the most qualified staff.
3. Ultimately, the successful implementation HR strategy depend largely on the capability and commitment of HR department, the senior management team, personnel sections as well as the line managers. There should be effective flow of information such that when HR decision making goes down to line managers, they should be able to make faster decisions that are more tailored to individual circumstances.

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