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Human Resource Management in the Nigerian Construction Firms: Practices and Challenges

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Abstract

Improvement on human resource management is critical to overall productivity and cost effectiveness in the construction industry. This study assesses the current human resource management practices in the Nigerian construction organisation and the challenges confronting it. Questionnaire survey was adopted for data collection while the sampling technique was purposive. Ninety eight human resource managers and construction professionals in two categories of construction organisations (client organisations involved in housing development and contractor organisations) were sampled. The results reveal that due process was followed in the recruitment process but the selections of desired candidates were often hampered by interferences and competitive work conditions. Furthermore, training and development practices were superficial, involving orienting newly recruited employee on facilities for optimum performance rather than developing employee job related competences. Provision of appropriate/modern working tools and equipment and provision of incentives and benefits to staff were the prevailing motivation and labour union practices. Challenges facing human resource management practice in the Nigerian construction industry include high labour turnover, interference at the selection stage, competitive wages and compensation issues among others. Further research is required to assess the impact of identified human resource practices on productivity and project performance.

Keywords: Challenges, Construction firms, Human resource management, Nigeria, Practices.

1. Introduction

The construction industry has been described as a barometer by which economic development of a nation is measured. This is because construction projects provide infrastructure required to drive socio-economic development and contributes to the Gross Domestic Products (GDP) as well as the standard of living of its citizenry. Construction process itself involves various activities with humans as a fundamental factor to the success of these activities (Aguenza and Som, 2012; Maxwell and Farquarson 2008). While it is true that machines have been developed to replace human in carrying out construction tasks (Rotman, 2013), it is also true that the machines cannot operate themselves. They have to be operated by human in order to achieve desired results. However, the low level of mechanization in the construction industry of developing countries leaves it

with no option than to heavily rely on Human Resource (HR) for its operations. In the construction industry of developing countries, HR account for significant part of the project cost. Cost of HR includes personnel administration, employee training, communication cost, welfare and compensation for health and safety. It therefore means that an effective Human Resources Management (HRM) will result in highly motivated workforce leading to high productivity, quality improvement and minimizes cost and time overruns.

HRM is a coherent approach to the management of an organisation's most valued assets; this include the people that work collectively in the organisation so as to contribute to the achievement of its objectives. HRM in essence deals with the process of attracting, developing and maintaining a talented and energetic workforce to support organisational objectives. The project oriented nature of construction activities, which is characterised by

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projects that are custom built to client satisfaction, nomadic nature of the labour force, uncertainties associated with the production process among others makes HR policies and practices uniquely different from those of manufacturing, health, and hospitality industries and thus a fundamentally different HRM models (Huemann and Keegan (2007).

Employment in the construction industry is characterised by relatively high rates of labour turnover which manifests in periodic labour shortage (Chan, Clarke and Dainty 2011; Erlick and Grabelsky, 2005 and McGrath-Champ, Rosewarne and Rittau 2011). According to the Institute of Management and Administration (cited in Olsen, Tatum and Defnall 2012), the skilled craftsmen shortage in the industry is not a shortage of workers per se, rather it is a shortage of adequately trained skilled and productive workers available for certain jobs. The growth of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) within the construction industry and the use of labour only sub-contractors have reduced commitment and investment in HR training within the industry (Dainty, Ison and Root 2004, Shafeek, 2016). Labour turnover within the industry is also attributed to migration of skilled intellectuals and technical personnel both from and within developing countries in search of better work condition. According to Wikipedia (2011), Nigeria, Kenya and Ethiopia are the most affected by emigration in Africa. Labour turnover in the industry is believed to be caused by ineffective HRM characterised by poor training or lack of opportunity for training, poor wages and compensation issues, irregularity of the workload, safety issues among others.

There is paucity of literature on HRM practices in the Nigerian construction industry. Adeagbo and Oyemogun's (2014) study focus on identifying the drivers and barriers to human resource development in the local construction firms in Nigeria. Other studies on HRM in Nigeria focus on other industries. For instance, Akinbode and Uweme, (2013) examined HRM practice in private cleaning service outsourcing organisation in Lagos. The focus of their study was on identifying the HR practices peculiar to cleaning services outsourcing organisation and the challenges confronting them. In another study, Oladipo and Abdulkadir (2011) examine the extent to which strategic HRM is practiced in the Nigerian manufacturing sector and the relationship between strategic HRM and organisational performance. Fajana, Owoyemi, Elegbede and Gbajumo-Sheriff (2011) on the other hand examined the influence of Nigeria socio-cultural characteristics on HRM practices.

The poor performance of the Nigerian construction industry in terms of delays in project delivery, cost uncertainty, and quality deficiency has consistently been a source of concern to industry stakeholders and researchers. Despite the existence of a large number of research efforts focused on addressing issues of poor project performance, the problem persist. In view of previous research findings that a positive relationship exist between organisational performance and HRM (Ayanda, Lawal and Ben-Bernerd 2014, Muhammad Masum et al. 2015), the current study therefore focuses on the state of HRM practices in the Nigerian construction industry in order to assess the extent to which construction

organizations in Nigeria use various traditional HRM practices with respect to recruitment, selection, training and motivation to increase the performance of the sector as well as the challenges confronting HRM practices in the construction sector.

2. Literature Review

The success of a company or business is directly linked to the performance of the people that work for that business. Since every organisation is made up of people, acquiring their services, developing their skills, motivating them to higher level performance and ensuring that they continue to maintain their commitment to the organisation are essential prerequisite to achieving organisational objectives. The process of making efficient and effective use of HR so that the set goals are achieved is referred to as HRM. There is no general agreement on what constitute HRM practice in literature. Practices that form the core of the various practices proposed for HRM comprise procurement (recruitment and selection), training and development, compensation (remuneration, incentive payment and retirement benefits), and maintenance (work satisfaction, health and safety).

2.1 Review of Research on HRM Practices in the Construction Industry

Zhai, Liu and Fellow (2014) investigated the role of HR practices in enhancing organisational learning in Chinese construction organisation using questionnaire survey and structural equation modelling. The study found that HR practices in Chinese construction organisations involve multidimensional practice of job description, participation, training, staffing, and rewards. Also, HR practice was found to have a significant positive effect on organisational performance.

In the United States construction industry, HRM theory that is currently widely accepted as having profound influence on organisational performance is employee motivation through: worker participation, recognition, team belonging, management and commitment and effective training (Yankov and Kleiner, 2001).

Huemann et al. (2007) developed a simple model of HRM process in project oriented company (inclusive of construction) which is different from mainstream HRM literature. The focus of the model is on employee wellbeing and ethical treatment at the end of the project. In addition to recruitment in mainstream HRM literature, they proposed that project personnel be assigned to project based on specific developmental need, expertise, and experience to work with particular client among others. In addition to employment, they proposed support for career development through on the job training and feedback while engaged on project. Finally, at the end of the project, they proposed three possible ethical treatments for project personnel: immediately assign them to new project, assign them to project starting sometime in the future where their skill will be better utilized, and hold them in abeyance in the absence of any project to be assigned to.

Tabassi and Abu Bakar (2009) explored HRM in construction projects in Iran. They found that training and

motivation of employees are major obstacles to effective use of HRM in Iran. To improve the performance of construction companies, they suggested employing both short-term and long-term training of construction workers at fixed location such as Technical Vocation Training Organisation (TVTO), as well as construction sites and other On the Job Training (OJT) facilities. In addition, they proposed that government should provide incentives or policies that will encourage self-learning through certification of fitness for occupation in the project.

2.2 Challenges of HRM in Construction Organisations

Chan (2005) quoting Thomas (1992) explains that integrating the views and interests of organisation workplace diversity dimensions such as age, ethnicity, ancestry, gender, physical ability/qualities, race, sexual orientation, educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, religious beliefs among others is a challenge in HRM. Chukwuemeka (2006:46) assert that employing a female worker imposes the burden of nursing mothers and its obvious consequences to productivity, including: loss of man hours, absenteeism and outright increase in labour turnover and layoffs. Government policies and legislation is another challenge on HRM. There are legislations on minimum wages, recruitment and selection (bothering on federal character), training and development, compensation, integration and separation of employees from the organisations. Yaro (2014) listed challenges of recruitment in the public service in Nigeria to include: interference by political office holders using sentiments and other primordial consideration in the recruitment process, federal character principle which prescribed ethnic balancing and equal opportunity to applicants from all geopolitical zones and recruitment on the basis of skills and technical abilities alone at the expense of positive attitude and character. These challenges are not limited to public service alone but also construction organisations in Nigeria. Oginni and Afolabi (2012) cited the challenge of "god fatherism" and nepotism taking the place of fairness and meritocracy in recruitment and placement in manufacturing organisations in Nigeria. The study bemoaned the practice of employing people without due process, and where vacancies are dully advertised, the interview is a mere formality. As such the result of most interviews does not count in the selection process.

3. Research Methods

The study was conducted in Lagos, Nigeria. Lagos is adjudged the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria and host a number of construction firms because of the perennial volume of construction activities. The research design adopted was a questionnaire survey because of the need to gather sufficient data from large population for the purpose of generalizing the findings. In addition, Phua (2013) assert that studies that are based on quantitative methods can be replicated and compared. Two categories of construction organisations: client organisations involved in housing development and contractor organisations were purposively selected on the bases of the number of employee engaged and the volume of construction workload. The sample frame comprises HR

managers and construction professionals in the two categories of construction organisations. A total of 98 questionnaires were retrieved out of 125 questionnaires administered which represent about 78 percent response rate.

The questionnaire comprises 3 sections. Section A is about demographic profile of the respondents. Section B consists of 44 HRM Practices frequently used in construction firm. The respondents were required to signify the frequency of use of listed HRM practices on a five point Likert scale (i.e. 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most times and 5 = all the times). Section C is on the challenges of HRM practice in the Nigerian Construction firms rated on a five-point Likert scale (i.e. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree).

Descriptive statistics was used to rank the variables in descending order based on the values of mean scores and standard deviation (SD). The variables with lower SD values were ranked higher.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample comprised of well-experienced respondents (58.2% had more than 6 years of working experience) in the construction industry. These respondents comprise HR managers for client organisations involved in housing development and construction professionals (architects, builders, engineers) who are construction managers in contracting organisations. Six percent are in executive management position, while 79% are in middle management position. In terms of academic qualification, 75% have first degree or its equivalent (HND). In terms of the number of years the companies that participated in the study have operated in Nigeria, 74.4% had over six years construction experience. This suggests that the construction organisations sampled have diverse years of construction experience involving HRM practices.

4.2 HRM Practices

The study sought the opinion of the respondents on the most frequently used practices in the Nigerian construction firms. The findings from the survey of various HRM practices are discussed below. Due to the word limit imposed by this journal, only the findings on few variables are discussed in detail.

4.2.1 Recruitment and Selection Practices

Recruitment is a set of activities used to attract sufficient job candidates who have the necessary potentials, competencies and traits to fill job needs. Selection on the other hand is the final step in the recruitment process, and involves choosing the candidate(s) that succeed in meeting the recruitment criteria. Fourteen variables representing recruitment and selection practices were identified from literature. The result presented in Table 1 shows that 8 out of 14 of the recruitment and selection practices are used most times. They include; placement of the right staff in the right department for the achievement of company general goals, and screening of candidate for vacant positions. This is consistent with Huemann et al. (2007) proposal for project oriented companies where it

was proposed that project personnel be assigned to project based on specific developmental need, expertise, and experience. This will bring about needed career development and improve productivity. Furthermore, the result indicates that preference for university graduates over polytechnic graduates, recruitments via referrals only, preference for male applicants over female applicants and youth (under 25 years) over older applicants are sometimes used for recruitment and selection of HR in the Nigerian construction firms. This is contrary to the practice in other industries like banking and manufacturing where young applicants (under 25 years) and university graduates are given preferential treatment above their counterpart who are older and had polytechnic education, in terms of job placement, remuneration and career progression. In the construction

industry, skills and competencies are rated far higher than the normative paper qualification commonly used for employee selection in most other sector of the economy as reported in Fajana et al. (2011). However, construction experience requirement often advertised does not favour young applicants as the years of work experience requirement are unrealistic.

The finding that preference for male applicant is not often the practice, is quite comforting in view of the age long perception that construction is a male dominated industry and vulnerable to masculine stereotypes. In the banking and hospitality industry, female applicants, particularly beautiful and attractive young single ladies are preferred to attract customers (Adenugba and Ilupeju, 2012)

Table1: Recruitment and Selection Practices

HRM Practices	Std. Deviation	Mean	Rank
Placement of right staff into the right department for the achievement of company general goals.	0.664	4.15	1
Screening of candidate for vacant positions	0.750	4.12	2
long term planning for human resources or manpower need of the organisation	0.865	3.93	3
Selection of staff based on quality & skill rather than academic qualification	0.853	3.79	4
Recruitment of staff for company general goal	0.928	3.77	5
Vacancies for staff are advertised internally & externally	0.930	3.58	6
Staff with high reputation are attracted with high salary from other companies	0.922	3.52	7
Conducting job analyses (determining the nature of each employee's job) before assigning them	0.965	3.47	8
Internal advertisement of vacancies for qualified staff	1.016	3.17	9
Foreign trained applicants are given preference over local trained applicants	0.970	3.08	10
University graduates are given preference over polytechnic graduates	1.103	2.98	11
Staff are recruited via referrals only	0.677	2.93	12
Preference are given to male applicants over female applicants	1.178	2.79	13
Young applicants below 25 years are given preference over older applicants	0.891	2.62	14

4.2.2 Training and Development Practices

Training is a planned process through which an organisation facilitates employees' learning of job-related

competencies. Fifteen variables on training and development practices were identified from literature (See Table 2).

Table 2: Training and Development Practices

HRM Practices	Std. Deviation	Mean	Rank
New staff are taking through company induction & training	0.632	4.37	1
Orientation and training of newly recruited employees	0.616	4.31	2
Training and development of staff on applicable softwares and tools for achievement of company goals	0.686	4.06	3
Staff are assigned on project based on skill & expertise	0.679	4.05	4
Allow staffs to be moved to another project at completion of a project	0.737	3.95	5
Training and skill development of managers (Leadership training)	0.736	3.93	6
Providing staff with opportunities for career development	0.725	3.9	7
Organising workshops, seminars and trainings to enhance employee skills	0.742	3.84	8
Career/professional advancement is encouraged among staff and necessary support is given	0.8	3.83	9
New staff are assigned to older employee for mentoring	0.677	3.79	10
Staff are engaged on project based on their experience on similar project	0.807	3.68	11
Staff are assigned on project based on availability of personnel	0.924	3.37	12
New staff are immediately assigned to projects	0.873	3.29	13
Staff are made to undergo training while waiting for the company to secure other projects	1.003	2.94	14
Low performing staff are dismissed from work without analysis/warning	1.182	2.06	15

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that training and development practices used most times in the Nigeria construction firms are: inducting and training of newly recruited staff, orienting and training new employee, training on soft wares and use of tools, and assigning staff based on their skill and expertise. The practice of having induction and training for new staff is common practice across almost all sectors (Oakland and Oakland, 2001). This is consistent with Huemann et al. (2007) training proposal but contrary to Tabassi and Abu Bakar (2009) observation of HRM practice in the Iranian construction industry. This finding is unexpected in view of barriers of HR development posed by SMEs, self-employed workers and subcontractors in the construction industry (Adeagbo and Oyemogun, 2014). The survey further revealed that sending staff for training while waiting for the company to secure other projects and disengaging low performing staff without prior warning is rarely the practice in the Nigerian construction firm. Training is the only ways by which technical skills can be transferred. Incurring additional cost on training staff can be offset by encouraging Job rotation and mentoring by experienced employee on the job.

4.2.3 Motivation and Labour Relation Practices

Motivation is external and internal factors that stimulate desire and energy in people to be continually interested and committed to a job or organisational goal. Fifteen variables were identified as motivation and labour relation

practices from literature as presented in Table 3. The results indicate that among the practices used most times to motivate staff are provision of appropriate and modern working tools and equipment, providing incentives and benefits to staff, and encouraging team spirit within the organisation. Others include: making provisions for accommodation, feeding, transport and health insurance in staff emolument, recognising and rewarding outstanding performance and regular performance appraisal and rewarding deserving staff. This is consistent with non-financial motivational factors reported in Ameh and Shokumbi (2013) as most effective for enhancing output of skilled and semi-skilled construction workers. The results suggest the use of hygiene factors as proposed by Herzberg in his two factor theory of motivation and physiological and safety needs in Maslow's theory. These factors may not be sufficient to motivate highly skilled employee into higher performance.

Labour relation is aimed at promoting industrial harmony that would boost productivity. The survey indicates that labour relation practices seldom used include: allows employee participation in only establishment-based union, negotiation of Trade unions issues with management and allows employee participation in national trade unions activities. This is reasonable as there is no recognised umbrella body for construction workers in Nigeria. Construction activities are rarely affected by official national strike

Table 3: Motivation and Labour Relation Practices

HRM Practices	Std. Deviation	Mean	Rank
Provision of appropriate / modern working tools and equipment	0.632	4.37	1
Providing incentives and benefits to staff	0.883	4.28	2
Team spirit within the organization is encouraged	0.794	4.27	3
Provision of Accommodation, feeding, transport and health insurance in staff remuneration and compensation	0.717	4.2	4
recognizing Employee outstanding performance and adequately rewarding them	0.953	4.17	5
Performance appraisal of Staff is done regularly and deserving staff are rewarded accordingly.	0.658	4.14	6
Regular review of employee pay/salary in line with economic realities	0.751	3.95	7
Setting general and specific management policy for the company	0.803	3.93	8
Provision of incentive and motivational schemes for employees	0.713	3.92	9
Staff at various levels have access to company's motivation & incentive schemes	0.959	3.87	10
Employee feels secure in their job	0.946	3.63	11
Setting the policy for Collective bargaining, contract negotiation and grievance handling.	1.185	3.44	12
Allows employee participation in only establishment-based union	1.37	2.83	13
Negotiation of Trade unions issues with management	1.322	2.72	14
Allows employee participation in national trade unions activities	1.443	2.66	15

4.3 Challenges Confronting HRM Practices in the Nigeria Construction Firm

Thirty-two challenges grouped under three categories: recruitment and selection, training and development, and motivation and labour relations were identified from mainstream HRM literature.

The result of challenges confronting recruitment and selection practices as presented in Table 4 indicates that competition for globally mobile talents, avoiding high experience labour turnover, reducing the cost per hire, recruiting the right person for a specific position, getting

the right candidate for vacancies internally advertised and attracting staff with high reputation from other companies top the list. These challenges bother on issues of recruitment of desired candidate and employee turnover. These findings collaborate Yaro's (2014) study which linked recruitment challenges to primordial issues of ethnicity, nepotism, favoritism among others. The finding is also supported by Madubiko's assertion of 'god fatherism', which restrict the selection of desired employee. Besides the recruitment practice, the issue of employee turnover in search of better work conditions and

other benefits is a big challenge confronting the HRM practice in the Nigeria construction industry. The most appropriate employee may be attracted to the oil and gas

companies, banks or academics because of the conducive employment conditions.

Table 4: Challenges Confronting HRM Practice in the Construction Industry

Challenges	Mean	Rank
Recruitment and Selection practices		
Competition for globally mobile talent	4.41	1
Avoiding high experience labour turnover	4.26	2
Reducing the cost per hire	4.26	2
Recruiting the right person for a specific position	4.20	4
Getting the right candidate for Vacancies internally advertised.	4.03	5
Attracting Staff with high reputation from other companies	4.00	6
To represent the interests of employees within the framework of its primary obligation to senior management.	3.99	7
Collecting the right information about jobs to prepare job descriptions.	3.95	8
Making sure employees have the mechanisms required to contest unfair practices	3.85	9
Outsourcing of short and long term employee services	3.54	10
Recruiting staff for specific project only (i.e on short- term bases)	3.53	11
Training and Development practices		
Identifying staff skill gap	4.02	1
Ensuring adequate training not to undermine department's effectiveness	4.01	2
Ensuring employees are doing their best during time of turbulence	3.99	3
Making adequate budget for employee training in dwindling economy	3.96	4
Training and development of staff	3.95	5
Preparing appropriate and well detail job description	3.94	6
Rapid advances in HR technology	3.88	7
Motivation and Labour Relation Practice		
Maintaining company employee salary structure in a competitive labour market	4.04	1
Maintaining good salary band among categories of employee in a competitive labour market	4.03	2
Providing adequate retirement benefit	3.98	3
Clearly defining how management should be treating employees.	3.96	4
Ensuring employees do not commit any unfair labour practices	3.94	5
Motivating sub-ordinates non-financially	3.86	6
Ensuring the company do not commit any unfair labour practices	3.85	7
Maintaining fair salaries among categories of employee	3.84	8
Ensuring the company is not in court because of discriminatory actions	3.84	8
Ensuring there is no conflicts among the sub-ordinates in the organisation	3.78	10
Setting the policy for collective bargaining, contract negotiation, and grievance handling.	3.76	11
Setting general and specific management policy for organisation	3.71	12
Ensuring that some employees do not think that their salaries are unfair and inequitable relative to others in the organisation	3.70	13
Allowing participation in only establishment-based union	3.57	14
Negotiating Trade unions issues with management	3.49	15
Staff involvement in national trade unions activities	3.44	16

Challenges confronting training and development practice include; identifying staff skill gap, ensuring adequate training so as not to undermine department effectiveness, and ensuring employees are at their best in times of turbulence among others. Most training takes place on the job site and are horridly done in order not to undermine production and profitability. This account for training inadequacy and contrary to Tabassi and Abu Barkar (2009) suggestion of conducting both short and long term training for employee in location outside the work environment. The appropriate time for training workers is during the period of low activities or while waiting for new jobs.

Furthermore, maintaining employee salary structure, maintaining good salary band among categories of workers, and providing adequate retirement benefits

among others were the dominant motivation and labour relation challenges. This may be attributed to the absence of trade unions in construction organisations for collective bargaining. In addition, the growth in construction SMEs which provides competitive services, coupled with the lowest bidder wins syndrome is an impediment to uniform emolument and compensation in the construction industry. This finding unfortunately, account for the high labour turnover reported in Chan et al. 2011 and McGrath-Champ et al. 2011).

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to assess the extent to which construction organisations in Nigeria use the various traditional HRM practices to improve the performance of

the industry. The study found that recruitment and selection practices in the construction organisation are distinctly different from those of the manufacturing and banking industry and centres on selection of skilled and technically competent personnel for organisation general goal. The study also revealed that training practices in the construction organisation sampled is superficial, aimed at orienting the new employee to the organisation and the facilities for optimum performance rather than employee skill development. Furthermore, challenges of HRM practices identified in the study are more of socio-cultural issues, and bothers on influence of political office holders

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- and other influential personalities, government policies with regards to recruitment using federal character policy, wages and compensation policies and employee turnover in search of better condition of service.
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