

Competency Development and Human Resource Flexibility

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Abstract: This paper discussed the relationship between competency development and human resource flexibility. The objectives of the paper were to examine the roles dimensions such as skill training, mentoring and project work play in outcomes of human resource flexibility. As a seminar paper, a theoretical design was adopted in the structure and approach towards assessing the variables. The review of literature was premised within the resource-based view and human capital theoretical frameworks; both of which advocate investments in the development of the organization's human capital as a basis for driving outcomes such that human resource flexibility for improved organizational competitiveness and adaptability. Following the review, the study observed as its findings that skill training, mentoring and project work contribute in the actualization of human resource flexibility; it was stated in conclusion that related actions and processes of competency development are critical to the quality, responsiveness and effectiveness of the organization's human resources, advancing flexibility features necessary for survival and well-being. It was recommended that organizations invest more and offer more support toward processes and actions that enable workers learning, growth and development within the workplace.

Keywords: *Competency development, human resource flexibility, human capital theory, resource-based view theory*

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The imperatives of dynamism as a feature of the organization, borders on the unpredictability and turbulent nature of today's business environment. Research (Pulakos, Arad, Donomvan & Plamondo, 2000; Millar, Mao & Moreo, 2010; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004) shows that the survival of the organization is hinged on its capacity to effectively adapt and address the changes that increasingly shape and redefine its market. Youndt and Snell (2004) attributed organizational change capacities to its demonstration of flexibility at the individual level. That is to say, for organizations to not only thrive and perform substantially, they must manifest human resource flexibility. Human resource flexibility describes the capacity for the varied engagement and application of the

organization's workers in terms of skills, behaviour and practice. It is important for sustained robustness and resilience especially during change or crisis events. Sirmon, Hitt and Ireland (2007) stated that human resource flexibility advances variety in the functionality of the workers and their ability to deal with changing conditions and situations thus enabling the operational efficiency and effectiveness of the organization.

Related studies (Tracey, 2012; Boxall, 2013; Bates, 2004) have demonstrated the importance of human resource flexibility to the agility and competitiveness of organizations. Sekhar, Patwarshan and Vyas (2016) investigated the relationship between the culture of

the organization and the flexibility of its human resource. Their study showed that practices or policies which support change and responsive job designs – impact positively on the change capacity of the organizations human resource. Nieves and Quintana (2016) in their own study advanced training as a prerequisite for improved outcomes of human resource flexibility. According to Nieves and Quintana (2016), training equips the workers to be more versatile and able to cope or address varied work-related demands and expectations. However, Eilstrom and Kock (2008) distinguished between competency development and training, arguing that competency development involves a much wider and dynamic process of which training is only an aspect. This is as much literature and research has bothered primarily about training and its implication for organizations with little recourse to other associative factors embodied in competency development. This focus has over time created a vacuum in knowledge particular to the value of competency development for human resource and organization as a whole.

Competency development details the various actions and processes concerned with coordination, advancing, enabling and

equipping of the organizations human resource in ways that enhance their knowledgeability of their roles and responsibilities, enriches their experiences at the workplace, and motivates them to do better and to improve on their functions (Eilstrom & Kock, 2008). As earlier noted, prior studies on human resource flexibility have focused on antecedents such as organizational leadership, culture and training (Kumari & Pradan, 2003; Pulakos et al. 2000; Boxall, 2013) with scarce reference to the role of competency development. Omran and Suleiman (2017) stated that the organizations operational capacity is directly linked to the competency of its human resource; the development of which bridges the organizations capabilities with the expectations of its environment. This paper identifies a knowledge gap in existing literature with regard to the role of competency development in addressing the deficiencies of flexibility in the organizations human resource – especially given the increasing volatility of the business environment; hence, this paper departs from previous research in its discussion on the relationship between competency development and human resource flexibility.

Statement of the Problem

Organizations exist and are only able to thrive when their features and competencies effectively mimic the dynamism of their environment. However, such dynamisms and volatility have in recent years increased substantially and have contributed to the failure and demise of most business enterprises across the world (Knag, Chung & Dainty, 2002; Okoli & Pawloski, 2004). This was made evident by the recent upheavals in technology use due to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and as such the increased emphasis for staff competent in a wide margin of roles – from traditional physical service and front – desk functions, to effective teleworking and as such the use organizations (Moore et al, 2002).

of modern technologies and adjustments in skills, behaviour and human resource practice (Hermawan & Suharnomo, 2020). The problem, unfortunately, traces to the incompetence and poor adjustments observed in the human resource of most organizations – leading to problematic functions, poor service outcomes and a loss in the customers and market of the organization. The noted lack of flexibility by the workers of most organizations was also made obvious in their inability to realign themselves and reapply themselves within the context of the new realities and challenges that currently shapes the business environment and impacts on their

Studies indicate that the success of the organization is hinged on the effectiveness of its workforce (Portgieter & Van der Merwe, 2002; Siddique, 2004). That is to say, organizations draw indepthly from the competencies and capacities of their human resource; hence a focus on developing or advancing the competencies of the worker, would invariably enhance the organizations level of functionality and health in dealing with the demands or challenges evident in its environment. Kuijpers (2003) identified competency development as linking the organization's competencies with the gaps in its environment; thus, enabling its agility in

changing and coping with the tides of change in its context. In the same vein, Rodriguez et al (2002) stated that organizations that are able to provide the required support and training experiences for their workers that match the nature of competition in their market, have a better chance at surviving and operating efficiently. Thus, research and focus on the role of competency development would provide the necessary yardsticks for understanding the basis and framework through which competency development advances outcomes such as skill flexibility, behavioural flexibility and practice flexibility.

Conceptual Framework

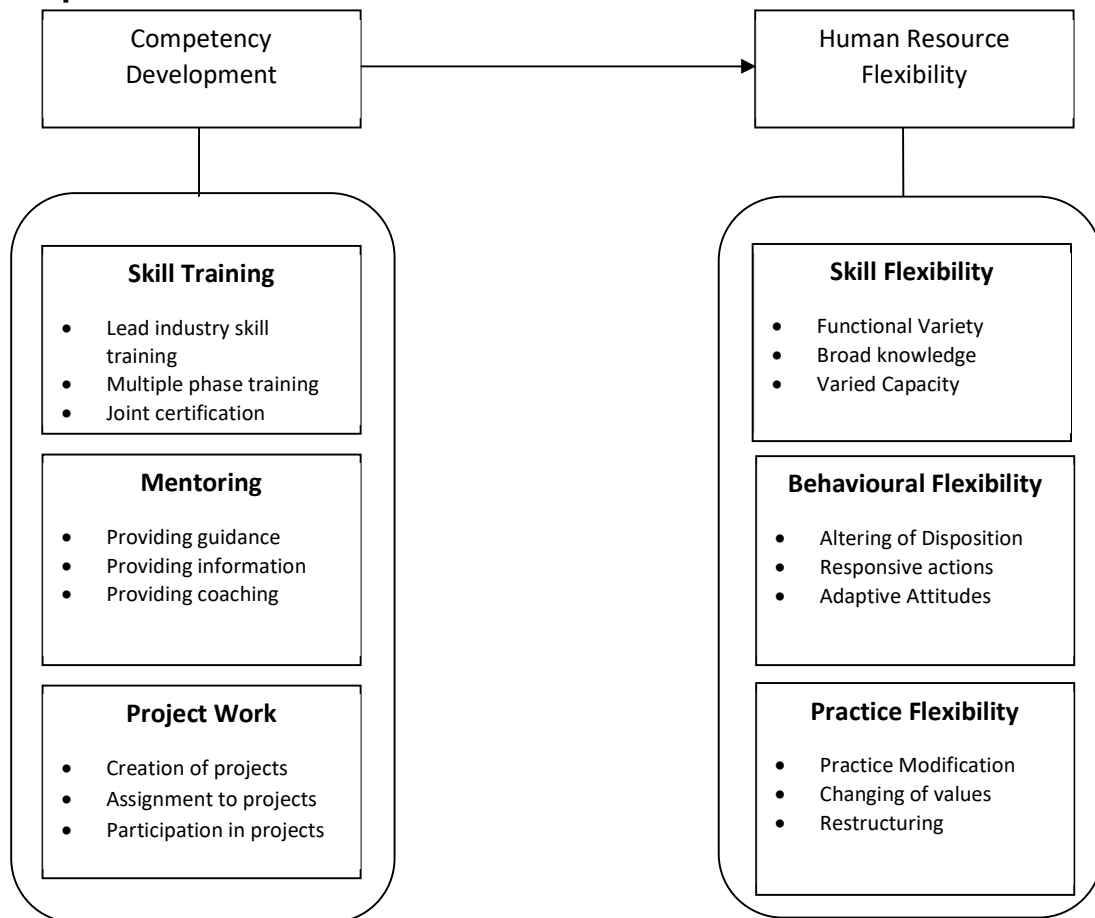


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Competency Development and Human Resource Flexibility

Source: Researcher's Desk (2022) with dimensions adapted from Zeb-Obipi (2016) and measures from Sekhar et al (2016).

Aim/Objectives

The aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between competency development and human resource flexibility. The objectives are to:

- i. Discuss the relationship between skill training and human resource flexibility

- ii. Examine the relationship between mentoring and human resource flexibility
- iii. Ascertain the relationship between project work and human resource flexibility

Research Questions

The following research questions are posed to guide the discussion on the relationship between competency development and human resource flexibility:

- i. What is the relationship between skill training and human resource flexibility?

- ii. What is the relationship between mentoring and human resource flexibility?
- iii. What is the relationship between project work and human resource flexibility?

Significance of the Study

This paper, in discussing the relationship between competency development and human resource flexibility, offers insight which could be useful to scholars, human resource management professionals, managers and students alike. The paper advances a position on the criticality of competency development in coping with the volatility of the business environment, through improvements to the human resource flexibility of the organization. This way, it offers a perspective on the role dimensions such as skill training, mentoring and project work play, in stimulating functional effectiveness and ensuring that workers skills, behaviour and practices are varied in line with the changes or variations

that mark their environment. This enriches literature by advancing a shift in terms of content on employee or workforce development from only training to a much broader and encompassing action – which is competency development. The position and perspective advanced in this paper will also signal the importance of driving internal organizational strengths, competitiveness and creativity, through the development of its own human resource competencies as proposed by the resource-based view theory and the human capital theory – thereby reinforcing and validating the related theories as substantial in explaining human resource flexibility.

Operational Definition of Terms

Behaviour Flexibility:

Flexibility with regard to behaviour is concerned with the workers capacity for functionality within diverse or varied

contexts and the altering of dispositions in line with the unique requirements of each context

Competency Development:

This describes the actions and processes through which the organization refines,

enhances and enriches the experiences, capacities and knowledge of its workers

Human Resource Flexibility:

Flexibility of the organizations human resources refers to the extent of its fluidity, and capacity for application and reapplication in a variety of ways, roles,

contexts and structures such that ensures functional continuity and sustained organizational operations.

Mentoring:

This is concerned with the relationships (mentor and mentee) designed to guide the worker – ensuring their actions,

behaviour and focus is aligned with that of the organization.

Practice Flexibility:

This involves the modification of practices, values, actions and operational modules in line with the emerging concerns and

changes in the environment of the organization

Project Work:

This describes the focus on problem-solving and the development of competencies through structured

experiences that create the opportunity for improving and enhancing related capabilities

Skill Flexibility:

This describes the extent to which workers skillsets vary and covers a broad range of

capabilities and functions in the organization

Skill Training:

This refers to the mastery of various competencies and by that the enablement

or enhancement of various capabilities and functional capacities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptual Review

This sub-section of the paper offers a review on the concepts of the study (competency development and human

resource flexibility) – their definitions, manifestations and possible relationship.

Competency Development

In this context, competence development is defined as an overall designation for the various measures that can be used to affect the supply of competence on the internal labour market (in individual employees, groups of employees or the whole personnel group (Heinsman et al, 2006; Kock et al, 2007; Burke & Hutchins, 2007). To be more specific, it may refer to measures regarding: (a) recruitment, promotion (e.g., career planning) and personnel mobility (internal and/or external); (b) education or training of personnel, for instance by means of internal or external courses; (c) planned

changes of tasks or work organization through different types of measures (e.g., job development, job rotation, team organization) with the objective of furthering informal learning in work (Alvarez et al, 2004)).

Competence development can thus refer to one or more of these measures. These measures may be planned, but attention should also be paid to unplanned or unintended functions that a certain action may have. In this regard, it should be pointed out that the term “competence development” sometimes takes upon another meaning, namely to denote

the individual learning processes through which competence is acquired. A distinction can therefore be made between an organization-related and an individual related meaning of the term "competence development".

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that activities that do not have competence development as their primary objective may imply competence development for the individual as a secondary effect and can therefore be seen as educating/developing (Millar et al, 2010). Another important point to emphasize is that different strategies and methods for competence development can be combined. This is probably also often the case in practice. It might even be argued that one ought to strive for an integration between two or more of the strategies mentioned in order to facilitate qualified on-the-job learning (Millar et al, 2010).

An organization's investments in competence development can be analysed as symbolic arrangements with the function of exemplifying and communicating, inwards and outwards, conformity with the values with which the organization wants to be associated with the objective of strengthening its legitimacy. In the same way, an increase in the education requirements for a given post can be assumed to have a symbolic legitimizing function (Millar et al, 2010). The demand for qualifications in an activity is seen largely as a social construction and relatively independent of the "objective" requirements regarding qualification. With this view, the investments made in competence development can be expected

to be reactive, ad hoc in nature and justified by short-term considerations rather than a result of a conscious strategy for competence development.

A series of more specific assumptions regarding the driving forces and prerequisites for an organization's investment in education can be formulated on the basis of an institutional view (Kang et al, 2015): (a) Organizations in which a large proportion of the employees have a professional affiliation (e.g. health care) can be expected to invest more in various forms of competence development than organizations with fewer professional people (b) The stronger and more complex the institutional environment of an organization, the more extensive can the investments in competence development be expected to be. (c) With the increased legitimacy of investments in education and other forms of competence development more types of organizations will invest in competence development, and a weaker coupling is to be expected between the investments made (as regards, for instance, extent and form) and various factors such as job complexity, work organization and competence requirements. (d) With an increased legitimacy of investments in education and other forms of competence development as a means of handling changes in the external or internal context of the organization, it is to be expected that there will follow investments in more general qualifications, and at the same time fewer efforts at systematically evaluating the effects of the investments made (Millar et al, 2010; Sekhar et al, 2016; Zeb-Obipi, 2016).

Skill training:

Training is an important aspect of competence development. Zeb-Obipi (2016) opined that training which is targeted at particular skill sets, upgrade and further equip the worker in terms of functionality. Skill training offers a two-way benefit - to the individual employee through their improved approach toward

work, and on that basis, an enhanced level of relevance to the organization; and then the organization as well, through improved levels of efficiency and enhanced outcomes of productivity, competitiveness and effectiveness. Skill training is considered a vital aspect and action in competency development because it links

the human interests with those of the organization -bridging what the individual

has to offer and what the organization expects from the worker (Zeb-Obipi, 2016).

Mentoring:

The process and practice of mentoring is one structured to address the workers need for guidance and direction in the workplace and in their career. Mentoring, according to Zeb-Obipi (2016) is an important aspect of competency development which builds on the experiences, knowledgeability and capacity of the mentor to create or serve as an exemplary model through which their mentees can learn and also advance themselves. Mentors offer direct and

orientation to their mentees through their actions, suggestions and the clarification of functional and organizational priorities. Mentoring thus advances work relationships that are beneficial to the workers and the organization as well – facilitating workplace stability and coherence through healthy workplace social ties and cooperation (Zeb-Obipi, 2016).

Project work:

This dimension is concerned with the shared action of problem-solving as expressed in team or group work. It occasions opportunities for workers to share ideas and learn from others, especially under conditions that are tasking and challenging, requiring creative or innovative approaches (Zeb-Obipi, 2016). Project work details varied exchanges between workers, especially that of knowledge and skills, given that as group

members workers tend to have more access to significant others who are probably more experienced or capable within the given scope of interest. Millar et al (2010) noted that team effort not only builds on the pooling of ideas in view of addressing specific problems, but in a way, it is also designed to educate and develop younger or less experienced staff on the procedures and processes involved in problem-solving.

Human Resource Flexibility

Within the strategic approach to human resource management, researchers have advocated flexibility in human resource systems and processes to help the organization adapt to a complex and dynamic environment (Ketkar & Sett, 2009; Way et al., 2012; Camps et al., 2015). From this point of view, human resource flexibility is conceived as a capability through which the organization can more easily adapt to environmental contingency changes (Tracey, 2012; Camps et al., 2015; Sekhar, Patwardhan & Vyas, 2016), where both intangible assets, such as knowledge and other tangible ones, play a role in the determination of competitive advantage (Hitt et al. 2001; Sirmon, Hitt & Ireland, 2007; Aryee et al., 2016). In the words of Wright and Snell (cited in Stokes et al, 2015), employees' flexibility can be defined as the extent to which the firm's human

resources possess skills and behaviour repertoires which offer the organization a chance to develop strategic alternatives within its competitive environment.

Human resource flexibility concentrates on the multi-talented nature of workers as indicated by the changing nature of their personality domain, for instance their expertise, behaviour and learning. It refers to the ability to develop, organize and install human resource system in an organizational setup which will manage human resources as a whole to compete on the basis of environment responsiveness and innovation. Human resource flexibility has been perceived as a capability that helps an organization to adapt to changing environmental contingencies (Nieves & Quintana, 2016). Beltran-Martin et al. (2008) has

found that employees having the advantage of the flexible work system shows greater involvement towards organization which ultimately increases organization's performance. With the support of human resource flexibility, performance management system not only value current performance of the employees, but also demonstrates a further way for their advancement of capabilities, skills and knowledge in upcoming times. This will inspire them for positive conduct towards work and organization. At the same time, this will make employees to react aggressively and effectively to their respective portfolio, ultimately leading to effective organizational performance (Galinsky, Sakai, & Wigton, 2011). Employees with high human resource flexibility system are more satisfied with their employment than organizations with a lesser flexibility plan. It has a positive impact on employee performance (Ketkar & Sett, 2009).

Employees with a broad knowledge base contribute to the organization's competitive advantage because this base generates higher capabilities to develop more efficient means to fulfil the different task requirements (Boxall, 2013). A number of studies assume that greater flexibility

increases employees' level of satisfaction and motivation and, accordingly, their productivity (Camps et al., 2015). Moreover, flexible employees maintain profitable relationships with customers that contribute to meeting those customers' needs, as well as to improving their satisfaction levels (Youndt & Snell, 2004; Fu et al., 2015).

Human resource flexibility may become relevant in the adoption of innovative solutions inside the firm because such flexibility implies that employees can better respond to stimuli which have previously appeared. To this must be added that, when employees improve their knowledge base on a regular basis, their performance variability at work decreases and, consequently, their productivity increases (Nieves and Quintana, 2016). Similarly, flexibility encourages the members of an organization to improvise and come up with new ideas, to question themselves and reflect on their actions, to give sense and generate new knowledge from these actions. For instance, it allows organization members to think about ways to reduce costs and develop new innovations in service delivery (Youndt & Snell, 2004; Nieves & Quintana, 2016).

Skill flexibility:

Flexibility in skills is one of the most relevant antecedents of flexibility in behaviours (Nieves & Quintana, 2016). Following the suggestion of Wright and Snell (1998), Beltrán-Martín (2008) and Kumari and Pradhan (2014), skill flexibility refers on the one hand to the number of potential alternatives uses where the knowledge and skills owned by an employee can be applied. Those who have acquired a large number of skills which allow them to perform a wide range of tasks are flexible employees. A flexible employee is thus one who shows the ability to work on different tasks and under various circumstances, a low cost and a short period of time being required to mobilize this employee to new functions or jobs (Nieves & Quintana, 2016; De Lastra et al., 2014; Camps et al., 2015).

On the other hand, skill flexibility is also related to the ability of employees to develop a broad variety of skills in the future (Wright and Snell, 1998; Maurer et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2013). Flexible employees are trained and recycled according to necessity; they anticipate the needs for future skills, show enthusiasm about learning new approaches to tasks, and perceive each event occurring inside the organization as a way to learn something important for the future (Pulakos et al., 2000; Dyer & Ericksen, 2005; Chang et al., 2013; Stokes et al., 2015).

Skill flexibility is that option given by the association where workers can utilize their abilities. It has two attributes, (a) resource flexibility, and the number of potential alternatives uses

to which employee skills can be applied and (b) how individuals with different skills can be quickly reorganized. Resource flexibility in regard to employee competencies refers to the degree to which employees possess - or can quickly acquire - competencies that enable them to successfully perform alternative work-related activities (e.g., tasks, roles, jobs, etc.) and employ alternative technologies.

Moreover, skill flexibility describes how quickly and effectively employees are adapting new skills that the organization gives them (Boxall, 2013). Broadly speaking skill flexibility can be generated in two different ways. First, organizations may have employees who own a set of broad-based skills and are capable of using them under different require conditions. Broad-based skills are valuable because they generate output streams for existing requirements and are also capable of producing output for possible alternative requirements. However, skills possessed by employees, but not currently be of use may open up new opportunities of business for the organization, and indeed, may influence strategic choices (Nieves & Quintana, 2016).

Second, an organization may employ a wide variety of "specialist" employees who

provide flexibility by allowing the firm to reconfigure skill profiles to meet changing needs. Neuman and Wright, (cited in Tracey, 2012) have brought the findings stating that with this flexibility, when the need arises, the firm may reorganize its employees (e.g., through project teams) to achieve the desired skill profile to fit with the changed demand. Thus, a wide range of employee skills contributes to flexibility. An organization may develop skill flexibility through processes such as job-rotation, cross-functional teams, and project-based work arrangements, all of which generate broad skill configurations specific to the organization that are not easily replicable (Bates, 2004). Employees having skill flexibility will easily cope with different type of job requirements. They can successfully meet the requirements of the market, customers and are more likely to manage the job stress effectively than the employees without having skill flexibility in them. This in turn makes them better performers contributing towards organizational effectiveness. It can be assumed that the higher the level of skill flexibility, the higher the organizational effectiveness (Bates, 2004).

Behavioural flexibility:

The definition of behavioural flexibility by Wright and Snell (cited in Tracey, 2012) gives the consideration of 'behaviour' at work to those routine scripts or sequences that employees follow when performing their tasks. For these authors, behaviours become rigid or inflexible when the employees who have applied a sequence of actions to handle repetitive situations select the same sequence to deal with new situations. By contrast, if employees are capable of using different routines when faced with new circumstances, their behaviours are flexible. Expressed differently, employees with flexible behaviours adapt their responses to previously unknown circumstances on the basis of improvisation rather than following

predefined action patterns (Bhattacharya et al., 2005; Dyer and Ericksen, 2005; Kumari & Pradhan, 2014;). There is a variety of reasons why flexible behaviours amongst employees constitute a valuable resource for the organization. Firstly, employees who can successfully cope with different contingencies at their workplace allow the firm to achieve savings in the costs derived from the lack of adaptation to change (Nieves & Quintana, 2016). And secondly, behavioural flexibility makes it easier to implement change processes in the firm, insofar as it gives the organization real chances to adequately respond to a wide range of situations (Bhattacharya et al., 2005; Beltrán-Martín and Roca-Puig, 2013).

Behavioural flexibility states about adjusting to new circumstance contradicted to the routine conduct. It represents an adaptable attitude of the employees as opposed to routine behaviours and the extent to which employees possess a broad range of behavioural characters that can be adapted according to the situation-specific demands. Resource flexibility in workforce behaviours refers to the degree to which the firm's existing employees possess - and are willing (motivated) to employ - behaviour scripts that can be applied to alternative uses (Nieves & Quintana, 2016). Behavioural flexibility can be distinguished from skill flexibility in the sense that employees may be skilled but lack the behavioural motivation to change or they may be highly motivated but lack the necessary skills or knowledge to make change decisions (Way et al, 2013). Employee behaviour flexibility is valuable because it enables the employee to deal with a variety of situations towards facilitating change implementation. Organizations having employees with enhanced learning behaviour capabilities

Practice flexibility:

Practice flexibility is about how rapidly, viably and productively human resource department adjusts and executes new human resource practices. Human resource practice flexibility in workforce management refers to the degree to which the organization can quickly (and effectively) implement alternative human resource processes and structures - i.e., implement human resource practices that are different than those currently employed by the firm (Nieves & Quintana, 2016; Kock et al, 2007). Aryee et al (2016) defined practice flexibility as having five classes, for example, 1- choices of overseeing time, 2- flexi time and flexplace, 3- reduced time, 4- time off, lastly 5- culture of adaptability. Whereas the Dension hypothesis (cited in Camps et al, 2015) has brought human resource flexibility composing of four collective qualities, for example, involvement, consistency, flexibility, and

means that the organization does not need to hire new people with new attributes to address environmental changes (Fu, 2015). There is some evidence that behavioural flexibility at the organizational level contributes to organizational performance. Organizations having the culture of flexibility are adaptable to the changing environment which has a positive impact on organizational effectiveness (Fu, 2015). Some studies have shown that organizations that are superior at learning and modifying its behaviour reflect new knowledge and insights which can enhance organizational performance (Boxall, 2013). This is because employees with behavioural flexibility usually have more likability in the workplace and enjoy favourable relationships with colleagues, superiors and subordinates. They are more likely to behave positively in every situation and context that arises. This will help the employees as well as the organization to perform effectively in a wide range of contexts.

mission, which are key components of organizational effectiveness. From all these components, flexibility studies are stressing on human resource flexibility as it is more related with worker behaviour adaptability and human resource practice adaptability. It has an immediate effect on human resource management, i.e., worker, maintenance, work fulfilment (Ngo & Loi, 2008).

Flexibility of human resource practices is the extent to which the organization's human resource practices can be adapted and applied across a variety of situations, or across various sites or units of the firm, and the speed with which these adaptations and applications can be made (Way et al, 2013). Flexible human resource practices permit employees to have an adaptable work plan that makes them to perform adequately both

particular and expert levels of work as the situation demands. Practice flexibility in workforce management refers to the degree to which human resource systems are comprised of human resource practices that can be staffing, developing, dismiss, retain, and motivate employees across different environmental contexts. Practice flexibility allows the firm to offer similar human resource practices across different units in achieving strategic consistency while adapting parameters to meet local concerns (Nieves & Quintana, 2016). Organizations that develop practice flexibility create an environment where the employees are able to respond more dynamically to environmental change, which is related to competitive advantage and thus bringing organizational effectiveness. It allows employees to work in a stress-free condition, enhancing their effectiveness and productivity. Human resource management practice flexibility is the degree to which such practices can be adapted and applied to a variety of situations or in diverse units or sections of the organization, as well as the speed at which these adaptations and applications take place (Bhattacharya et

al., 2005; Beltrán-Matín et al., 2008; Kumari & Pradhan, 2014). It could be said that it is the firm's ability to implement/apply alternative human resource practices easily and effectively. Flexibility in practices may create value inside the organization in several ways. Firstly, when the firm's situation undergoes changes, the organization can change its practices quickly. For instance, a remuneration system based on the description of jobs is bound to create resistance to change; however, a flexible pay policy linked to profit measures adapts faster to changes in terms of profit increase or decrease (Ismail et al., 2015). Secondly, flexibility in human resource practices will most probably result in flexible behaviours amongst employees. In the previous example about variable compensation plans, it becomes easier for employees to adapt to the change required by the business because their remuneration is determined by the firm's success. And thirdly, human resource practice flexibility enables the firm to offer similar practices in different units and to achieve coherence throughout the organization.

Competency Development and Human Resource Flexibility

Investing in competency development is imperative for any organisation, which will certainly realise a return on investment in developing their workers. Those who neglect this important aspect of human resource management are bound to suffer the consequences as warned by Kumari and Pradhan (2014), who state that investing in skills training is vitally important in today's competitive marketplace. When companies fall behind in the development of their human resources, they are prone to fall behind in countless other ways as well. The above is confirmed by Ngo and Loi (2008) in their comment on the fact that we live in very turbulent times.

Changes occur frequently in organisations, in jobs and in the way they are performed. Nowadays, it is important for managers to

serve as mentors and in that way guide their subordinates and help them to grow in confidence, and to develop new skills to cope and adapt to the challenges of change. Workers are essentially assets to an organisation and should therefore be treated as human capital. The implications of more investment in them would raise expectations from them in terms of performance. Their improved skills and behaviour will give the organisation its competitive edge (Ngo & Loi, 2008).

Siddique (2004) asserts that human capital represents the human factor in the organisation. The combined intelligence and skills and expertise of employees give the organisation its distinctive character. The human elements of the organisation are those that are capable of

learning; striving for change, innovation and provision of creative thrust, which if properly nurtured will ensure long-term survival of the organisation. According to Burke and Hutchins (2007), line managers, supervisors and workers are often taken for granted and not recognized by senior management as important to the

operations of the organization. He further advises that people are not just cogs in vast organisational machines; rather, they also experience problems on and off the job, which impede their performance in a similar way to lack of individual knowledge or any structural deficiency in job design.

Theoretical Framework

Resource Based View Theory

Sustainable competitive advantage and superior performance are key elements of the Resource Based View. An organization that strives to sustain a competitive advantage in the market and does more research to come up with non-imitable resources will remain relevant in the market. These resources will act as a barrier to the new entrants in the market. It will also act as the catalyst of increasing the prices of goods and services in the long run the organization will realize improvement in performance. Barney *et al* (2011) posit that there are majorly two essential elements of the Resource Based View they include; sustainable competitive

advantage and superior performance. Resources of the organizations seem to be dynamic meaning that they do change. An organization that adjusts to changes, adopts new ways of doing things and become more innovative will remain relevant in the industry. These organizations will have competitive advantage (Helfat & Peteraf, 2003). Organization may have a lot of resources that can be imitated, substituted, and those that are common to every organization but does not have competitive advantage. While another organization may have very few resources that are unique, cannot be imitated and have competitive advantage.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory originated in the mid-20th century work of Mincer (cited in Pablo *et al*, 2007), Schultz (cited in Pablo *et al*, 2007), and Becker (cited in Pablo *et al*, 2007). These authors proposed a remarkably simple explanation of personal income. The idea is that individuals can gain skills (human capital) that will make them more productive through actions or processes geared towards enhancing their competencies. This enhanced productivity then leads to greater income. As discussed below, this was not a new idea. The main accomplishment of human capital theory was to make this vision consistent with the rest of neoclassical theory. In many ways, human capital theory was an inevitable by-product of a century of political economic thought.

The key ingredient was the deep-rooted productivity-income hypothesis which emphasized on the development of the skills or competencies of the worker. The idea that income stems from productivity has been a central tenet of political economy for more than a century. It was formalized in neoclassical theory by Wicksteed (cited Killen *et al*, 2012) and Clark (cited in Killen *et al*, 2012). Both authors theorized that income distribution obeyed a "natural law". In a market economy, each factor of production would earn its marginal product. This was the incremental increase in output caused by the incremental increase in input of capital/labour. Thus, if a capitalist earned more than a worker, it was because an additional unit of 'capital' added more to output than an additional unit of labour.

Empirical Reviews

Pradhan and Kumari (2017) did a critical review on how human resource flexibility relates with firms' effectiveness in manufacturing firms in India. This work employed cross sectional survey. Questionnaire was utilized in data collection from respondents. The work employed a random sampling method, 500 respondents which comprise of employees in upper echelon. Questionnaire was distributed personally and through mails. However, 350 questionnaires which represent 70% of total response rates were correctly filled and valid for the study. The linear structural equation modelling was used for data analysis. The result of the analysis revealed that skill flexibility and behaviour flexibility have a noteworthy positive relationship with organizational effectiveness in terms of operational performance and employee performance. They concluded that human resource flexibility system of an organization enables the firm to take instantaneous actions and to successfully satisfy new or urgent demand in the market. They suggested that organizations should train their staff and develop them to make them flexible in order to produce more benefit and better results for the organization.

Ubeda – Garcia, Claver-Cortes, Marco-Lajara and Zaragoza-Saez (2017) did an analysis on how HR flexibility relates with performance of hotel in Spain. Survey research was carried out by the researcher. Questionnaire was used in collecting data. 100 questionnaires were given out to respondents. The data retrieved was analysed using Partial Least Squares (PLS). The study noted that skill flexibility does not have statistically significant relationship with performance of hotels in Spain. They however stated that employees must be given the opportunity to develop new skills in order to perform different task or function. Yousuf, Haddad, Pakurár, Kozlovskiy, Mohylova, Shlapak and János (2019) examined the rapport amongst

operational flexibility and performance of establishment. Ninety industrial firms in Jordan served as the sample, questionnaire was distributed to managers in senior cadre in product development, operations, marketing and financial departments and Regression Technique was utilized. It was observed that operational flexibility clearly and directly affects financial and operational performance of Jordan companies. More precisely, flexibility in volume as form of operational flexibility does not influence the companies' performance in Jordan, notwithstanding, mix and new product flexibility directly affects both financial and operational performance of the companies.

Chen and Li (2016) did an extensive study where they examined how flexibility human resource management relates with innovation performance of enterprise. Survey research was carried out by the researcher. The structural model equation was used in analysing the data. The findings revealed that behaviour flexibility and skill flexibility can be employ by firm in enhancing and boosting innovation performance of enterprise. This thus implies that innovation of an organization can be enhanced through human resource flexibility. Alibakhshi and Mahmoudi (2016) looked at how flexibility in human resources relates with performance of hospitals of Tehran Medical Sciences University. A cross sectional survey was carried out. 317 staff from 5 hospitals. Questionnaire was used in gathering information from respondents. Stratified random sampling was used in the study. Data was analysed using linear regression. The outcome of the study revealed that skill flexibility does influence the performance of organization positively to a significant degree. They maintained that human resources flexibility plays a significant role in creating unique capability and in enhancing competitiveness of the organization.

Way, Wright and Tracey (2018) looked at how HR flexibility relates with performance of firms; up to 100 employees were covered in the study. The data was analysed using the hierarchical linear modelling. Construct of human resources is indicated as intrinsic characteristics of an organization, or as causal ambiguity (Lippman and Rumelt, 1982; Barney, 1991), otherwise known as isolating mechanism (Mahoney and Pandian, 1992; Knott, 2003). However, it requires further clarification and exploration (Acedo, Barroso and Galan, 2006) as to why the resource heterogeneity and distinctiveness can improve enterprise performance, competitive advantage, or organizational effectiveness.

According to the above, when the basic and the professional capabilities of the human

resources satisfy the industry's demand for the workers, the suitability of the supply and demand of human resources between industry and market will be reflected in the workers employment rate. To induce its reasons, through the two-way three-party, the workers and managers, contribution, the suitable supply and demand in human resources can be achieved. This is why the basic and the professional capabilities of the trained workers should have the quality of value, rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability. The basic and the professional competitiveness of the workers is in line with the organizations demand for this worker, because the human resources preference requirements are in line with the resource quality of value, rarity, inimitability, non-substitutability.

Knowledge Gap

From the discussion it is evident that while literature abounds on the manifestations of human resource flexibility, both as a consequence and antecedent of various factors, there appears to be a lacking in terms content addressing the role of competency development and human resource flexibility. Following the review, one could argue that the gap in knowledge is expressed or manifested in two ways, the theoretical gap, and the contextual gap. In terms of the theoretical gap, not much content has been advanced in line with assessing the related theories and models on competency development, especially from an organizational behavioural point of view. Furthermore, given the increasing inclination for researchers to equate training to competency development, one finds that there is also a scarcity of literature which have substantially

differentiated between these two factors (training and competency development) – advancing an operational and distinct conceptualization for both variables, and clearly specifying the nature and role of competency development in workers and organizational outcomes such as human resource flexibility. In terms of contextual gap, the review indicates a strong referral and emphatics on developed contexts by existing empirical studies. However, given the unique life world experiences of organizations within various contexts and the differences that may exist in overarching values and social systems, it is evident that there is a gap in empirical content addressing the manifestation of human resource flexibility, as a feature of the organization and also as a consequence of competency development in developing contexts such as Nigeria.

Findings

In line with the review and the congruence of views identifying competency development as imperative for outcomes of human resource flexibility, the following findings are stated:

- i. Skills training ensures the right and required quality and feature of

workers are advanced by the organization and thus easily structured to propel and drive its objective of human resource flexibility

- ii. Mentoring promotes healthier workplace relationships and also enriches workers functional capacities in ways that enhance the human resource flexibility of the organization
- iii. Project work enriches workers experiences - improving on their experiences, thus enhancing the human resource flexibility of the organization

Conclusion

Based on the position reached in this paper on the positive role of competency development in the actualization of human resource flexibility, it is affirmed that the related practices of competency development such as skills training, mentoring and project work are important in creating and enabling the necessary conditions and frameworks for improved outcomes of human resource flexibility. As discussed, competency development provides not just opportunities for workers to learn and grow, but is also patterns and

structures functional designs that serve to support and equip workers with the right knowledge, skills and relationships necessary for improved outcomes of flexibility in their skills, behaviour and also in the human resource practices of the organization. It is therefore the conclusion of this paper that related actions and processes of competency development are critical to the quality, responsiveness and effectiveness of the organization's human resources, advancing flexibility features necessary for survival and well-being.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are premised on the noted imperatives of competency development in advancing and achieving improved outcomes of human resource flexibility. These are stated as follows:

- i. It is recommended that skills training actions or programs focus on advancing suitable and required levels of competencies within the organization, as well as the equipping of workers with the right mindset and capabilities as a way of facilitating improved levels of functionality
- ii. It is recommended that the organization advances work designs or structures that are supportive of mentoring practices. This enhances workplace relationships and strengthens the social and functional ties within the organization - improving workers functional capacity and flexibility in the organization.
- iii. It is recommended that the workers are offered the required exposure through structured project work and simulations – such that enhance their experiences and strengthen their capabilities in ways that are necessary for improved outcomes of functional effectiveness and flexibility.

Contribution to Scholarship

This paper contributes in a variety of ways to knowledge and scholarship. As a theoretical paper it advances the resource-based view theory and the human capital theory as substantial in explaining and predicting the outcome of the relationship between competency development and

human resource flexibility. In this way, contributes through the support and reinforcement it offers these theories as appropriate models and frameworks in understanding competency development and its implications for

organizations. This paper also contributes through its operational approach in the review of the relationship between the variables – competency development and human resource flexibility. The discussion offers a narrower and more specific

perspective on the conceptualization of the variables and the roles dimensions such as skills training, mentoring and project work, play in advancing outcomes of skill flexibility, behavioural flexibility and practice flexibility.

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