

# The Place of Human Resource Management in Achieving Competitive Advantage in Nigerian Public Organisations under the Global Economy

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## Abstract

This paper explores the strategic role of human resources management in achieving competitive advantage in a global economy. Human resource management remains indispensable in engendering competitive advantage for businesses in this era of tense global competition. Productivity and competitiveness of organisations is now dependent on their employees' ability to generate, process, and apply knowledge. Scholars and practitioners of human resources management agree that a workforce that is properly trained and managed is a source of competitive advantage. The article recognised the fact that public organisations have not really given importance to human resource management and this is responsible for their underwhelming performance. The paper recommends some HR strategies that managers can adopt to improve the quality and value of their workforce, and these range from effective talent management, continuous workplace learning, safe and healthy work environment, ICT adoption, competitive benefit system, HR planning to proper deployment of skills and expertise.

**Keywords:** Human resources, Human resources management, Competitive advantage, Resources base model, Globalization.

## **Introduction**

In the last few decades, the world has witnessed an unprecedented interdependence among the various economics of the world in a phenomenon called globalization. This interconnectivity has increased the rate of competition among businesses. Organisations are now recognizing that effective human resources management is indispensable in achieving competitive advantage. This strategic value of human resources stem from the fact that in spite of the usefulness of other resources, human resources are endowed with discretionary decision making power, cognitive ability and ability to combine other resources in the right mix to accomplish desired objectives.

The quality of a country's human capital is very important in sustaining competition in this global era. Anyim, *et al* (2012) noted that, countries with low quality human capital attract investment that require low skills and low wages while countries with high human capital are attractive sites for foreign direct investment that creates high skilled jobs and wages. This underscores the importance of quality human resources to global competitiveness.

However, it is pertinent to note that public organisations in Nigeria has not really done enough to enhance the skills of its human resources to ensure they are in a good position to compete in the global economy. It lags behind in terms of knowledge generation, processing and application. And because the world is now more competitive and knowledge driven, a nation can only exploit the opportunities in the global economy if its human resources possess the requisite expertise and knowledge. This realization has mounted pressure on managers to respond to increasing global competition for talents, changes in workforce attitudes and composition, shifts in the employer/employee relationship and rapid advances in HR technology. Based on the foregoing, this paper explores the qualities that make human resources a source of sustained competitive advantage and suggest strategies that public organisations should adopt to be competitive in the global economy.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section which is the introduction is followed by review of literature in section two. Section three presents the theoretical framework on which this study is anchored. The attributes that make human resources a source of sustained competitive advantage are espoused in section four while section five explores the strategies public organisations must adopt to be competitive in the global economy. Section six concludes the paper.

## **REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### **THE CONCEPT OF GLOBALIZATION**

Globalization is the process of international integration arising from the interchange of worldviews, products, ideas, and other aspects of culture. Put in simple terms, globalization refers to processes that promote worldwide exchanges of national and cultural resources. Advances in transportation and telecommunications infrastructure, including the rise of the Internet, are major factors in globalization, generating further interdependence of economic and cultural activities.

The IMF (2000) identified four basic aspects of globalization: trade and transactions, capital and investment movements, migration and movement of people and the dissemination of knowledge. Further, environmental challenges such as climate change, cross-boundary water and air pollution, and over-fishing of the ocean are linked with globalization. Globalizing processes affect and are affected by business and work organization, economics, socio-cultural resources, and the natural environment.

Stiglitz (2006) defined Globalization as the closer integration of the countries and peoples of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication and the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge and (to a lesser extent) people across borders.

The driving force of globalization is certainly the progress of technology. It speeds up the effects of globalization, and contributes to essential transformation of the functioning of economic systems. International economy is no longer divided vertically to separate national economies, but involves a number of different levels or types of market activities, which spread horizontally over a wider area of virtual space – replacing physical geography of national borders with quasi geography of market structures, transaction costs and informational cyber space" (Jakšić, 1997 cited in Stefanovic, 2008).

### **Human Resource Management**

As the business environment becomes more and more competitive, organizations are realizing that their likelihood of sustained success is most dependent on learning to get the maximum out of their employees. Such a realization has had a significant impact on the practice of human resources management. Business forecasters predict that the role of employees, managers, and HRM personnel are likely to see more changes in the

decades ahead. Thus, individuals entering the business environment today (and tomorrow) require an understanding of the importance of human resources to organizational success.

As we move further into the twenty-first century, it is becoming clear that the effective management of an organization's human resources is a major source of competitive advantage and may even be the single most important determinant of an organization's performance over the long term. Organizations have started to realize that their success is dependent on their ability to attract, develop, and retain talented employees (Reich, 1998). The long-term, sustained success of an organization in today's changing and challenging business environment involves top management's commitment to designing and implementing HRM programs geared towards developing both high-performing employees and organizations. It is only by working toward the development and retention of the right type of employees can any organization expect to be successful in a global, dynamic, and continuously changing competitive environment.

Human resources management is the term increasingly used to refer to the philosophy, policies, procedures, and practices related to the management of an organization's employees. Human resources management is particularly concerned with all the activities that contribute to successfully attracting, developing, motivating, and maintaining a high-performing workforce that results in organizational success.

Human resource (HR) management is also defined as the design of formal systems in an organisation to ensure the effective and efficient use of human talent to accomplish organisational goals (Onah, 2012:3).

In the process of HRM, there is an increasing emphasis on the personal needs of the organization and its members. How effectively employees contribute to organization goals depend to a larger extent upon the ability of its HRM staff. The challenge is to create an organizational environment in which each employee can grow and develop to his or her fullest extent. Such an environment increases the likelihood of a successful organization, and this is what HRM is all about, making organizations successful.

Human resources management efforts are planned, systematic approaches to increasing organizational success. They involve HRM programs aimed at developing HRM strategies for the total organization with an eye toward clarifying an organization's current and potential problems and developing solutions for them. They are oriented

toward action, the individual, the global marketplace, and the future. Today it would be difficult to envision any organization achieving success without efficient HRM programs and activities.

The purpose of HRM programs is to increase organizational success and to develop the potential of all members. Human resources management also emphasizes that HRM planning needs to be closely related to the organization's strategic goals and plans. Finally, there are a series of planned HRM activities that will ultimately influence the success of an organization.

### **Human Resources Management Functions**

Managers in all organizations recognize the importance of recruiting, selecting, training and developing, rewarding, and compensating employees. Human resource management and other functions must work together to achieve organizational success and compete locally and internationally. The following are the functions of HRM.

- **Strategic Human Resource Planning**

Human resources management needs to be closely integrated with managerial planning and decision-making. Increasingly, an organization's top management is aware that the time to consider organizational HRM strengths or limitations is when strategic organizational decisions are being formulated, not after critical policies are decided (Onah, 2012). A closer integration between top management's goals and HRM practices helps to elicit and reward the types of behaviour necessary for achieving an organization's strategy. Strategic management of human resources includes Human resource planning. The HRM planning process involves forecasting HRM needs and developing programs to ensure that the right numbers and types of individuals are available at the right time and place. Such information enables an organization to plan its recruitment, selection, and training strategies.

- **Recruiting and Selecting Employees**

Once Human resource needs are determined, the next step is recruiting employees (*i.e.*, interviewing, screening, and selecting the most qualified candidates, filling some positions through transfer or promotion, and temporary employment coordination).

Recruiting and staffing is a far more complex activity than in previous times when HRM staff could rely on recommendations from current employees or a "help wanted" sign in front of the business. In order to plan for future selection efforts and training programs and to ensure that performance appraisal and compensation systems are rationally based on job demands, HRM personnel must complete careful descriptions and analysis of current jobs. The development and use of job analysis information as part of Human resource planning and as the foundation for all other HRM functions is indispensable. Organizations may recruit candidates internally (*i.e.*, recruit current employees seeking to advance or change jobs) or externally.

- **Training and Development**

Many of today's employees look at the chance to develop and move up as important in where they will seek employment. In order to facilitate employee progression, many organizations choose to spend substantial sums to train and develop their employees. Training and development (*i.e.*, orientation, performance management skills training, and productivity enhancement) are planned learning experiences that teach employees how to perform their current and future jobs. Training focuses on present jobs, whereas development prepares employees for possible future jobs.

Training and development is also a way of motivating employees. French (1978) cited in (Onah, 2012) posited that "employees who know and understand their jobs and feel that management values them enough to prepare them for future assignment are more likely to demonstrate higher morale and greater interest in their job."

- **Performance Appraisals**

Performance appraisal process helps organizations measure the adequacy of their employees' job performance and communicates these evaluations to them. Performance appraisals are a critical link in the HRM process, as they assess how well employees are performing and determine appropriate rewards or remedial actions to motivate employees to continue appropriate behaviours and correct inappropriate ones (Gbeja, 1992, Cole 2002, cited in Onah, 2012). The HRM role in performance appraisal is one of working with other managers in

the organization to establish the appraisal process, the performance dimensions to be measured, the procedures to ensure accuracy, and requirements for discussion of appraisal results with employees (ibid). Management may also use performance appraisals as a tool for making HRM-related decisions, such as promotions, demotions, discharges, and pay raises. Performance appraisal is very important and should be undertaken in a timely manner and done as accurately as possible.

- **Career Development**

Organizations are becoming more active in developing career development programs. Many organizations are designing career programs in an attempt to increase overall organizational performance and employee productivity, and to attract, develop, and retain the most qualified employees in this increasingly competitive and global environment.

In addition to being concerned about their own interests, organizations are increasingly concerned about the long-term interests of their employees. However, with pressures to improve efficiency and overall effectiveness, organizations are also expecting individuals to accept more responsibility for managing their own careers. This means that individuals must do everything they can to grow and realize their full potential in order to improve their value either to their current or future employer.

- **Benefit and Compensation Administration**

A logical result of the appraisal process is determining which employees most deserve rewards. Compensation entails pay and benefits (*i.e.*, wage and salary administration, incentive pay, insurance, vacation/leave administration, retirement plans, profit sharing, stock plans). Allocating rewards is a complex and specialized activity. Rewards include both the direct compensation (salary and hourly wages) and the indirect compensation (benefits) that organizations offer to employees. The aim of compensation practices is to help organizations establish and maintain a competent and loyal workforce at an affordable cost. Like other HRM activities, compensation practices are also affected by legal requirements of equal pay for equal work, minimum wage and over-time provisions, and required benefits such as Social Security. In addition to the level

of pay, a successful compensation system is based on fairness. Employees bring a variety of perspectives to bear in deciding whether they are satisfied with the compensation they receive, thus making management of compensation a particularly challenging HRM activity.

Compensation systems need to be designed to mesh with the strategic objectives of the organization. They also need to integrate the realities of prevailing pay levels in the labour market with an organization's profitability and ability to pay (Ubeku, 1975).

### **The Concept of Competitive Advantage**

It is a business concept describing attributes that allows an organisation to outperform its competitors. These attributes may include access to natural resources such as high grade ores or inexpensive power, highly skilled personnel, geographic location, high entry barriers, *etc.* New technologies, such as robotics and information technology, can also provide competitive advantage, whether as part of a product itself, as an advantage to the making of a product, or as a competitive aid in the business process (for example, better identification and understanding of customers) (Wikipedia, 2015).

It also refers to the ability gained through attributes and resources to perform at a higher level than others in the same industry.

Barney (1991) describes competitive advantage as occurring "when a firm is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors." According to him, competitive advantage can only occur in situation of firm resource heterogeneity and resource immobility. Firm resource heterogeneity refers to the fact that resources vary across firms. In the traditional strategy model, resources are viewed as homogenous across firms in the industry. Firm resource immobility refers to the inability of competing firms to obtain resources from other firms or resource market.

A competitive advantage exists when the firm is able to deliver the same benefits as competitors but at a lower cost (cost advantage) or deliver benefits that exceed those of competing products (differentiation advantage). Thus, a competitive advantage enables the firm to create superior value for its customers and superior profits for itself (Porter, 1985).



## Theoretical Framework

The Resource-based model of strategic human resource management is adopted for this article. This model is the most recent entry into the theoretical discussions of strategic human resource management literature and has been coined the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991; Conner, 1991; Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984).

Resource-based model emphasizes the strategic value of human assets and continuous workplace learning. It focuses on the strategic significance of internal 'Strengths'. The model views organization's resources as the basis for competitive advantage.

According to Wernerfelt (1984), a resource is anything, which could be thought of as a strength or weakness of a given firm... those tangible assets that are tied semi-permanently to the firm. Barney (1991) expands this definition to include "all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, *etc.*, controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness."

Thus, for a firm's resource to provide sustained competitive advantage, four criteria must be attributable to the resource:

- i. The resource must add positive value to the firm,
- ii. The resource must be rare or unique among current or potential competitors,
- iii. The resource must be imperfectly imitable, and
- iv. The resource cannot be substituted with another resource by competing firms.

Therefore, given resource heterogeneity and resource immobility and the satisfaction of the requirement of value, rareness, imperfect imitability and non-substitutability, a firm's resource can be a source of sustained competitive advantage. Barney (1991) states that the resource-based model makes it clear that firm cannot expect to buy or purchase sustained competitive advantage, in that the advantages, if they exist, can only be found in the valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and non-substitutable resources already present in the firm.

The idea that human resources can serve as a competitive advantage is not new. Given the fact that Barney seems to imply that true sustained competitive advantage are more likely to be discovered than developed; it is first necessary to examine the

conditions under which human resources can be a source of sustained competitive advantage in the context of the resource-based model.

### **HUMAN RESOURCES AS SOURCE OF SUSTAINED COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

Using the four criteria for a sustained competitive advantage, Wright *et al* (1992) evaluated the conditions under which human resources meet these criteria:

First, in order for human resources to exist as a sustained competitive advantage, they must provide value to the firm. This condition requires that there is a heterogeneous demand for labour (*i.e.*, firms have jobs that require different types of skills) and a heterogeneous supply of labour (*i.e.*, individuals differ in their skills and level of skills). Under this circumstance, human resources can add value to a firm.

Secondly, a resource must be rare if it is to be a source of sustained competitive advantage. Wright *et al* (1992) noted that due to the normal distribution of ability, human resource with high ability levels are, by definition rare. The goal of virtually all selection programmes is to ensure that the organization is hiring only the highest ability individuals. The issues then are the validity of the selection system and whether or not the organization is able to attract and retain those applicants deemed to be of the highest ability. Thus a firm could theoretically obtain employees of superior ability through a combination of valid selection programmes and attractive reward systems.

Thirdly, in order for a resource to be considered a source of sustained competitive advantage, human resources must be inimitable. Wright *et al* (1992) use the concepts of unique historical conditions, causal ambiguity, and social complexity to demonstrate the inimitability of competitive advantages stemming from human resources. Unique historical condition refers to the particular historical events that have shaped a firm's practices, policies, and culture. Causal ambiguity describes the situation where the causal source of the competitive advantage is not easily identified. Social complexity recognizes that in many situations (*e.g.*, team production) competitive advantage stems from unique social relationships that cannot be duplicated. Thus, Wright *et al* argue that due to the fact that many competitive advantages that might be based in a firm's human resources are characterized by unique historical conditions, causal ambiguity, and social complexity, it is highly unlikely that well developed human resources could be easily duplicated.

Finally, a resource must not have substitute if it is to be considered a sustained competitive advantage. This raises the question of whether or not other firms' resources

such as technology have the potential for offsetting any competitive advantage attributable to human resource. In order to address this issue, it is important to note that human resources are one of the few firm resources that have the potential to: (a) not become obsolete, and (b) be transferable across a variety of technologies, products, and markets. Although the rapid pace of technological change has resulted in new technologies that make former technical skills obsolete. Many human capital resources are quite generalizable. Thus, if a firm has obtained individual with high levels of cognitive ability, then constant training in the state-of-the-art technological knowledge ensure that the resource does not become obsolete.

Therefore, it might be possible to substitute other resources in the short term, but it is highly unlikely that such substitutions could result in sustained competitive advantage. This stems from the fact that to the extent that the resource offsetting the advantages of human resources is not rare, inimitable, or non-substitutable, then it will be imitated and human resources will once again constitute a competitive advantage.

### **Towards Achieving Competitive Advantage through Human Resources in Nigerian Public Organisation**

Globalization can have a positive or negative impact on an organization's human resource management depending on the strategy and practice employed by the organization. An organization with a highly skilled and competent human resources stand a better chance to withstand the intense competition engendered by globalization and can exploit the benefit accruing from the global economy than an organization that lacks the right mix of human resources. The quality of human resources at the disposal of the Nigerian public sector will determine its effectiveness and efficiency in the rendition of services.

To ensure sustained competitive advantage through human resources in the public sector the following strategies are advocated:

**EFFECTIVE TALENT MANAGEMENT:** Knowledge management focuses on identification of employees with intellects and expertise and how to channel it towards organizational effectiveness. In the information age, knowledge rather than physical assets or financial resources is the key to competitiveness. As pointed out by Mecklenberg *et al* (1999) knowledge management allows companies to capture, apply, and generate value from

their employees' creativity and expertise. It is broadly defined as a company's ability to attract, retain and motivate employees. With the change in workers demographics and market forces, there is the urgency for organization to cultivate a workforce that can compete in the global market. Organisations are now putting tremendous effort in the recruitment process with a strong commitment for the continuous development of their employees. Any business that base its recruitment policy on sentiments, favouritism and ethnic consideration rather than objective criteria of merit, competence, experience and qualification will struggle to compete. Our public service must endeavour to get it right in its hiring even while adhering to the quota system without compromising merit. HR practitioners in public organisations must ensure that their organization have the intellectual capital it needs in the right proportion and at the appropriate time. Programmes must be created to enhance knowledge management initiatives and to elicit management's support.

**REPUTATION MANAGEMENT AND CORPORATE ETHICS:** Reputation management relates to stakeholders' view or the impression they hold about the operational conduct or integrity of an organization. Top management and the HR practitioners currently pay high-level attention to reputation management and ethics (Schultz, *et al.*, 2003). Due to cases of corruption scandals and other vices in organizations, the HR practitioners should take the responsibility of facilitating the training of employees in sustaining and protecting their organization's reputation. Besides, HR professionals could monitor reputation and ethics in the organization and this would assist management to assess its reputation management efforts.

**STRATEGIC HR PLANNING:** It is the careful analysis of existing workforce and job requirement and developing people who will man the structure of an organisation in the future in order to ensure the attainment of objective. It predicts the future human resources needs of an organisation after analysing the organisation's current human resources, the external labour market, and the future HR environment that the organisation will be operating in. Its main objective is to ensure that an organization has the right people with the right skills at the right time.

One phrase that has become associated to globalization is the "War for Talent." Organisations are in a serious competition to attract the best brains to their

establishment. There is no better way to win this war than to have a good human resource plan. Public organisations should draw up such plans so that they do not get workers that other competitors have deemed not good enough.

**TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT:** Globalization can potentially reduce the values of human resources in the public sector because of the high rate of technological and scientific innovations. This can render skills and competence obsolete especially when the public sector do not move with the time by designing and organizing strategic learning programmes aimed at updating the skills and competence of their human resource. This is vital consequent on the fact that human resources are the only resource that possesses cognitive ability. This implies that despite being obsolete in skills as a result of innovation, they possess the capability to acquire a new knowledge after undergoing a specific designed training programme. Thus, this demonstrates for the umpteenth time the uniqueness of human resources in promoting competitive advantage. The importance of continuous learning cannot be overemphasized. In an era where information and knowledge is power, there must always be avenue to train to acquire current ideas and skills. It is necessary to improve knowledge, expertise, skills, confidence and performance level of workers. Training ensures higher productivity and efficiency. Organisations that want to compete favourably in the global market must prioritize the training and development of its staff. The business world is in a constant flux. Technologies and information of today can become obsolete and irrelevant the next day. Public organisations should not downplay the importance of workplace learning. It should not be seen as too expensive to undertake. They must train their staff continuously to be competitive or risk being left behind. The timely and educative advice given by Maister (2002) is worth noting. He said: "To make money, managers should not spend all their time managing money, but should instead devote their efforts to the things that produce the money: the enthusiasm, commitment, and drive of the labour force. Don't manage money. Manage people."

**PROPER DEPLOYMENT AND PLACEMENT:** One of the frustrations in public organisations today is faulty deployment of staff. Employees are deployed after training without regard to the skills they have acquired. This is responsible for the gross inefficiency and frustration apparent in public organisations. It is an indictment on the human resource strategies of these organisations. Of course, when you put a square peg

in a round hole, it just cannot fit. Many such mismatches in our systems are what make it difficult to compete. It must change if we are to move forward.

**SAFE AND HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENT:** An important source of workplace change is the desire to promote a safer and healthier work environment. There are increasing legal, social and political pressure on organisations to ensure that the health and safety of their employees are guaranteed. It is no rocket science that a safe and healthy work environment has a positive psychological impact on employees' performance. It engenders job satisfaction, commitment, optimum performance and keeps employees engaged. Public organisations must not neglect this function because only a healthy worker can be productive. This brings to mind the television bulletin of one television station about the messy state of the federal Secretariat in Abuja earlier this year. It was reported that water supply was cut off for months and the stench from the public convenience was endangering the health of workers and making it impossible for them to work. Such situation should not be allowed to occur in a workplace. Organisations should protect the health of their staff to get the best from them.

**ADOPTING INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY:** In the last few years, new communication technology such as email, Smartphone, web and videoconferencing has not only facilitated closer contact with clients, but as well, reduced cost, increased efficiency and productivity. Digital filing systems save space, paper and printing costs. Information technology has made the world smaller and faster through internet. Ideas and large amount of information now move freely and constantly. The challenge for the HR Managers is to make good use of what information technology offers and to make it to be a viable productive part of work setting and tool. New information technology has opened up possibility of greater strategic control in companies. The possibilities from such technological innovations will provide continued strategic opportunities for companies (Lynch, 2006).

Technology in workplace practically eliminates space and time making the world a global village. It has enabled businesses to establish a global presence through social media platforms and apps at a fraction of the cost. All these technological innovations drive the global economy. Today organisations need to leverage these innovations to

compete favourably in the global economy. What better way to achieve this than having tech savvy employees? Public organisations must embrace ICT.

**COMPETITIVE REWARD SYSTEM:** Organisations must be ready to reward their best talent handsomely. Pay should be commensurate to talent, skills and work done. Fairness and equity should be incorporated into wage structure. The world is now a village so workers mobility is unprecedented. Any Organisation that wants to attract and retain the best talents must have a competitive reward system.

### **Conclusion**

From the review of literature and other empirical studies carried out by various scholars on the subject matter, it is evident that globalization is a worldwide phenomenon which has come to stay with a far reaching implications in almost all sphere of human life.

However, in spite of the challenges businesses face today because of globalization, human resources still remain the most important resource in achieving competitive advantage. The theoretical framework gave credence to this. Since effective management of employees give organisations a competitive edge, managers should design strategies that will elicit optimum value from their employees. Therefore, organisations should adapt best practices in recruitment and selection, HR planning, training and development, reward administration, safe and healthy work life and ICT into their HR policies in order to develop a workforce that can compete favourably in the global business environment.

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## NOTES AND GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

This is a general guide for authors and reviewers unfamiliar with international standards of the anonymous peer-review process and who are considering publishing articles in the Public Service Delivery and Performance Review Journal. We urge authors and reviewers to read the section carefully.

### INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

#### Part A: Substance

**Originality:** Originality in this sense refers to the innovative and uniqueness of the academic and professional knowledge contributed by the authors in this journal. The author is required to contribute new and fresh ideas to the subject matter and look at the issues from a distinctive perspective.

**Strength of Argument:** Your main argument must be sound, based on well-developed and clearly presented supporting arguments, and meaningful conclusion. At the same time, you must remember that you are limited to between 6000 – 8000 words; thus your paper must argue its point and conclude within these limits.

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