

Full Length Research Paper

# Workplace learning and competitive advantage of public health institutions in Rivers State

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Accepted 28 February, 2020

**Establishing the relationship amongst workplace learning and competitive advantage within public health parastatals within Rivers State. The research designed used in this study was survey design. 1719 staff formed the study population and using Krejcie and Morgan sample size determining table the sample was 313 medical staff from Port Harcourt city (Rivers State University Teaching Hospital) and Obio-Akpor (University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital) of Rivers State. Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to test all hypotheses formulated. The findings revealed existence of relationship between workplace learning dimensions and competitive advantage measures of public health institutions and that effectively and efficiently using of experiential and empowerment learning, the public health parastatals competitive advantage will positively be aided. Recommended was for management to consider workplace learning (experiential and empowerment) for improved sustainability of the competitive advantage (cost leadership and differentiation) that might be practiced in such organisation.**

**Key words:** Workplace learning, Competitive Advantage, Experiential learning, Empowerment Learning, Differentiation, Cost Leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

For every going concern organization, survival is the key issue and today's survival is having the unbeatable workforce. Therefore, the submission of Cumming (1978) as quoted in Sule (2017) that the *"management of human resources is concerned with obtaining the best staff for an organization and having got them, looking after them so that they will stay and give of their best to their jobs"*. The emphasis, considering this study, is after having got the best workforce, they must be looked after and an essentially viable ways of looking after them is through training when carrying out the job. Workplace learning entails staff on-the-job training. This is to some extent better than training in the workshop or any similar formal setting because this training is tailored directly at the job. Dodgson (1993) as cited in Olorunmola, Hettey and Sule (2019) describe workplace learning as "the manner in which firms manufacture, supplement and sort out learning and schedules around their exercises and inside

their societies and adjust and create authoritative productivity by improving the utilization of the expansive abilities of their workforce."

Again, training on the job is getting acquainted with the process of executing task within the organization which may differ from the way other organization in the same industry carry out similar task. For instance, in the brewery industry, many brewery firms produces stout drink as a brand but that of Guinness Nigeria PLC stand out. More so, one of the tools of gaining higher competitive advantage is competent workforce. With constant workplace learning, the skills and competences of the workforce will be enhanced and therefore, the organization might enjoy a better competitive advantage.

Competitive advantage, therefore, can be described as doing something in a unique way such that it cannot be easily copied by other organizations as such the organization stands out in the industry. Simply put competitive advantage could best be described as having an advantage and/or upper hand in the competition within the industry. Onuoha (2016) said that competitive advantage is "a function either providing comparable buyer value more efficiently than competitors (low cost)

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or performing activities at comparable cost but in unique ways that create more buyer value than competitors...” However, series of discussion on organizational learning cum competitive advantage is in existence like that of Namada (2019), Oyateru (2011), and Appelbaum and Gallagher (2000), therefore, the study will examine the relationship amongst workplace learning and competitive advantage but specifically, this study now narrowed the discussion down on the public health institutions particularly, in Rivers State which cannot be seen to have been done before by any scholars.

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Establishing the relationship amongst the workplace learning and competitive advantages of public health institutions in Rivers State. The following were the specific objectives considered.

- Knowing the relationship between the experiential learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State.
- Establishing the relationship between the experiential learning and cost leadership of institutions in Rivers State.
- Ascertaining the relationship between the empowerment learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State.
- Examining the relationship between the empowerment learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State.

## Research Questions

- What is the relationship between the experiential learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State?
- What is the relationship between the experiential learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State?
- What is the relationship between the empowerment learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State?
- What is the relationship between the empowerment learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State?

## Research Hypotheses

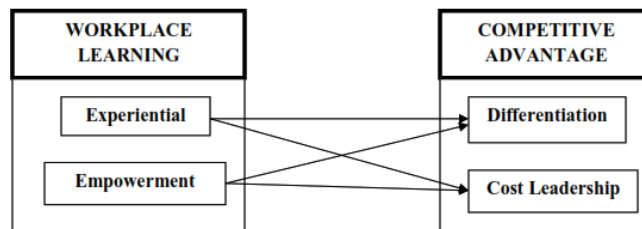
- There is no relationship between the experiential learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State.
- There is no relationship between the experiential learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State.
- There is no relationship between the empowerment

learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State.

- There is no relationship between the empowerment learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1:** Operational framework showing the relationship amongst workplace learning and competitive advantage.

Source: Measures: Porter (1980) as quoted in Onuoha (2016)  
Dimensions: Olorunmola, Hetey and Sule (2019)

## CONCEPT OF WORKPLACE LEARNING

Workplace learning is the acquirement of skill, knowledge and competence acquired inside the ambit of the work environment. Cacciattolo (2015) said that “working is interconnected with learning and consequently, workplace learning is the way in which skills are upgraded and knowledge is acquired at the place of work.” This includes on-the-job training, and/or on-site training. The training must be undertaken within the workplace and must be conducted on the work process like the training room. That is, workplace learning does not include training given to workers in the organization training facilities. Argyris and Schon (1978) as quoted in Olorunmola, Hetey and Sule (2019) described workplace learning as “the discovery and revision of mistakes.” Cacciattolo (2015) citing Fenwick (2008b) described “workplace learning as occurring through the relations and dynamics between ‘individual actors’ and ‘collectives’.” Stoude and Fairbrother (2006:458) as cited in Cacciattolo (2015) said that it intensify skills that may vantage to conventional qualifications, as well as informal broadly centered ability. Also, Cocciattolo (2015) concluded that “workplace learning is conventionally seen as a means of improving the skills of employees and enhancing their knowledge and the learning may be either formal or informal” and that workplace learning is becoming more relevant than formally-acquired qualifications because according to Cacciattolo (2015) it is gaining “wider structure that concerns workplace and the employees, educational institutions and various communities within organisations” and becoming employees training tool.

Workplace learning was classified into “in-house training, experience-based learning opportunities and training through coaching and mentoring, and continuous learning” Silverman (2003:2) as quoted in Cacciattolo (2015). Using workplace learning in an establishment facilitates learning via active involvement in the day-to-day organisation’s activities Fenwick (2008:20) as quoted in Cacciattolo, 2015. Again, Chang, et al., 2009:410-411 in Cacciattolo, 2015 submitted that persons are aid to acquire knowledge and come up with better workplace performance.

However, learning at workplace was a link amongst individual and organizational learning van Winkelen and McKenzie (2007:531) as cited in Cacciattolo (2015). More so, MicKinsey’s 7S talks about skills as the last of the seven S’s and delineated it as “one or two distinctive capabilities of the organisation, which authentically differentiates it from the competitor Pasche (1994) as cited in Appelbaum and Gallagher (2000:47).

### **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning basically is a learning based on experience. According to the Chief Medical Director of the then Braithwaite Memorial Hospital now, Rivers State University Teaching Hospital, “the services of retired health personnel, who are still capable, will be employed on contract to assist in building up a formidable system. They have to supervise the young people who are also expected to tap from their wealth of experience”.

That is learning from experienced co-workers. Kolb (2000) said that experiential learning “...emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process”. It can then be inferred from the assertion that experiential learning is continuous learning processes that are grounded in experience.

Experiential learning considers learning to be broader than school classroom learning. It has to do more of every human setting and therefore, encompasses solving of problem, making decision and change in attitude that have to do with adaptation (Kolb, 2000).

### **Empowerment Learning**

In Olorunmola et al., (2019), Armstrong and Laschinger (2006) said that empowerment learning is “the way toward giving cutting edge workers the specialist to settle on choices once saved just for administrators”. In the same Olorunmola, et al. (2019), Johnson (1998) was reported to have asserted that empowerment learning organisations “...start and make an empowering domain for their business to flourish since they ought to be intended for making information at a speed that will profit them ...”

It is essential that making profit goes along with having reasonable amount of customers which relies on the competitive advantage strategy being practiced by such

organisation.

## **COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

This is the ways and manners firms plan to turn in a bid to outsmart and outshine other competitors inside the identical industry. This could be attained by taking much vantage of the situation forces around the industry. Such firm must position itself on the industry. Porter (1988:65-66) as quoted in Onuoha (2016) opined that “a firm that can position itself well may earn high rates of return even though industry structure is unfavorable the average profitability of the industry is therefore modest”.

This study, therefore, rely on the submission of Onuoha (2016) that “competitive advantage is a function of either providing comparable buyer value efficiently than competitors (low cost) of performing activities at comparable cost but in unique ways that create more buyer value than competitors and hence, command a premium price (differentiation).

### **Differentiation**

This is simply a strategy of adopting an effort that will be unique in the industry. Onuoha (2016) said the strategy “involves concrete efforts to remain on top through the provision of unique or highly valued products”. Such uniqueness may include special features, branding or quality service delivery. For instance, consider public health institutions, the social care for patient goes a long way in the healing process. The institutions can train and canvass for extra care in handling of everybody that comes into their institutions.

### **Cost Leadership**

With cost leadership strategy, the institutions prosecute service delivery at low-cost thereby becoming low-cost service provider to their customers/patients. There are so many ways organisations can embrace this strategy like encouraging the government health insurance scheme, funding from well spirited persons and the subsidized handling of the kid and aged people.

For instance, Dr. Bernard Aprioku, the Chief Medical Director (CMD) of the then Braithwaite Memorial Hospital (BMH) and now, Rivers State University Teaching Hospital opined in 2009 that “apart from government funding and sponsorship, the hospital also enjoys some degree of assistance from corporate organisations and concerned individuals. We have had donations from Indomie, they brought a brand new incubator for premature babies; drugs are subsidized and discounted by government as well as provision for less privileged patients whose bills are paid by the Rivers State government”

. Again, cost leadership could be achieved through cost

**Table 1:** Relationship between Experiential Learning and Differentiation

		Experiential Learning	Differentiation
Experiential Learning	Pearson Correlation (r)	1	.686**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	313	313
Differentiation	Pearson Correlation (r)	.686**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	313	313

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)  
Coefficient of Correlation (r<sup>2</sup>) = 0.47 Source: SPSS Output, (2020)

**Table 2:** Relationship between Experiential Learning and Cost Leadership

		Experiential Learning	Cost Leadership
Experiential Learning	Pearson Correlation (r)	1	.697**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	313	313
Cost Leadership	Pearson Correlation (r)	.697**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	313	313

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)  
Coefficient of Correlation (r<sup>2</sup>) = 0.49 Source: SPSS Output, (2020)

control, cost minimization policies, avoidance of scraps, wastage and any other wasteful practices within the organisations (Onuoha, 2016). One of the factors for the reduction of cost is through learning which was described according to Onuoha (2016) as “repetitive performance of a task allows person to develop a specialized set of skills which permits the completion of the assignment in a more efficient ways”.

The use of modern facilities can help in cost leadership strategy where major operations referred abroad at a huge cost can be handled in the hospital according to Dr. Bernard Aprioku, the CMD of BMH. The CMD gave an instance that “for each patient flown abroad, it used to be about ₦7 million, but here we do it at a maximum of about ₦800,000”.

**METHODOLOGY**

Survey design was used in this study. Medical staff of two main (2) public health parastatals in both Port Harcourt City and Obio-Akpor local government areas of Rivers State formed the study population. In Rivers State University Teaching Hospital, there is 731 medical staff of 375 bed space and in University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital about 988 medical staff with 500 bed space. The total staff strength of both health institutions amount to 1719 medical staff formed the population and using Krejcie and Morgan sample size determining table, the sample is 313. Primary and secondary sources were the data sources. Responses from the research participants with the use of questionnaire were the

primary data. The study hypotheses were tested with Pearson Product Moment Analysis.

**HYPOTHESES TESTING**

**Hypothesis One (H<sub>01</sub>) Testing**

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no relationship between the experiential learning and differentiation of public health institutions in Rivers State.

Table 1 – Experiential Learning and Differentiation: The data analysis result shows medium relationship. The r = 0.686, displays medium correlation amongst the variables. The alternate hypothesis is then accepted and the null hypothesis rejected.

**Hypothesis Two (H<sub>02</sub>) Testing**

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no relationship between the experiential learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State.

Table 2- Experiential Learning and Cost Leadership: The data analysis result shows medium relationship level. The r = 0.697, showing positive medium correlation amongst the variables. The null hypothesis is hereby rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. .

**Hypothesis Three (H<sub>03</sub>) Testing**

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There is no relationship between the empowerment learning and differentiation of public health institutions in

**Table 3:** Relationship between Empowerment Learning and Differentiation

		Empowerment Learning	Differentiation
Empowerment Learning	Pearson Correlation(r)	1	.709**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	313	313
Differentiation	Pearson Correlation(r)	.709**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	313	313

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)  
Coefficient of Correlation ( $r^2$ ) = 0.50 Source: SPSS Output, (2020)

**Table 4:** Relationship between Empowerment Learning and Cost Leadership

		Empowerment Learning	Cost Leadership
Empowerment Learning	Pearson Correlation(r)	1	.805
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	313	313
Cost Leadership	Pearson Correlation(r)	.805	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	313	313

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)  
Coefficient of Correlation ( $r^2$ ) = 0.65 Source: SPSS Output, (2020)

Rivers State.

Table 3–Empowerment Learning and Differentiation: The result of the data analysis shows high relationship. The  $r = 0.709$ , indicates high correlation amongst the variables. The null hypothesis is hereby rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted.

#### Hypothesis Four (H<sub>04</sub>) Testing

**H<sub>04</sub>:** There is no relationship between the empowerment learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State.

Table 4 – Empowerment Learning and Cost Leadership: The result of the data analysis shows positive high correlation. The  $r^2 = 0.65$ , showing is positive high correlation amongst the variables. The finding reveals positive high relationship amongst the variables. The null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis accepted.

## FINDINGS

### Experiential Learning and Differentiation

Experiential learning and differentiation analysis result (Hypothesis One) reveals medium relationship with  $r^2 = (47\%)$ , that indicates that for an element of experiential learning, there is 47% increase in the level of differentiation of public health institutions. This implies moderate medium relationship amongst experiential

learning and differentiation. The implication is that experiential learning accounted for 47 percent of public health institutions differentiation. This finding is in agreement with that of Onuoha (2016) that said the strategy “involves concrete efforts to remain on top through the provision of unique or highly valued products” achievable through learning from experienced colleagues.

### Experiential Learning and Cost Leadership

Experiential learning and cost leadership analysis result (Hypothesis Two) reveals that there exist a remarkable (medium) relationship amongst experiential learning and cost leadership. This is evidence, given that  $r^2 = 49\%$  which revealed that 49% total variation in experiential learning accounted for cost leadership of public health institutions. This signifies that for every increase in the level of experiential learning, there is corresponding 49% increase in the level of cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State. This signifies that there is medium relationship between experiential learning and cost leadership of public health institutions in Rivers State. This findings concur with that of Onuoha (2016) that asserted that cost leadership could be attained through cost control, cost minimization policies, avoidance of scraps, wastage and any other wasteful practices within the organisations and one of the factors for the reduction of cost is through learning which was described according to Onuoha (2016) as “repetitive performance of a task allows person to develop a special-

-ized set of skills which permits the completion of the assignment in a more efficient ways”.

### Empowerment Learning and Differentiation

Based on the empowerment learning and differentiation analysis result (Hypothesis Three), there is an evidence of high relationship between empowerment learning and differentiation. The determination coefficient ( $r^2 = 50\%$ ) reveals that empowerment learning can contribute up to 50% to the differentiation in the public health institutions. This finding is in agreement with that of Olorunmola, et al. (2019) where Johnson (1998) was reported to have asserted that empowerment learning organisations “...start and make an empowering domain for their business to flourish since they ought to be intended for making information at a speed that will profit them ...”

### Empowerment Learning and Cost Leadership

The result of empowerment learning and cost leadership (Hypothesis Four) analysis indicates that there is positive high relationship between empowerment learning and cost leadership. The determination coefficient was 65% that implies that high relationship exist amongst the variables, meaning that there exists positive high relationship because the influence of empowerment learning can account for 65% cost leadership of public health institutions. This finding is in support of Onuoha (2016) that asserted that cost leadership could be attained through cost control, cost minimization policies, avoidance of scraps, wastage and any other wasteful practices within the organisations and a way to reduce cost is through learning which was described according to Onuoha (2016) as “repetitive performance of a task allows person to develop a specialized set of skills which permits the completion of the assignment in a more efficient ways”.

### CONCLUSION

Since all the alternative hypotheses were accepted, it implies that there is relationship amongst workplace learning dimensions used (exponential and empowerment learning and competitive advantage measures (differentiation and cost leadership) of public health institutions in Rivers State. But the competitive strategies must not be combined together to use in the organisation as study had not actually ascertain combination effectiveness of two or more competitive strategies. This is subsequent to Porter assertion in Onuoha (2016) that “only one of the generic competitive advantage strategies should be adopted at any given time”

### RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study findings, the following are recommended:

1. The public health institutions exponential and empowerment learning that is being tried to achieve must be with dynamism, relevance and focus on the needs of the public health institutions employees for improvement purpose of the competitive advantage level.
2. The management of public health institutions in Rivers State should allow their workers to know that workplace learning is specifically to make them ‘masters’ in their field and by so doing, such will facilitate seeing their work as leisure, reduce job dissatisfaction and invariably, increase the competitive advantage of both the workers and the institutions.
3. The management of public health institutions should liaise with the workforce on the need for any competitive strategy and possibly, what they intend to achieve for the organisation to enlist the workforce full support and cooperation.

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