EMPLOYEE RELATIONS STRATEGIES AND THE INDUSTRIAL CHALLENGES OF NON-TEACHING STAFF OF FEDERAL UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

Okezie Kristopher Onyekachi

Federal College of Dental Technology and Therapy, Trans-Ekulu, Enugu.

obiayom2016@gmail.com

Justitia Odinakachukwu Nnabuko

Department of Nigeria, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus (UNEC)

Justitia.nnabuko@unn.edu.ng

Joseph Ikechukwu Uduji

Department of Nigeria, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus (UNEC)

Joseph.uduji@unn.edu.ng

Chiemelie Benneth Iloka (Corresponding)

Department of Marketing, Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT)

iloka.benneth@esut.edu.ng

Abstract

This study aims to assess the relationship between employee relation and industrial challenges. To do this, 446 responses were gathered among non-teaching staff in federal universities across south-east Nigeria. Findings from the study show that labour union, staff training, and information and communications has strong relationship with industrial challenges. Therefore, it is concluded that in order to ensure that non-teaching staff are happy at federal universities, they should be allowed to: fairly participate in labour unionism, be put through different training and development programmes, and offered quality communication and information about events in both the institution and academic world in general.

Keywords: Communication, Labour Union, Information, Staff Training, Universities

1. Introduction

Employee relations has a lot to do in an organization to smooth the wheel of productivity. It is called relations because it has to do with the relationship between workers and management. According to Meade (2018), employee relations are the ways employees relate with

management in order to create a good environment for effective performance. Hence, every nation has its own laws that try to streamline worker-management relations and are embedded in its labor laws. The applicability of employee relations laws, better known as labor laws, varies from one country to the next and from one organization to the next. All in all, employee relations have to speak of how management intervenes in staff-related matters for the sole purpose of strengthening positive ties between management and every member of staff. n every organization, there is the use of employees by management to create products or services to satisfy human wants. By satisfying the wants of customers, the organization raises money to reward employees for their services. This is the concept of employee relations. That informs why Moha (2021) describes employee relations as the relationship between employers and employees that enables the employer to produce goods or services that satisfy human wants. Today's interpretation of employee relations refers to individual as well as collective workplace relationships.

Hence, the management of any organization owes it a duty to keep its promise, both to the employees and to the customers, to satisfy both sides as well as to be clear and honest in communication. According to Taylor & Kent (2007), factors affecting employee relations include: leading industry professionals determining that workplace bullying, a lack of honesty, a lack of flexibility, bad managers, unclear policies, pay raise requests, and workplace conflicts are the most significant toxic factors that damage employee relations. In the words of Sturges (1994), employee relations entail the 8Rs of Workplace Human Relations Technology, which are Requests—self-service and management approval; reporting to deliver more; revolutionary technologies will become rarer; responsive design will be expected and crucial; Return on Investment trumps everything, as does the rationalization of systems and recruitment and training using social media.

In the Nigerian educational system, the fixation of staff salaries is done by the National Salaries and Wages Commission and the executive arm of government, while the legislators back it by law. Once fixed, payment is handed down to the schools' authorities. The actual dissipation is done by the school authority. As can be noted by Agbaeze (2021), most schools' management manipulates the labor laws to the disfavor of the workers, pointing out that often workers in universities and polytechnics are not paid at the right time even when the government has provided the fund. This is the case, says Agbaeze, in most schools in eastern Nigeria such as UNN, ESUT, UNIZIK, IMT, and ESCET, as well as in other sections of the country. This research shall evaluate the effect of employee relations staff intervention strategies and the challenges of non-teaching staff at federal universities in south-east Nigeria.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis
2.1. Employee Relations

One of the major aims of any good and experienced employee relations officer is to build a favorable environment for environmental safety, friendliness, and productivity in the workplace, and a coordinated intervention through the trade union is inevitable.

Maintaining good employee relations helps reduce workplace conflicts, boost staff morale, and raise overall productivity. According to Meade (2018), employee relations refer to the manner in which management addresses and interacts with employees, adding that employees or the workforce are the most important part of any business. Whereas employee relations is inward-looking, public relations is outward-looking. No business can run effectively without both. The employee needs to communicate with co-employees in order to get his job done. This is where employee relations come into play. Employers need to maintain good employee relations in order to ensure that business runs smoothly, problems are avoided, and employees are able to give their very best.

An organization that abides by a good employee relations program provides fair treatment to all employees so the latter are only able to give their best but also remain loyal to the company. In the words of the National Board for Technical Education (2011), an effective employee relations program starts with clearly written policies. Many companies have a strong employee relations department that ensures that company policies are followed fairly and that too with consistency. The employee relations department works in close collaboration with workers and management in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the organization.

Typically, an organization's human resources department manages employee relations efforts; however, some organizations may have a dedicated employee relations manager role. Typical responsibilities of an employee relations manager include acting as a liaison or intermediary between employees and managers and either creating or advising on the creation of policies around employee issues like fair compensation, useful benefits, proper work-life balance, reasonable working hours, and others. When it comes to employee relations, an HR department has two primary functions. First, HR helps prevent and resolve problems or disputes between employees and management. Second, they assist in creating and enforcing policies that are fair and consistent for everyone in the workplace.

By maintaining positive, constructive employee relations, organizations hope to keep employees loyal and more engaged in their work. To maintain positive employee relations, an organization must first view employees as stakeholders and contributors in the company rather than simply as paid laborers. This perspective encourages those in management and executive roles to seek employee feedback, to value their input more highly, and to consider the employee experience when making decisions that affect the entire company.

2.2. Labour Union and Industrial Challenges of Non-Teaching Staff

Anyadike (2019) carried out primary research on the trade unions in Nigerian universities, using the University of Nigeria as a case study. 200 non-teaching members of NASU were selected for the study. They were asked to what extent members of NASU were benefiting from the act of trade unionism in the institution, especially in the act of collective bargaining. 120 (60%) said they greatly benefited, while 80 (40%) said they never significantly benefited significantly. So, we conclude that trade unionism makes a lot of impact on the academic system. It was recommended that trade unionism be taken seriously among the workers at the university.

Otanka (2019) undertook research on the aspect of trade unionism in the school system using Nnamdi Azikiwe Federal University, Awka, as a case study. 500 junior workers were elected for the research. About 400 students (80%) agreed that they derive much benefit from their participation in the school trade union, while the rest had no response. So, we conclude that the workers greatly benefit from the activities of trade unionism in the university, especially the junior employees. It is therefore recommended that school management ensure junior workers participation in trade union activities. In view of the above, it is hypothesized that:

HO₁: *Labor unions do not affect the industrial challenges of non-teaching staff at federal universities in south-east Nigeria.*

2.3. Staff Training and Industrial Challenges of Non-Teaching Staff

Agbaeze (2021) conducted secondary research on the way training of workers has affected junior staff remuneration at the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) as a case study between 2000 and 2020. The regression that followed discovered that workers were happy with the activities of trade unions in the school, with a lesser number in opposition. So, we conclude that workers training and retraining are better taken care of by vibrant trade unionists. It is recommended that democracy should be employed by leaders of trade unions to portray and ensure transparency since almost all workers have embraced it.

Moha (2021) conducted primary research on the way federal universities motivated workers through timely training and retraining. 140 junior workers of the Michael Okpara Federal University in Umudike were interviewed. 77 workers (55%) agreed that they are well trained by the seminars they attend on worker training and retraining, while the rest (45%) disagreed. So, we conclude that training and retraining of workers in the school system encourages worker output. It is, therefore, recommended that management retrain workers periodically.

HO₂: *Staff training does not affect the industrial challenges of non-teaching staff at federal universities in south-east Nigeria.*

2.4. Information Communication and Industrial Challenges of Non-Teaching Staff

Nwoha (2020) conducted secondary research on the way communication of information on workers welfare affected worker output at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, between 1998 and 2020, using data sourced from university personnel. After the regression that followed, it was discovered that communication fosters output in the school system. It was concluded that the school system is better off with informed communication. It was so recommended that junior workers in any institution should be adequately communicated with the issues of organizational challenges.

Animalu (2021) conducted primary research on the importance of communication in the functioning of tertiary institutions by interviewing 100 workers at Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki (78%) note that communication with management settles lots of infractions with management to the betterment of the worker, while the rest (23) disagree. So, we conclude that

communication is very vital to the growth of the organization. It is highly recommended that the school system always ensures prompt communication between management and workers.

HO₃: *Information communication does not have a significant effect on the industrial challenges of non-teaching staff at federal universities in south-east Nigeria.*

2.5. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
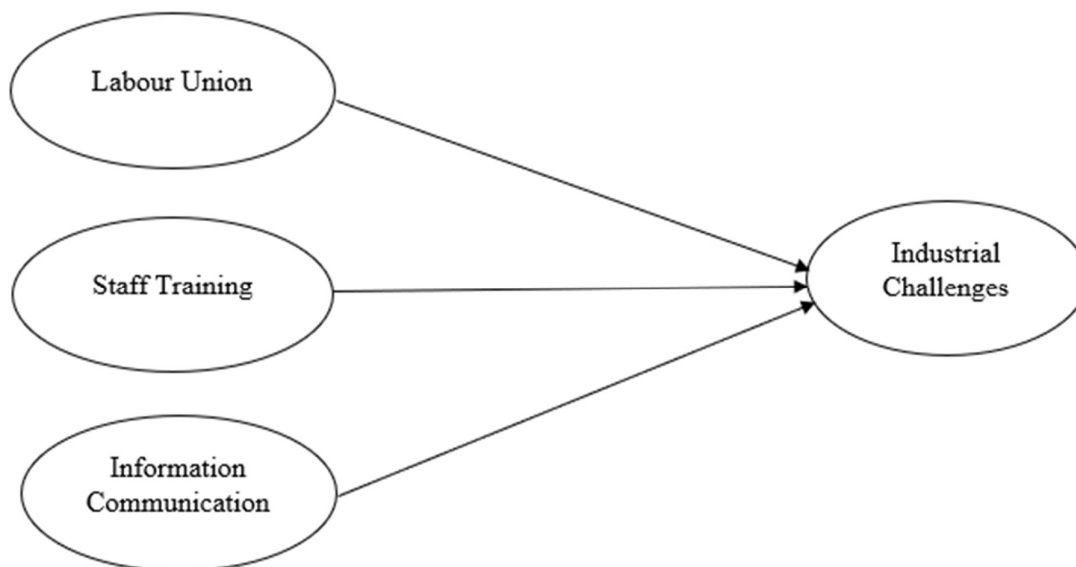
Based on the Figure 1 above, this study is founded on two main variables (independent and dependent variables). The independent variables are labour union, staff training and information communication, while the dependent variable is industrial challenges. The independent variables are components of employee relations and they are designed to test whether they influence industrial challenges among non-teaching staffs in Federal Universities.

3. Research Method

Survey research design was adopted for this study with responses gathered via structured questionnaire. The respondents were non-teaching staff of federal universities in south-east Nigeria. Five (5) federal universities in the South-East were selected: University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Federal University of Technology, Owerri; Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Abakaliki; Michael Okpara Federal University of Agriculture, Umudike; and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Based on Yamani's Statistical Distribution Formula (1967), the sample size was defined as four hundred and sixty-six (471). The data used for this analysis can be accessed via Kaggle (https://doi.org/10.34740/KAGGLE/DSV/4972216). Random sampling method was used with validity of the data tested using face- and content-validity. Gathered data were analysed using IBM SPSS and AMOS software.

4. Data Analysis

An examination of the demographic factors presented in Table 1 reveals that the majority of the survey participants are male, constituting 64.2% of the total number of respondents. Females make up the next highest percentage at 34.8%. The majority of respondents fall within the age range of 31-40 years (44%), followed by those over 50 years old (21.1%), 20-30 years old (19.8%), 41-50 years old (12.6%), and those under 20 years old (2.5%). In terms of ethnicity, the largest group of respondents identify as Igbo at 49%, followed by the Middle Belt at 22.2%, Yoruba at 13.5%, and Other ethnic groups at 9%. Hausa/Fulani make up 6.3% of respondents. For the purpose of the study, it was important that the participants have prior experience of industrial challenge, and 95.6% of respondents answered "yes" to this question, while the remaining 4.4% answered "no." Therefore, the majority of participants are suitable for inclusion in this study.

Table 1. Demographic Variables

	Frequency	Percent %	Cumulative percent %
Gender Male	816	64.2	64.2
Female	456	35.8	100
Age Below 20 years old	32	2.5	2.5
20-30 years old	252	19.8	22.3
31-40 years old	560	44.0	66.4
41-50 years old	160	12.6	78.9
Above 50 years old	268	21.1	100.0
Ethnicity Hausa/Fulani	80	.6.3	.6.3
Igbo	624	49.0	55.3
Yoruba	172	13.5	68.8
Middle-Belt	282	22.2	91
Others	114	9.0	100.0
Have you experience industrial Yes	1216	95.6	95.6
challenges before? No	56	4.4	100.0

The researcher evaluated the reliability and validity of the data before conducting the structural model assessment. The concept of reliability refers to the consistency of the measurement scale used to represent the construct being studied (Leong et al., 2011). To test the convergent validity of the data for this study, the Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha, Squared Shared Variance (ASV), factor loadings, Maximum Shared Variance (MSV), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) tests were utilized. These results are presented in Table 2. The values returned for both Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha were greater than 0.7, indicating good reliability of the constructs used in the study (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Additionally, the AVE value was higher than 0.5, suggesting that the collected data had convergent validity (Hair Jr et al., 2016; Hulland, 1999). According to Wang and Shah (2023), for validity to be established, the ASV and MSV values should be lower than the AVE. In

Table 2, all of the ASV and MSV values are lower than the AVE, which supports the validity
of the convergent data.

Table 2. Convergent Validity

	Factor Loading	Crombach α	CR	AVE	ASV	MSV
LU1	0.744	0.93	0.91	0.58	0.41	0.50
LU2	0.768					
LU3	0.758					
LU4	0.701					
ST1	0.835	0.92	0.88	0.71	0.66	0.53
ST2	0.817					
ST3	0.884					
ST4	0.678					
IC1	0.887	0.91	0.91	0.77	0.73	0.64
IC2	0.957					
IC3	0.790					
IC4	0.841					
IChallenge1	0.887	0.91	0.91	0.77	0.73	0.64
IChallenge2	0.957					
IChallenge3	0.79					
IChallenge4	0.851					

The researcher also evaluated the discriminant validity using the conventional approach
recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), as well as cross-loading. Fornell and Larcker
(1981) proposed that in order for discriminant validity to be established, the square roots of the
Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct should be larger than the
correlation values established among other constructs. In Table 3, the first value in each column
is greater than the other values in the same column, indicating that discriminant validity has
been achieved for the data analysed.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity -Fornell and Larcker criterion results

	COI	IS	EOA	PD	PPD
COI	**0.77**				
IS	0.645	**0.84**			
EOA	0.517	0.651	**0.88**		
PD	0.48	0.701	0.652	**0.71**	
PPD	0.344	0.768	0.548	0.565	**0.71**

The researcher also conducted a test for the goodness of fit, using TLI, CFI, and RMSEA. In order to be considered a good fit, the standard values for TLI and CFI should be greater than 0.90, which is the case for this study. The standard value for RMSEA should be less than 0.10, which is also the case for this study, as shown in Table 4. Therefore, based on the results from Table 4, it can be concluded that the model fits well.

Table 4. Model Goodness of Fit

Selected indices	Result	Acceptable level of fit
TLI	0.901	TLI > 0.90
CFI	0.904	CFI > 0.90
RMSEA	0.002	RMSEA < 0.05 good; 0.05 to 0.10 acceptable

In view of the above discussions, the data gathered in this study can be moved for further analysis. This is based on the fact that it has valid convergent and discriminant validity, and the model is a good fit. Thus, further analysis in relation to the stated hypothesis is presented and discussed below.

4.1. Test of Hypothesis

Figure 2 and Table 5 document the path analysis for latent variables. Figure 2 shows that labour union has a positive relationship with industrial challenges (0.83), staff training has a positive relationship with industrial challenges (0.67), and information communication has a positive relationship with industrial challenges (0.82). Going further, the beta and significant values in Table 5 show that this relationship is statistically significant (<0.001). This rejects hypotheses 1–3 in the null forms.
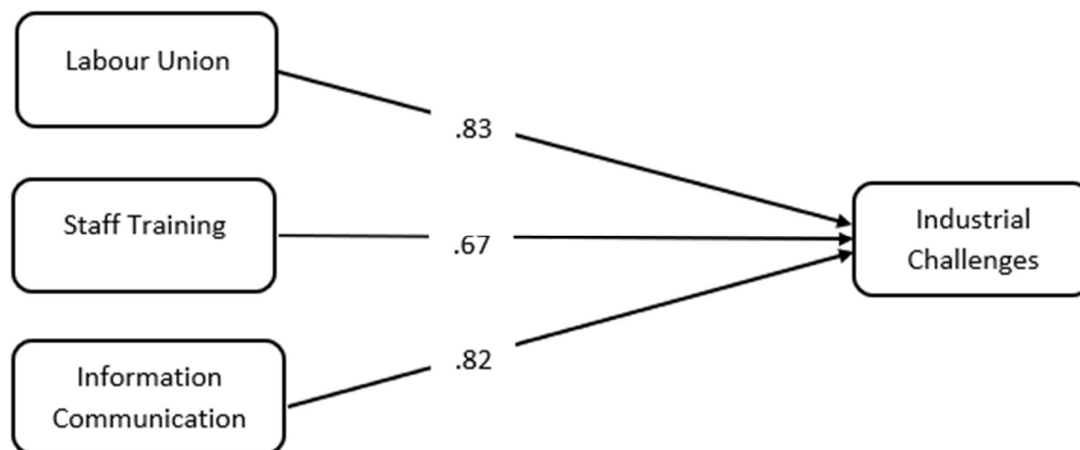
Figure 2. Path Analysis

Time 5. Path Analysis

Relationships			Estimate	Beta	S.E.	C.R.	*P*
LU	<---	IChallenges	.831	.495	.041	20.322	0.000
ST	<---	IChallenges	.564	.366	.040	14.019	0.000
IC	<---	IChallenges	.816	.459	.044	18.425	0.000

5. Discussion and Conclusion
5.1. Summary of Findings

This study was designed to assess the relationship between employee relations and industrial challenges faced by non-teaching staff of federal universities in south-east Nigeria. Based on the assessment, 446 responses were gathered and analysed using IBM SPSS and AMOS software. For the analysis, labour union, staff training and information communication were used as the components of employee relations. The analysis shows that labour union has a positive relationship with industrial challenges (0.83), staff training has a positive relationship with industrial challenges (0.67), and information communication has a positive relationship with industrial challenges (0.82). These findings are also statistically significant at <0.0001.

5.2. Implications of Findings

Findings from this study have two main implications. First, it goes to show that building sustainable employee relations in Nigerian universities will entail allowing the employees to active participate in labour unions, putting them through necessary training and development programmes, and keeping them informed about new trends and issues in the system. By so doing, the employees will be in better control of their working systems and be able to yield concrete positive outcomes.

Secondly, the study has filled an existing gap in academia. Majority of the studies on employee relations within the context of Nigerian universities have focused mainly on the academic staff. Therefore, by filling this gap, this study has been able to demonstrate that similar issues are also experienced for the non-academic staff and as such buffer necessary solutions for addressing these industrial challenges. Thus, this study has been able to fill existing gap in academia, laying the foundation for development of necessary theories and models.

5.3. Limitations of Study

While there are a number of limitations to this study, these limitations do not undermine overall findings. The main limitation of this study is the scope. While there are universities across all geopolitical zones of Nigeria, this study focused primarily on federal universities within the south-east. Thus, it limits overall applicability of the findings to all universities across the country. Secondly, while there are numerous components that can be used to evaluate employee relations, only three (labour union, staff training, and communication and information) were used in this study. Therefore, it limits overall understanding of the effects of other potential components of employee relations. Essentially, the scope and chosen variables were meant to ensure coherence and improved data gathering, not to limit overall findings or applicability in any form.

5.4. Further Related Studies

Based on the limitations above, it is recommended that further relates studies should seek to assess the entire Nigerian universities while also adopting more variables aside the ones used in this study. This will ensure generalization of both findings and applicability of the findings irrespective of the university in question.

5.5. Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it is concluded that employee relations (labour union, staff training, and information and communication) yield positive and statistically significant influence on industrial challenges. That is to say, the higher the employee relations the lower the overall challenges these employee face in Nigerian universities. Essentially, it is recommended that universities seeking to address the issue of industrial challenges being faced by non-academic staff should endeavor to address offer quality employee relations in the process.

6. Acknowledgement

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