

THE BLEAK NATURE OF HRM PRACTICES IN ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT OF CASUAL LABOUR EMPLOYMENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the morbid use of numerical labour flexibility with a specific focus on casual labour employment. Scholarly enquiries into labour casualization have often been assessed from a labour-market flexibility perspective and/or managerial control of labour. In contrast, this research attempts to add to literature by unveiling the experiences facing these organisational cohort from narrative accounts of employees. In doing so, 20 interviews were conducted with casual staffs employed as security guards, cleaners and shelf stackers at one of the Shoprite supermarket subsidiary operating in Nigeria. The findings exposed ebbing HR practices regulating working conditions of these set of workers based on the low skill nature of their job roles. Consequently, practical implications of the study proposes demands for HR managers to reconceptualise HRM best practices that would accommodate and support casual labourers based on the rising need for firms to remain flexible in response to changing market vagaries.

Keywords: Labour flexibility, Casualization, Casual labourers, Nigeria, HRM practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

In establishing control over labour for profitability purposes, one device increasingly used by employers is flexibility. Labour flexibility has for many decades received considerable scholarly attention. Kotler and Keller, (2006) perceives flexibility is evoking the ability to cope quickly with changing circumstances and business uncertainties. Torrington et al., (2011), considers flexibility as policies which allow employers to adapt more speedily to turbulent and competitive market shifts by shedding or increasing labour in response to demands without the costly overheads associated with full time permanent employees. Consequently, these full-time employees working in organisations are increasingly being challenged by the use of non-standard work arrangements which is manifest in industries around the world, whether in transnational, multinational, public or private firms and in the informal sectors (Nolan, Wicket and Birchell, 2000). Accordingly, substantial debates have focused on how this non-standard work patterns such temporary, casual, contract, part-time and subcontracting employments are part of a much wider set of developments towards the marketization of employment relations but which also

raises concerns about the decline of internal labour markets, and the precarious nature of atypical labour arrangements that is the root cause of job insecurity, low employee commitment, poor work quality, reductions in task discretion and work-life conflicts (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008). However, the use of casual labour which is gaining grounds in an unprecedented proportion is the focus of this article.

Research reveals a significant number of studies on the reasons for, effects and outcomes of labour casualization in advanced economies where the theory of the 'flexible firm' developed (Atkinson, 1985). However, the current study shifts a reader's attention to the realities of labour casualization in one of the most populous countries in Africa – Nigeria that is still categorised as a developing nation because of the so many socio-economic and political downturns plaguing the country. Fapohunda (2012) pointed out that the poor economic status of the country is the one of the main reasons for the intensive use of casual labour. Therefore, the main question of this study is to explore how low skilled workers react to HR practices relating to labour casualization in Nigeria. Thus, the overall objective of study is to examine the plight of workers who are under casual employment contracts and specifically identify the detrimental nature of casualization and consequences on the labour sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior literature on casual labour matters have often been assessed from the industrial relations and labour-market flexibility perspective with emphasis on implementing institutional and policy guidelines for casualization practices (Lowry, 2001) while a paucity of research remains in assessing the impact of the nature of such employments from a casual worker's perspective. In its broadest sense, scholarly discussions on labour flexibility was pioneered and popularised by Atkinson (1984, 1985). Atkinson's thesis of the 'flexible firm model' re-echoes similar ideas, as expressed by early studies of the segmented labour market theory; that the flexible firm involves an in-house divide and rule practice. To this end, flexible work patterns were described by Atkinson (1985) as a way of achieving profits and performance by increased managerial control through variances to diverse levels of organizational commitment of employee tenure. Atkinson argued that apart from the skilled and permanent employees who enjoy the benefits of functional flexibility, the peripheral group of workers are mostly associated with precarious working conditions because they are temporary, contract and/or casual employees brought in mainly to help cover peaks in operation or short-term needs of the organisation. Atkinson (1984) argues that numerical flexibility are structured in accordance to business demands and workers' work-life needs by varying pattern and length of hours worked. More specifically, within the periphery context are casual employees who have lower skills and are less central to the organisation's success

because their skills are more available in the labour market.

In broad terms, casualization involves work of an irregular or intermittent nature and a form of employment that is 'deprived of most standard benefits, rights and forms of protection and that is marked by substantial level of precariousness' (Campbell and Burgess, 1997). For instance, in a country like Nigeria, it is reported that the vast use of casualization has been a source of concern to workers, labour unions, and most organisations. Kalejaiye (2014) contested that the astronomical growth of casual labour in Nigeria seems to arise from deliberate policies of big organisations creating more casual labour positions in substitute for permanent positions. The reason is not farfetched given the volatile and fragile nature of the Nigerian economy. This stems from the expansive political dilemma facing the country arising from leadership failures affecting virtually every facet of the country's national character. For instance, the high unemployment rates and extreme poverty levels in Nigeria is driving desperate job seekers to take up any form of low income jobs irrespective of the degrading nature of such employments. Subsequently, Nigerian employers are seizing this opportunity to increasingly fill positions in their organisations that are supposed to be permanent vacancies with casual workers. With a population of almost 190 million which the hyperactive demographic situation is predicted to increase astronomically to 285 million by 2025 (Fajana, 2008) if population control measures are not considered coupled with a recognition of the country as a low and middle-income economy is apparently a reason why Nigerian organisations opt for cheap labour. Further, the nation's wealth in crude oil have captured a great amount of attention from global businesses for decades and the increasing diversification of the economy from the oil sector to other industries arising from the increasing wealth among a class of Nigerians is believed to be fuelling growth in the luxury end market in the country.

Take for instance the developments in Nigeria's retail landscape indicate that the stirrings of a retail revolution is undeniable. Thus, international investors are now taking advantage of the Nigerian Government's liberalisation policies that is allowing rapid growth of international trade. For instance, in the Nigerian retail market, Shoprite supermarkets; that is study context of this article is now unarguably one of the best supermarkets Nigeria. Shoprite holdings, headquartered in South Africa is the largest fast moving consumer goods retail platform operating across the African continent with operations in about fifteen countries in Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands (Shoprite homepage - www.shoprite.com.ng). Shoprite started operations in Nigeria in 2005 and now has various super stores across the country. While the vision and brand of these retail supermarkets is to provide lowest possible prices of all consumer and household goods, they also brought about creation of jobs to Nigerians. Employment opportunities ranges from sales managers, stock administrators, bookkeepers, cashiers, courtesy counter clerk, baggers, meat clean-up clerks, bakers, pharmacists, salad bar clerks, security

guards, drivers, shelve stockers among many other job roles. While some employees enjoy a high level of job security (such as organisational top and bottom line managers), there are others that may not have the same job security and permanency. This research specifically intends to explore casual employment as a phenomenon at Shoprite Nigeria with particular focus on some of these workers' verdict on the adequacy of HRM practices affecting their casual work arrangements.

3. METHODOLOGY

Epistemologically, the research design of the study draws from a social constructivist paradigm that dwells on sourcing data from people's lived experiences (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). The reason for adopting this method is because it provides an appropriate framework for the development of in-depth understanding of the social reality understudy. By engaging in this inductive approach, a non-probabilistic Purposive sampling method was used to recruit 20 low skilled workers on non-standard contracts. The specific workers selected were security guards, shelve stockers and store cleaners of one of Shoprite's supermarkets located in one of the Southern States of Nigeria. Once access was granted to conduct the research, the time, place and frequency of visits was formalised with the full help of the store manager. The one-to-one interviews were conducted with these sets of casual staffs when they finished their shifts and confidentiality was prioritised throughout the data collection activity. Most of the questions asked centred on their perceived experience of HRM and casual work arrangements of the giant supermarket. The semi-structured interviews were conducted during the participant's lunch breaks or after their work shifts. Each interview last for about 40-50mins. In order to meet the eligibility criterion, participants were selected through judgemental sampling. Few names of workers on casual employments were retrieved voluntarily from the HR unit of the store while snowballing was used to source for more interested interviewees. Given the request for anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to represent all key informants that took part in the study. The demographic profiles of all participants are shown in the table below.

TABLE 1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Item	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	19	63.3
	Female	11	36.7
Age	35-39	8	26.7
	40-44	13	43.3
	45-49	9	30
Work experience	1-2 years	10	33.3
Age of children	Above 2 years	20	66.7
Level of education	Primary school	10	33.3
	High school	14	46.7
	G.C.S.E.	6	20

All the interviews were tape recorded while field notes were also taken to support the oral data. Once saturation point was reached, all the interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis (TA) methodology used to analyse the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), TA is simply "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". Thus, a manual coding (i.e. identifying, naming and categorising themes) from the transcribed interviews was done. This continued until saturation was reached. The final stage was translating the themes into a narrative account which informed the theoretical development that emerged from the study findings.

4. FINDINGS

Themes emerged from all interview data addressing the main research question and objective of study. For instance, findings indicated that most participants observed HR practices in their workplace was either inaccessible and below acceptable standards. Some of the areas of discontent are reported as below:

4.1 Job scheduling

One of the themes that emerged from data was the problematic nature of job scheduling of casual workers. Some participants expressed displeasure at the allocation of rosters and shift patterns that tends to raise concerns with respect to the differential treatment of permanent and casual workers in the supermarket. For instance, one of the issues raised was with regards to rewards for work done. One of the participants commented:

"It is difficult experience for casual workers to get shifts with good pay rates and sometimes work on weekends and even public holidays, but priority is first given to permanent workers before we are considered for any bonuses".

In addition, some of the shelf stackers on casual employments lamented about the precariousness of their job despite the fact that they are mandated to be around at all times. Some further viewed labour flexibility practices as a marginalised policy and structured as an exclusive right given to those on managerial roles to the detriment of others. There was also evidence from some of the interviewees on the lack of pay rise, job protection and denial to access any benefits such as extra pay that should be given to some of them that work unsocial hours. In general, two-thirds of the participants felt that their low earnings is caused by erratic shift patterns allocated to them by their line managers. A few highlighted the financial difficulties they experienced arising from the low income which is not enough to

meet their family needs. Some narrated how they work long hours but receive unsatisfactory salaries that was perceived as the root cause of their work-life problematic experiences.

4.2 Performance management

A handful of participants held views that since casuals can be recruited and terminated more quickly than permanent employees, employers are often less committed about the way casual employees are managed. Overlooking some aspects of recruitment and performance management of these sets of workers was a major problem in Shoprite. One of the participants who is a security guard was of the perception that some employers may argue that because they invest less in casual employees than permanent ones, they can afford to be less rigorous about performance management for casuals. This is why one cleaner felt that casuals are often treated as expendable and disposable labour which was also corroborated by other shared views that alluded to the company adhering to a philosophy of: "If things don't work out with any of these workers, we can often and cheaply replace him/her immediately and get someone else". This high level of job insecurity was perceived by some as a source of stress and psychology strain felt at work.

Two participants in their separate interviews also highlighted the lack of equal job opportunities arising from some group benefiting more from the continuous cycle of work planning, execution and planning. Nearly half of all the participants expressed displeasure with the level of feedback on performance they receive. One of the male security guard iterated that:

"I am of the opinion that our HR should give more support and assistance to us because the company expect so much from us when it comes to securing the premises."

Another interviewee (a shelf stacker) believes that in the same way that other employees are given weekly and monthly recognition for service excellence, on few occasions, it would be also rewarding if the same level of appreciation is shown to reliable casual labourers by management.

4.3 Training

A number of interviews revealed how some of these casuals held a fairly negative perception about the training activities which some viewed as inadequate while others feel it is not simply provided. This was perceived as the reason for carefree and casual handling of the existing tools and machines and general nonchalant attitude of casual labourers in the discharge of their duties on some occasions in and around the supermarket. For instance, three female cleaners questioned the quality of training being received by expressions such as:

“I don't feel the supermarket gives us satisfactory room to improve at our work. As a cleaner, I am not given safety boots and our line managers don't really instruct us on the use of the various cleaning chemicals but we are briefed for few minutes on where we are working daily.”

The excerpt above typifies a sample version of perceptions on the dreary nature of training available to these sets of employees. One of the shelf stackers also mentioned how casual workers face a higher likelihood of forced dismissal arising from any unsatisfactory work performance. In addition, some others believe they do not have any other working conditions except for the diminutive remuneration they receive at the end of the month. There was the obvious believe that most effective skill acquisition comes from training within a paid-work context, but from most interviews, the inadequate training issues made some participants express further concerns about how casual workers get trapped in a low-skill, low-pay circle of disadvantage and the increasingly lack of labour union representation. This situation was said to weaken employee morale arising from engaging workers under unfair labour practices and deplorable working conditions and environment.

4.4 Communication concerns

There were a few complaints about the minimal disclosure of work information between managers and casual workers. Some of the participants were of the view that the level of communication is not fair or comparable to that of permanent workers. Managers appear not to communicate comprehensive work plans and/or schedules of work to these workers as they only get to know about day's work in the morning. The workers in turn do not get a chance to make any input in this regard and most of these casuals particularly those that work in the store belief that their contributions might be very important. In fact, the truth of the matter is that very few these participants said they possess requisite planning and scheduling skills which is under-utilised due to lack of detailed explanations from their line managers. One of the cleaners specifically iterated that:

“One of the problems we face is that sometimes we are not properly briefed on where to work at the beginning of the week”.

The poor disclosure of work designated to casual labourers employed in the supermarket was said to sometimes affect the quality of work output. For instance, it was revealed that the communication gap between line managers and the casual workers been supervised creates a lack of job motivation arising from views of being marginalised. In a nut shell, the central theme running through almost all the interviews was that labour standards are often compromised by firms involved in labour casualization. In other words, the participants highlighted the plight of employees who are under casual employment while identifying some of the implications of this form of labour practice. Some of the interviews also

revealed that the ill-treatment of casual labourers also extends to job allowances, canteen services, pension plans, health and life insurance schemes, transportation, leave entitlements and also lack of regularisation of employment as required by the law.

While all the participants were apt to ventilate their grievances about the bleak nature of HRM of casual labourers, further enquiries were made on improving the phenomenon under study. With expressions of both concerns and mixed-feelings, almost all participants shared similar views on the need to address the bleak nature of HRM practices in the management of casual labour employments. For instance, some felt that their remuneration should be fair and comparable to that of the permanent workers. This is because there was a popular opinion that most of the casuals and even contract staffs are very skilled in what they do but are discouraged because they generally get lower remuneration and poor conditions of employment and are also denied the right to organise and benefit from collective agreements. This was obviously perceived as unfair and violates the principle of equal pay for equal work without discrimination on whatsoever ground. Furthermore, two of the participants who were cleaners reiterated that casual workers should be given priority whenever there is an opening for permanent positions. It was believed that offering permanency can serve as an incentive that would promote hard work and diligence from casual labourers.

5. DISCUSSION

The whole essence of this study was to examine issues and arguments on work casualization from a Nigerian perspective. In line with this, the data suggest that casual employment is central to the perceptions of labour misfit between workers and their employer. This research further supports an earlier study by Lowry (2001) who argued that these sets of people belong to a category periphery workers who are deprived of standard job benefits and employment protections merely by virtue of the precarious nature of their employment. Subsequently, the study revealed the extent to which the sampled workers narrated how they do not have access to human resource practices that could facilitate the type of opportunities and working conditions available to permanent employers at Shoprite. There is a general argument that casual employment influences organisational management's decisions to obviate the need for certain HRM practices by assuming low levels of commitment from their casual staff (Burgess, 1996). However, Campbell (1996) argued on the contrary that excluding casuals from promotion prospects, access to adequate training, social integration, rewards and recognitions will not only have a negative effects on their morale but can potentially damage organisational productivity.

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Conceivably, the lack of access to HR systems at the level of the organisation are most likely to have adverse long-term effects on a firm's performance.

Consequently, in developing scholarly ideas from this study, it is proposed that the disadvantages associated with casual employment in Nigeria will have adverse effects on the employees, causing social context problems at work that can impact on the organisation as a whole as provided in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2 DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH CASUAL LABOUR EMPLOYMENT

Sphere	Negative realities
Employee	Work uncertainty
	Poor wages
	Working time insecurity
	Work-life conflict
	Demotivation
	Occupational stress
Social	Low equal opportunities
	Poor interpersonal relations
	Abysmal performance
Organisation	Decreased quality service
	Lower profits
	High turnover

In essence, the negative realities facing casual employment reveals that this certain group of workers are not benefiting from the availability of flexible work arrangements. Thus, casualization in Nigeria appears to exist as the only alternative to unemployment. Therefore, this research revealed the extent to which large organisations especially multinationals doing business in Nigeria like the superstore understudy can avert the need for certain jobs whose normal employment consist of series of short time labour. Consequently, this study aimed at contributing towards filling the gap in labour casualization literature, and particularly explored issues that pertain to the overall reactions that workers about HRM practices in their organisation. From the study findings, it can be implied that employees engaged on casual contracts may not function at their optimal abilities and would be more efficient under better working conditions. So from the negative realities conceptualised from the study findings, casualization does not only adversely affect workers and the social context of their employment but can also damage organisation's profits arising from poor service and increased negative employee turnover.

Thus, casualization will always disallow potent organisational progress because it will consistently remain a source of conflict within an organisation, thereby stealing away some of management's time that would have been devoted to critical and more positive issues that would contribute to organisational

development and growth. Certainly, employees irrespective of their terms of contract perform better in healthier, happier and stay longer in environments in which they fit. On the contrary, evidence from the study exposed the uneven HR practices as it negatively affect workers' health and work-life balance. This can affect workers life expectancy (Buchler, Haynes and Baxter, 2009). In addition, Okafor (2011) contested that excessive casualization may have inimical impact on important aspects of national economic performance such as skill formation and development while making the Nigerian workforce suffer greatly (Oluwadare, 2014). Consequently, the continuous engagement in anti-labour practices that deprives casual workers of basic HR welfare packages like those emerging from this study can frustrate economic advancements in the private and public sectors resulting into labour agitations, industrial actions and even social unrest.

6. CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper have attempted to uncover perceptions of various HRM practices affecting casual workers. The study however revealed antagonistic views of these practices and considered particularly problematic for casual employees working in Shoprite. Some of the HR problems highlighting in the study included aspects in job scheduling, training, performance management and organisational communications. These problems unearthed various negative realities confronting these sets of casual workers (see table 2). Generally, there are fears that many Nigerians are arguably suffering from the menace of casual workers, which both the labour movement and the governments at the various levels needs to address. Conceivably, the Nigerian Government must not only stop the degradation of work, but also develop the political will to exert the strength necessary in ensuring that both national and especially international organisations doing business in Nigeria must adhere to the Nigeria Labour Laws. For instance, Section 7 (1) of the Labour Act, Cap 198, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990 stipulates that informal and temporary employments held for three months must be regularised after this period with written statements containing all necessary terms of employment. This provision of the law aims to guide against job insecurity and excessive use of casualization. Since most scholars and union bodies like the Nigeria Labour Congress agree that casual work and its spread are bad for organisational citizens (i.e. employees), there should be targeted efforts that will offer strident resistance against casualization by all interested stakeholders of labour relations. In assessing the limitation of this qualitative study is the small sample size that was used and analysed. Thus, the results may not likely be generalizable. Future quantitative research can be carried out to ascertain validity, credibility and generalisation of this findings through statistical computations. Although the number of

participants was enough for a qualitative research, they were all working in a single organisation and access to specific information regarding the context of study allowed better and higher accuracy in the interpretation of the study findings.

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