MANAGING DIVERSE WORKFORCE ON CONSTRUCTION SITES IN ABUJA-NIGERIA

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Abstract

Globalisation of construction has led to the engagement of multicultural workforce on construction projects; progressively making cultural diversity and management strategies salient issues for multicultural construction firms. To this end, management of diverse workforce on construction sites in Abuja (FCT) was assessed through the use of qualitative methodology and analysed using content analysis. Ten managers/supervisors were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The findings show that the current practice of managing multicultural construction workforce is not sufficient to bring about the desired productivity, hence the need to manage the workforce along their cultural dimensions. Although construction firms are benefitting positively from the pool of knowledge associated with diverse workforce, yet the full potentials that will foster effective management for higher productivity is lacking. Based on the result of this study, it is recommended that construction firms adopt and develop multi-cultural training programmes for workers so as improve productivity and minimize interpersonal conflicts.

Keywords: Culture, Diversity, Ethnicity, Management, Abuja construction sites

Introduction

Cultural diversity and ethnicity can become a basis for determining social and economic life of citizenry. As such, according to Loosemore, Phua and Ozguc (2011), a culturally diverse workforce is an asset to be utilised in today's competitive environment and ever changing work place culture. In a related development, Emuze and James (2013) emphasised that firms now realise how important diversity is and are trying to keep up with the change that comes with it. However, Loosemore *et al.* (2011) stated that cultural diversity could also have negative consequences and implications if not well managed. The world is culturally diverse. This is both a plus and a challenge to organisations in many ways. Cultural diversity is a challenge due to the differences in culture, beliefs and perceptions of different ethnic groups; this generates conflicts affecting the principal objective of the organisation - productivity and a plus to organisations because management seizes the opportunity cultural diversity offered in terms of wide pool of knowledge, innovations, knowledge sharing, new technology knowhow to enhance productivity.

Globalisation creates an opportunity that leads to connections and interconnections of different ethnic groups together in many organisations all over the world, of which construction companies are not left out. Globalisation has increasingly changed organisations' workforce structure from being homogenous to heterogeneous whereby people from different cultural beliefs and backgrounds relate together, as part of a competitive global

economy. Diversity opens up social networks among people of different cultural backgrounds. People identify socially with people similar to them along many divides such as ethnic, gender, profession, and race. This identification with similar members is known as social identity (*Tajfel & Turner, 1985*). This differences and connections affect groups' interactions (Abrams & Hogg, 1999). Loosemore et al. (2011) indicated that construction firms are not developing and adopting appropriate programmes and policies on cultural diversity which would have improved productivity due less workplace conflict and high staff morale. Management of this diverse workforce has therefore become a huge concern to organisations partly because of the negative and positive effect it presents. To this end, *management of diverse workforce* on construction sites in Abuja (FCT) was assessed with a view to determining the strategies adopted by medium sized construction firms in Abuja.

To realise the aim of the study, the following objectives were set out:

1. To determine the major ethnic groups on selected construction sites in Abuja.
2. To examine the impact of ethnic group interactions on construction productivity at the selected sites.
3. To determine the measures put in place by Foreign and Indigenous construction companies in managing ethnic group differences.

Management Practices of Cultural Diversity in Construction firms

The job of a contemporary manager can be conceptualised in many different ways. The most widely accepted approaches, however, are from the perspectives of basic managerial functions, common managerial roles, and fundamental managerial skills. Managing diversity or diversity management is a needed tool in a growing culturally diverse world that utilises *people's diversity for achieving economic end goals* (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000) as well as coping with challenges of competition. Despite the public pronouncement by construction firms of improvement in diversity issues realised through implementation of equal opportunities policies and diversity action plans, the construction firms' diversity in reality lacked improvement. This is partly due to inclination for mobile workers, failure of public authorities in including and enforcing diversity management action plans as part of pre-qualification condition during tendering (Andrew, Amir & Shelagh, 2009). Many organisations exhibit lackadaisical attitude towards diversity management, seeing it as a waste of time and resources.

Nonetheless many construction firms are using traditional management style in managing their diverse workforce. Most managers traditionally adjust their managerial approach to cope with diverse workforce through rapid giving out of orders, and strict rules, close supervision in form of organising and controlling the diverse workforce. The diversity management approach used by United Arab Emirate (UAE) organisations is assimilation approach whereby workers from other cultures get adapted to the dominant culture (Jameson, 2007). Furthermore it is imperative that managers understand the cultural set-up of their workforce if organisational objectives are to be achieved (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2009).

Methodology

Qualitative research method was adopted in this research using structured interview as the research instrument. The interviewed used in this research work was designed semi-structured. This is closely related to questionnaires but the opinion of the interviewees is expressed verbally (Veal, 2006). Ten managers/supervisors of selected medium sized construction firms were interviewed. The interviewees were from various managerial cadres; sites managers, sites supervisors and engineers with ten years of experience and above. Purposive sampling was used to determine the number of managers interviewed. The interview lasted for about 45 minutes for each interviewee. Purposive sampling is a judgmental sample that is chosen based on the researchers' familiarity of the people concerned who are ready to provide adequate information on the topic (Bernard, 2002). This sampling technique is a non-probability sampling procedure which is usually used in qualitative research that has to do with selecting the people to be interviewed based on the interviewer's knowledge on the appropriateness and typicality of the sample selected (David & Sutton, 2004 and Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The coding agenda was used to code the interview for easy content analysis set (Mayring, 2007). The interview questions were divided into 12 themes, each theme divided into different categories and subcategories for easy content analysis. The study covered medium sized (this is in terms of the number of employees) construction sites in Abuja, Nigeria. This study was part of a larger study on diversity management on medium sized construction sites in Abuja.

Results and Discussion

The content analysis is shown in Appendix A.

Summary of Findings

♦ Abuja Construction workforce is made up of diverse workers from different ethnic groups.

♦ Skill is distributed across the diverse workforce.

♦ Generally, there is no dominance of a particular tribe; the diverse workforce distribution is not uniform in all the selected sites.

♦ Most of the tribes have a religious belief which they bring in to their work place, as such influence their work style and orientation.

♦ There are incidences of tribal challenges of discrimination, acrimony, conflicts and language barriers on the construction sites.

♦ Abuja construction sites have no diversity management programmes in place for their workers; management has been by the traditional style of organising and coordinating.

♦ 10% of the managers displayed tribal sentiment to some particular tribes.

♦ 90% of the managers are not formally informed on diversity management and programmes.

Table 1: Summary of the content analysis

Site communication Adopted	Skill training development on diversity	Best practices adopted	Tribes distribution	Management style adopted	Personnel to manage diversity	Management style outcome
Pidgin English, 100% Hausa, English, Tribal language	managers/supervisors have not received skill training on diversity.	71% of the construction firms are not adopting best practices on diversity generally while 29% trained their workers on cultural diversity awareness.	No tribes dominance 90% 10%	Traditional management style Diversity management style: cultural awareness talks (44%) (33%).	All individuals involved in the site work. Manager/supervisors (11%). Foremen (11%) White men	Management style adopted not adequate to curb diversity.

- Only 10% of the managers on the selected sites had undergone cultural diversity training.

- Abuja construction firms have not reached the full potential to manage diverse workforces.

Conclusion

Construction sites in Abuja are multicultural in nature, borne out of unchecked wide migration of people from other states to make a living. This has impact negatively and positively on the outcome of activities of construction sites which is productivity. Individual workers as well as the construction companies have been greatly impacted negatively as a result of inadequate, inappropriate and misconstruing of traditional management of workforce to cultural diversity management. No doubt construction firms have benefited from the pool of knowledge associated with diverse workforce (see Loosemore et al., 2011); nonetheless the time wasted on project completion as a result of conflicts among ethnic groups on sites revealed that the full potential that will foster required productivity has not been tapped. The traditional management style employed by the sites surveyed is not sufficient to effectively manage cultural diversity on Abuja construction sites. In addition, fighting which is connected with misunderstanding cultural differences is one of the major reasons why workers lose their jobs. Managing multicultural workforce is demanding; it therefore requires dedicated managers and supervisors who are devoid of ethnocentric tendencies and have adopted a multifaceted culture that promotes effective control of the diverse workforce..

Recommendations

For construction sites in Abuja to have the managerial potentials to manage diverse workforce having seen the shortfall of the traditional site management as it relates to cultural diversity, the following are recommended:

- Appropriate programmes should be formally developed within organisations whereby all the workers will be trained on diversity management and cultural awareness.

- Organisations should develop employee survey as a re-evaluation technique designed towards achieving extensive reporting of the cultural diversity of the organisations' workforce. It could be by means of effective and consistent performance measurements in form of re-evaluation technique of comparing their organisations productivity to that of others.

- As much as possible, construction firms should create cultural awareness on sites translating the safety slogans, sign posts in different languages that are representative of the workforce.

- Future researchers may continue the sequential line of study of cultural diversity management of construction firms by extending the study to other construction sites in other geographical locations in Nigeria.

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Appendix A: The Following Table Represents the Coding Agenda for the Qualitative Contents

Category	Variable (sub-categories)	Definition of the Category	Examples from the interviews for statements fitting into the category	Coding rules (to limit the categories)
b) What is the opinion of the interviewee as regard cultural diversity on construction sites?	- Opinion /enlightenment/ integration of different tribes on construction sites.	This is to get the in-depth view of construction managers as regard different tribes working together.	It is adopting various tribes to work on my site without prejudice" (9)	Opinion of cultural diversity gives further revelation of whether there is general or individual acceptance of cultural diversity on construction sites and how it is viewed - either positive or negative.
Theme 2: site tribe disparities				
Different tribes in your organisations	-Tribes/major tribes -Bias -Homogenous	According to Loosemore the distribution of some particular tribes to some aspect of work depict tribal bias.	There are workers from different tribes working on this site.	This will help to know the ethnic configuration of workforce o n the site.
b)dominant tribe and reason c) preference for tribe and reason	Major tribe Minor tribe Dominant tribe	The aggressiveness and overbearing of some tribe over the other.		This will establish reason of recruitment whether is based on tribal bi as or worker that can deliver.
Theme 3: Best practices				
a)Measure put in place by your organisation for managing cultural diversity	Training Cultural awareness Role modelling Team spirit	To know the practices of construction firms on cultural diversity and strategies adopted to manage cultural diversity	Best practices? Well I just do my usual way of giving pet talks to workers before the start of work	Understanding of managers on managing diversity and individual way of managing diversity

a) organisation structure b) ensuring effective communication flow among diverse work force	-Organisation's communication flow - Bridging communication gap	The form of organisation structure in operative to give insight to flow of communication between subordinates and the superiors ;policies adopted to bridge communication gap	"The organisation structure is formal. there are laid down system of operations processes which entail subordinates passing through their direct boss to get management attention or knowledge sharing"	The first variable is to identify the organisation structure of the firm in other to give insight on the organisation communication processing. The second variable shows the extent to which a subordinate can go to make his voice heard.
Theme 4: Security of employment/Job security				
a) What could result in a worker losing their jobs?	-Possible reason of workers losing their jobs	In order to understand whether ethnic bias really exist on construction sites it seemed relevant to ask the probable reason why workers lost their jobs;	"when workers fights on site".	What are the deep -down (core) issues that could make workers quit their jobs or be fired on site.
b). Is there job security in your organisation irrespective of job level/position?	-job security at all job level	According to Hofstede 4th cultural dimension – uncertainty avoidance whereby people have different degree of tolerance.	"Yes however on issues of ethnic some workers have had to be sacked based on trivial issues that have to do with tribalism.	This further explains why workers cling to their work despite un-conducive working atmosphere and on the part of the employee laying off of worker when a worker posed as a threat to the job.

c). How are the workers motivated?	-Parity in motivation	According to Loosemore et al; (2012) superior tends to favour their tribes in resource Allocation; they tends to motivate their tribes better than other tribes.	"I motivate my workers uniformly in respective of their tribes or background although I do give more incentives to my outstanding workers"	What is the basis of motivation and criteria used.
Theme 5: Team spirit				
Do people prefer to work together as a team or as individual?	-Collective -Individual	Hofstede dimension analysis di sclose that there are culture that prefer working collectively while others individually.	"Yes people prefer to work together as a team but the possibility of someone working as an individual in a team cannot be overrule it does happen on my site.	The firs t variable suggests the extent of cooperation in a team that will bring about the required work productivity.
Theme 6: gender diversity				
What is the role of women in your organisation?	-Gender -Female	Some culture does not allow women working which could be the basis of recruiting only male for site work.	"Women are fragile culturally wise they are not supposed to work not to talk of engaging them in site work."	To dive into issues of women working on site whether construction firm uphold the cultural bel ief of some ethnic that disallow women from public work.
Theme 7: Commitment to diversity				
a) What does it mean for you to have a commitment to diversity?	Involvement/support for cultural diversity	This define the role of supervisors, managers and management to diversity and how it can be achieved	"Learning from other tribes' way of doing things despite being educationally informed on construction work is a good way of incorporating diversity on site".	This variable help to know if really they understand what it mean to be fully involved in diversity issues.

b). How have you demonstrated that commitment?	-Knowledge sharing.	This define the way and manner by which managers get involved to ensured that cultural diversity yields positive result on site.	"I brought myself to the level of every site personnel under me by learning there languages so as to understand them better at least I can speak up to eight languages.	This is to know whether managers/supervisors on site show interest and the effort make to learn the language of people under them.
c). How would you see yourself demonstrating it here?	Present /on-going effort on your part to encourage and ensure diversity a reality on site.	This define effort made on the part of managers on current site to make diversity Work positively	"I try as much as possible to make diversity a day to day part of my work."	Showing example for others to imbibe cultural diversity.

Theme 8: cultural diversity challenges

a) What do you see as the most challenging aspects of an increasingly diverse work place?	-Challenges -increasing diverse work place	This is to understand the impact of cultural diversity on the selected sites.	"The challenges are enormous. You are face with personnel wanting to side their colleagues from same ethnic group even when it is obvious that they did wrong thing"	The first variable Shows the peculiar challenges each construction sites experiences on the issue of cultural diversity. While the second variable tells the extent and degree of challenges in an increasing diverse work place.
b) What steps have you taken to meet such challenges?	-ways to curb cultural diversity.	This defines the various ways either theoretical or practical by which cultural diversity can be managed.	"We laid stringent rule on site that no one should discredit other tribes and any violation results in the offender appointment being terminated.	This reveals whether construction site managers manage cultural diversity in line with best practices.

Theme 9: Benefits of cultural diversity in work styles

a) Has diversity played a role in shaping your work styles? b) how if so?	Influence of diversity on Work style.	This explains how interactions and working with other tribes have shaped the manager's work style.	Of course aside the negative impact I have gained and acquired new knowledge from the unique way other tribes does their work on site which has enhance my work style.	This is to know the extent at which diversity have really affected the work style of the managers/supervisors.

Theme 10: Aspiration of cultural diversity

a) What is your vision of diversity at a workplace?	-Future -Diversity -workplace	Weighing the negative impact of cultural diversity to the positive impact does cultural diversity have a future.	"To me as far as construction work is concern you cannot do without employing diverse tribe because of scarcity of skilled labour.	In a situation (nearest future) where there are availability of skilled and unskilled labour want to know whether managers will opt for people of their own tribe only to work for them.

Theme 11: work practical

a) Describe a specific situation in which you worked with a diverse group of people over a period of time.	Experience shared.	This is to share personal experience gained from working with diverse people.	"Some are pleasant but some mostly are unpleasant"	Experiences of working with diverse workers in Abuja Nigeria will further disagree/ support the contemporary researchers such as loosemore et al; (2010), Cox (1993) assertion that cultural diversity affects work productivity when not effectively manage.
b) Based on this experience, what did you learn?	-Lesson learned	This describe how they have been able to improve managerial skill from past experience ling of dealing with diverse work force	"I have learn that together we stand divided we fall so therefore irrespective of the skill and how experience site personnel are when there is no unity the work will greatly suffer and this can go a long way in affecting the reputation of the company."	This depicts how they have been able to prevent any reoccurrence of negative impact of cultural diversity from the past experience.

Theme 12: Cultural diversity Skill development

a) Whose responsibility do you believe it is to manage diversity?	Person to manage diversity effectively	This is to get the view of managers on who really should manage diversity	"It is the responsibility of every individual on site if you are able to manage yourself individual then there will be less work for the managers to do that is you make the job easier for us and the work move on faster.	These var iables reveal individual opinion on who should manage cultural diversity.
b) What are the issues of diversity within the team?	Problems arising	This refer to matters of diversity within the team such discrimination, superiority complex, bias, lack of cooperation	"there are lots of issues of diversity within team ranging from tribal bias lack of cooperation, favouritism, fighting"	This is to shed more light to the issue of diversity.
c) What skills training have you received as part of your leadership development on diversity?	-Skill training -leadership development.	This defines leadership development on diversity.	"I have received no training on diversity.	This is to disclose whether managers manage diverse workers based on site experience gained over time or from the diversity skill training received through their organisation; which also reveal whether construction firm provided training on diversity for their workers.