

EFFECT OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES ON WORKERS' RETENTION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

<https://doi.org/10.47743/jopafl-2022-26-05>

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Abstract: *The climatic condition of any organisation is usually toxic whenever two or more parties fail to reach a consensus with regard to allocation of rewards or benefits. Such disagreement breeds a dysfunctional conflict that affect both the performance of the warring parties as well as other colleagues in the workplace. However, in order to bring orderliness to the organisation, administrators and managers need to discover the best conflict resolution strategies that would be used to resolve the disputes. This is the basis for which this study investigated the effect of conflict resolution strategies on workers' retention in the public sector. The sample frame for this study comprises of two hundred and eleven workers drawn from five government parastatals in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. Linear regression was used to analyse the research hypotheses. Result of the study revealed that conflict resolution strategies have significant effect on workers' retention. The study concludes that conflict resolution strategies such as compromising and avoidance strategies improves the retention of workers in the public sector. One of the implications of the research is that managers, administrators and supervisors should do everything possible to avoid conflict in the workplace to encourage the retention of workers in the organisation.*

Keywords: *conflict, conflict resolution strategies, retention, workers, government parastatals*

Introduction

Workers' retention is a major issue that most organisations are faced with especially in the Sub-Saharan African work environment (Xuecheng et al., 2022; Zayed et al., 2022; Kundu & Gahlawat, 2016). Thus, retaining workers bring about high performance, effectiveness, efficiency and positive social responsibility (Chatzoudes & Prodromos, 2022). Research has shown that organisation that retains workers are more productive in terms of customer service delivery and societal reputation (Edeh et al., 2021). Biason (2020) assert that workers retention is the result of good leadership such as supervisor support. Corroborating with the above affirmation, Ohunakin et al. (2019) contended that retaining workers is an indication that the organization is healthy and sustainable. Meanwhile, Mahadi et al. (2020) maintained that organisational stability is a function of functional conflict whereas dysfunctional conflict affects the smooth running of any organisation. In light of the above, Sija (2022) stressed that retaining workers have promote

affective commitment and enterprise compliance. In addition, Malik et al. (2020) suggested that the rate of retention in any organisation is one of the indices for foreign investors. On the contrary, Adedeji and Obianuju (2018) opined that workers retention in the public service sector is usually determined by supervisor and employee relationship. Fukui et al. (2019) added that albeit, the public sector does not bench retention on performance due to their mandate to provide public services to the society as against private sector that focuses more on profitability. This is what stimulated Zayed et al. (2022) to affirmed that apart from supervisor -employee relationship, employees also pay emphasis on their colleague's support. Thus, Fukui et al. (2019) accentuates that coworker support is one of the major indicators of retaining workers in the public service sector.

From the foregoing, Adilo (2019) maintained that any organisation that does not have a good mechanism for resolving conflict in the workplace have created a vacuum for high workers turnover. In line with the above, Wainaina et al. (2020) asserts that even though conflict has no specific period of erupting in the workplace, administrators need to read between the lines through constant discussion with their workers. Therefore, the deployment of conflict resolution strategies has been affirmed to yield a positive result in settling disputes in the workplace. John-Eke and Akintokunbo (2020) stressed that the conflict that is favourable to smooth functioning of the organization is known as functional conflict whereas the conflict that is destructive is called dysfunctional conflict. This implies that it is not all conflict that has negative effect on the organisation. Conflict resolution strategies has improved employee commitment, employee loyalty and retention of employees (Boateng, 2014). Gwanyo et al. (2020) opined that the conflict resolution strategies promote positive organisational climate. In addition, Dialoke and Edeh (2017) maintained that conflict resolution strategies are instrument for behavioural change which transforms aggrieved parties into new being. In light of the above, Omene (2021) assert that the settlement of conflict in the workplace would prevent workers from leaving the organization to another. However, studies such as Wainaina et al. (2020), Özyildirim and Kayıkçı (2017), Dialoke and Edeh (2017) has investigated conflict resolution strategies with other organizational variables but none of them considered its effect on workers retention. This has created a huge research gap which this study has filled. It was this vacuum that stimulated the researchers to embark on this research.

Nonetheless, the problem that most government parastatals are facing is the high rate of employee turnover. This problem is caused by administrators' inability to provide support to their workers thereby leaving them to depend on their own skills which most times affect their performance. It was also shown that due to the structure of government parastatals, workers are not usually appraised based on profit generation thus, their retention is dependent on coworker and supervisor relationships (Omene, 2021). On another hand, Osabiya (2015) stated that the lack of coworker support in most public sector in the society has caused many workers to quit their jobs. Fukui et al. (2019) maintained that workers that attach themselves with their colleagues in the workplace usually request for support in one way or the other. It therefore implies that coworker support encourages other workers to remain with their organization other than moving to another organisation. It was the above argument that brought the attention of Kularathne and Senevirathne (2020) when they argued that supervisor support coworker support is valuable instrument for the prevention of workers from leaving the organization.

Literature review

Conflict Resolution Strategies

Conflict resolution emerged as a result of the disagreement that exist between two or more individuals working in a formal work setting. In this section, researchers reviewed the concept of conflict and conflict resolution strategies. Conflict is any disagreement between to individuals in the same or different organisations (Omene, 2021). Scholars alluded that conflict refers to when one person is aggrieved with another individual (Osabiya, 2015; Olukayode, 2015). In addition, Dialoke and Edeh (2017) stressed that conflict arises in the workplace when there is clash of interest amongst individuals working in the same organisation. It was shown that whenever differences exist, conflict is bound to take place (Osabiya, 2015). On the other hand, conflict resolution strategies are processes of resolving disagreement between employee and employer. Wainaina et al. (2020) argued that conflict resolution strategies include avoidance, compromising, accommodating, collaboration and competing. Ezekiel and Abdulraheem (2022) suggested that conflict in government owned organisations is quite different from those in the private sector and hence, require that administrators use conflict resolution approaches that are appropriate. Research has shown that most effect ways to resolve conflict in any government parastatals are through avoidance and compromising strategies (Olukayode, 2015). Mba (2013) supported the above argument and admitted that avoidance and compromising strategies are the best for conflict resolution. In another perspective, Yusuf-Habeeb and Kazeem (2017) maintained that there is no one best strategy through which conflict cannot be resolved rather, the situation would be determinant factor. Kazimoto (2013) was of the view that dispute resolution is dependent on the behaviour of the aggrieved. What this implies is that disagreement begins and end with the first individual that ignited the conflict. It is against this premise that Mayowa (2015) argued that disagreement between employee and the employer can be resolved when one of the aggrieved parties is ready and willing to shift ground.

However, conflict resolution strategies are the lubricants for peace, harmony and orderliness in the workplace. Thus, the rate at which workers are aggrieved with their employer and coworkers generated a lot of argument amongst scholars (Özyildirim & Kayıkçı, 2017). Adeyemi and Ademilua (2012) in their study confirmed that workers usually disagree with their employer whenever there is disparity in pay, uneven distribution of resources as well as favouritism. But Mba (2013) stated that the causes of conflict should be identified when selecting a strategy to avoid visiting same issue in the long-run. Agreeing with Mba (2013), Mayowa (2015) argued that avoidance strategy and compromising strategy should be deployed in order to end conflict respectively. In addition, Yusuf-Habeeb and Kazeem (2017) argued that the use of avoidance and compromising strategies in settling dispute has shown that conflict can be handled amicably. It is based on these submissions that this research utilizes avoidance and compromising as the strategies for resolving conflict in selected government agencies in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Compromising is also known as reconciliation (Mayowa, 2015). Compromising refers to a situation whereby two parties forfeit some of their major issues for the purpose of reaching a consensus (Akhtar & Hassan, 2021; Uchendu et al., 2013). The outcome of compromising strategy is win-win. Prior research has revealed that employee-employer conflict can be best resolved through a compromise approach (Yusuf-

Habeeb & Kazeem, 2017). Some of the benefits of compromising strategy are job satisfaction, mutual benefits, speed settlement of disputes and cost efficiency (Kazimoto, 2013). On the other hand, avoidance is a process of settling a dispute where one party withdraw his/her demand to pave way for peace (Aja, 2014; Kazimoto, 2013). Abdullah (2015) affirmed that avoidance is a conflict resolution strategy whereby one party decides to avoid anything that could jeopardize the harmony that exists between the parties to a conflict.

Nonetheless, prior empirical investigations have examined conflict resolution strategies and other variables in different industries, countries and different methodologies. Akhtar and Hassan (2021) investigated the effect of conflict management styles on organizational commitment in Pakistan and found that integrating style predicted the commitment of workers compared to other conflict management styles. Omene (2021) explored conflict management strategies as a prerequisite for effective organizational performance found that conflict resolution strategy enhances good relationships with other stakeholders in the organisation. Adilo (2019) examined the relationship between conflict management and organizational performance in selected breweries in south east, Nigeria and discovered that conflict management has significant positive relationship with organisational performance. Dialoke and Edeh (2017) examined conflict resolution strategies and workers' commitment in in Rivers State, Nigeria and found that conflict resolution strategies such as integrating, collaborating and, compromising strategy have significant positive relationship with workers' commitment. Özyildirim and Kayıkçı (2017) identified conflict management strategies amongst school administrators state schools in Muratpaşa and discovered that compromising strategy is mostly used while dominating, avoidance and others were found to be the least. Osabiya (2015) examined the best practice in resolving in Nigeria public sector and found that compromising can be used to settle conflict between an employee and management.

Workers' retention

Workers' retention refers to policies that management deploys to keep workers to stay with their organisation. Scholars has argued that workers retention is the process of providing motivational tools to workers that would encourage them to perform their work effectively and efficiently (Edeh et al., 2021; Kundu & Gahlawat, 2016). Workers' retention was also defined as a strategy undertaken by management to keep workers that has potential skills used to solve problems facing the organization (Ohunakin et al., 2019). Adedeji and Obianuju (2018) contended that irrespective of the management policies for retaining workers, if the workers decided to quit, there is nothing anyone can do about it. Biason (2020) argued that retaining employee varies from one business environment to another. Elaborating on the above argument, Mahadi et al. (2020) opined that retention policies are not usually the same in every organization but it behoves on the administrators, managers or supervisors to discover the best motivating factors to employ. It is against this contention that Chatzoudes and Prodromos (2022) assert that worker retention covers every activity that could motivate employees to remain active in their respective job responsibilities without thinking of leaving. In line with the above Edeh and Udensi (2017) are of the view that retention of workers depends on the behaviour of the supervisor. This maybe the reason why Ohunakin et al. (2019) assert that supervisors are the major influencers of retention in any organization.

In light of the above, scholars have validated reliable and affirmed measures of workers retention in different work settings such as good working environment, competitive working condition, pay and other financial rewards (Edeh & Udensi, 2017). Zayed et al. (2022) added that worker retention policies differ in private and public organisations. This is because of the objectives that each of the sector pursue. But research has revealed that in the public sector, employees prefer the supports of supervisors and coworkers as instrument for retention. Some studies that support the above assertion are Iqbal et al. (2020), Kularathne and Senevirathne (2020) and, Danish et al. (2019). This research therefore adapts supervisor support and coworker support as indicators of workers retention. This is based on their reliability and validity as reported by other studies (Kularathne & Senevirathne, 2020; Malik et al., 2020; Fukui et al., 2019). Based on the above review of literature, the study developed the research hypotheses.

Compromising strategy and supervisor support

Compromising strategy has a positive effect on supervisor support. For instance, when an employee perceives that administrators or managers are able to settle the conflict between the warring parties, such employee would be willing to take instructions from the supervisor. But, if the conflict is not settled, the employees would withdraw their loyalty which would result to counterproductive behaviour in the workplace (Adeyemi & Ademilua, 2012; Hotepo et al., 2010). Thus, the relationship between an employee with a supervisor is like a ligament that hold the organization. It was this argument that motivated Owsiak (2021) when they assert that conflict in the workplace usually take place amongst the subordinates and supervisors. But Malik et al. (2020) pointed out that since the supervisors represent the interest of management thus, they are not bound to implement the policies that would favour the subordinates. Kularathne and Senevirathne (2020) deviated by accentuating that the supervisor is also an employee who can be removed at any possible time by the management and should not engage in any action that could trigger conflict in the organisation. Research has proven that compromising strategy has yielded positive result in settling disputes in different countries and workplaces (Uchendu et al., 2013). It is against this assertion that Gwanyo et al. (2020) maintained that administrators and managers can settle conflict in their organisation through the application of compromising strategy. John-Eke and Akintokunbo (2020) accentuate that compromising strategy is the best instrument for settling misunderstanding. Following the above submissions, Adilo (2019) admitted that compromising strategy makes parties in conflict to give up their interest and embrace win-win approach. It is based on this premise that the first research hypothesis is formulated.

H1: Compromising strategy has a significant effect on supervisor support

Avoidance strategy and coworker support

Employee prefer work environment that promote the spirit of oneness where coworkers can always assist each other. Such type of work culture is what engenders tranquility and discourages employees from quitting their jobs. Adeyemi and Ademilua (2012) opined that it is better to avoid conflict than to allow it escalate. Omene (2021) added that good administrators do not encourage conflict because they understand the consequences it could have on the image of the organisation. Meanwhile, Mba (2013) advised management and other top leaders to discouraged disagreement that may arise

between them and subordinates as the end would result to high turnover. Therefore, public service administrators should always employ avoidance strategy to resolve any conflict that tend to surface in the workplace. Abdullah (2015) also suggested that administrators should take conflict very seriously because it can manifest anytime. In light of the above, Özyildirim and Kayıkçı (2017) is of the view that conflict avoidance has the capacity of motivating workers to support each other in the organization. Sija (2022) stressed that what employees support each other in a work atmosphere that is free from hatred, anger and frustration. Dialoke and Edeh (2017) affirmed that managers and administrators that avoid conflict are preferred by employees to the one that do not understand how to resolve disputes. Thus, in order to retain workers in the public organisations, administrators need to embrace avoidance strategy which would in turn promotes worker support. Based on the foregoing arguments, the second research hypothesis is formulated.

H2: Avoidance has a significant effect on coworker support

Theoretical underpinning

The theory that supports this research is social exchange theory (Homans,1958). Social exchange theory assumed that the relationship between an employee, employer, coworker and supervisor is based on cost-benefits. What this relationship means is that each stakeholder is dependent on one another for survival (Xuecheng et al., 2022; Jahan & Kim, 2021). Thus, in the psychological contract, an employee objective is to ensure that the objective of the organization is accomplish by performing assigned responsibilities while expecting some rewards from the management (Ogbonna & Mbah, 2022). Regarding employee retention, an employee that does not have good relationship with supervisor and coworkers would not be effective in discharging his/her responsibility. Therefore, to avoid conflict in the workplace, an employee would adhere to the prescribed rules and regulations guiding the work culture with an expectation from the management. However, once the expectation of the employee is not met, the employee would not be effective in the discharge of his/her duty. Once this counterproductive behaviour set in, the employee would start thinking of how to leave the organization to another (Xuecheng et al., 2022).

Research objectives

The broad objective for this research is to investigate the effect of conflict resolution strategies on workers retention in selected government parastatals in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. From the review of literature, the following specific research objectives were enumerated.

- 1) To investigate the effect of compromising strategy on supervisor support
- 2) To determine the effect of avoidance strategy on worker support

Research methods

Research design used in this study is cross-sectional survey as it supports the use of primary instrument such as questionnaire for data collection within a specified short period of time (Zikmund et al., 2013; Saunders et al., 2009). The target population of the study comprises of Ebonyi State government parastatals. Specifically, convenience sampling was used to select five Ebonyi State Government Parastatals headquartered at Abakaliki. Sample frame for the study are two hundred and eleven (211) workers from the

five parastatals. Conflict Resolution Strategy Questionnaire (CRSQ) was adapted from Dialoke and Edeh (2017) and modified to fit the sample frame of the current study. On the other hand, Employee Retention Questionnaire (ERQ) was also adapted from Zayed et al. (2022). Sample size of one hundred and thirty-eight (138) was determined from the sample frame using Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Researchers followed the ethical principles guiding investigations that involve humans. Therefore, the consent of the participants was sought. Participants were informed that their participation in the research would not in any way harm them and, that their personal identities as well as the identities of their parastatals would not be reported in the research. Thereafter a meeting was scheduled with the researchers to provide explanations on the aim of the research which the researchers provided. It was after the explanations that the researchers administered one hundred and thirty-eight (138) questionnaires to the participants. Participants agreed to complete the questionnaire within one month. After the expiration of the one month, the researchers went to retrieve the questionnaire. During the sorting of the questionnaire, it was observed that only one hundred and twenty-six (126) copies were filled correctly while twelve (12) copies were wrongly filled. Copies that are wrongly filled were marked “invalid” while those that were correctly filled were marked “valid”. Linear regression was used to analyse the formulated research hypotheses with the aid of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (20.0).

Results

The demographic profiles of the participants in table 1 indicated that 53 respondents representing 42.1% are females while 73 respondents representing 57.9% are males. Age of the respondents revealed that 18 participants representing 14.3% fall within 18-33 years; 34 participants representing 27.0% fall within 34-43 years and, 74 respondents representing 58.7% fall within 44 years and above. Educational level of the participants shows that 15 respondents representing 11.9% attended primary school; 31 participants representing 24.6% attended secondary school and; 80 participants representing 63.5% attended tertiary institutions. Work experience of the respondents revealed that 38 participants representing 30.2% have worked between 1-10 years and; 88 respondents representing 69.8% have worked between 11 years and above.

Table 1 Demographic profiles

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender		
Female	53	42.1
Male	73	57.9
Age (years)		
18-33	18	14.3
34-43	34	27.0
44 & above	74	58.7
Educational level		
Primary	15	11.9
Secondary	31	24.6
Tertiary	80	63.5
Work experience (years)		
1-10	38	30.2

11 & above	88	69.8
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The result of research hypotheses in table 2 revealed that conflict resolution strategies (compromising strategy, avoidance strategy) have significant positive effect on workers' retention (supervisor support, coworker support). From the table, it was shown that compromising strategy has significant positive effect on supervisor support (0.570) while avoidance strategy has significant positive effect on coworker support (0.592). The results of the model also show that the distinction between R2 and adjusted R2 are < 5%, which affirmed that there is no sample error. In addition, the R2 of the models indicated that 33% and 35 of the total variation in compromising strategy and avoidance strategy can be explained by supervisor support and coworker support. Lastly, Fstat (59.806; 66.782) > (3.91) which confirm that the null research hypotheses are rejected while the alternate are accepted.

Table 2: Result of hypotheses

R	0.570	0.592
R ²	0.325	0.350
Adjusted R ²	0.320	0.345
T-stat.	7.733	8.172
Fstat.	59.806	66.782
Std. error	0.086	0.062
Sig.	0.000	0.000
N	126	126
d.f	3.91	3.91

Predictor: Conflict Resolution Strategies (Compromising, Avoidance)

Criterion: Workers' retention (Supervisor support, Coworker support)

Discussion

It was revealed from the results that conflict resolution strategies have significant positive effect on workers' retention. This finding implies that an increase in conflict resolution strategies increases workers' retention. In other words, when managers, administrators or any constituted authority resolves conflict using compromising strategy and avoidance strategies, workers' intention to leave would be changed and thus making them to remain with their parastatal. In terms of specificity, the study found that compromising strategy predicted supervisor support while avoidance strategy has significant positive effect on coworker support. These results corroborated with some prior studies on conflict resolution strategies as shown in the literature while others oppose the findings due to the industry, participants and geographical location where the researches were carried out. A study carried out by Dialoke and Edeh (2017) on conflict resolution strategies and workers' commitment in revealed that conflict resolution strategies measured in terms of integrating and compromising strategies have significant positive correlation with workers' commitment. On the contrary, Akhtar and Hassan (2021) result on conflict management styles and organisational commitment in Pakistan show that integrating style has significant effect on the commitment of workers. In addition, Adilo (2019) determined the relationship between conflict management and enterprise performance in Nigeria and found that conflict management has significant relationship with enterprise performance. Again, Özyildirim and Kayıkçı (2017) investigation on

conflict management strategies and school administrators' performance show that compromising strategy is used often to settle conflict in the workplace. Even though compromising was found to be effective in retaining workers as shown in this study, the environment in which the research was conducted can also affect the outcome which means that in another work environment, the result may be different. In addition, since the participants are mostly civil servants, their responses may be based on the rules governing civil service rules which differs from the private sector work environment. This is because if the study was conducted in the private sector where profit making is rated high as one of the performance indices, the respondents in that work environment may provide different responses on whether compromising and avoidance strategies would have prevented workers from leaving the organisation or not.

Conclusion and implications

Drawing from the discussion above, this research concludes that conflict resolution strategies that administrators' or managers consolidates on compromising and avoidance strategies enhances workers' retention that is measured with supervisor support and coworker support. The implication of this study is that administrators and managers of government parastatals should avoid conflict in the workplace to encourage workers to remain in the organisation. Secondly, peradventure there is disagreement between one or more employees, administrators, directors or managers should utilize compromising strategy to resolve the dispute. In addition, managers, directors and administrators of government agencies should provide maximum support to workers as it has proven to strengthen their retention in the organization. One of the limitation of this research is the use of one method of data collection other than the combination of interview. Another limitation is the target population. Therefore, the results of this study would be generalized especially as the target population was government parastatals as against the private sector.

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