

THE ROLE OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN FOSTERING ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS FOR COMMUNITY GROWTH

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Abstract

In recent years, the significance of workforce development programmes has garnered substantial attention, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. These programmes are instrumental in equipping individuals with the entrepreneurial skills to thrive in the labour market. The paper therefore explores the role of workforce development programmes in fostering entrepreneurial skills for community growth. A sample of 191 employees was selected from a population of 2,450 employees who have participated in workforce development programmes in South-West, Nigeria through the multi-stage sampling technique. Instruments used for data collection were the Demographic Data Inventory (DDI) and Entrepreneurial Skills Questionnaire (ESQ). Three hypotheses were formulated and tested by means of the simple linear regression analysis at the .05 level of significance. Results revealed significant influence of workforce development programmes on problem-solving skills ($\beta = .275$, $t = 12.838$, $p < .0005$), significant influence of workforce development programmes on business management competence ($\beta = .302$, $t = 14.387$, $p < .0005$) and significant influence of workforce development programmes on networking and relationship-building skills ($\beta = .252$, $t = 14.387$, $p < .0005$) among employees in South-West, Nigeria. It was subsequently recommended, among other things, that policymakers and organizations should prioritize and invest in comprehensive workforce development initiatives to ensure sustainable economic development and the cultivation of a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem in the zone.

Key Words: Workforce development programmes, entrepreneurial skills, community growth, employees.

Introduction

In recent years, the significance of workforce development programmes has garnered substantial attention, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. These programmes are instrumental in equipping individuals with the entrepreneurial skills to thrive in the labour market. Fostering entrepreneurial skills aids community growth and sustainable development. Entrepreneurial skills can be defined and understood in various ways, reflecting their multifaceted nature and importance. Entrepreneurial skills are widely viewed as problem-solving and innovation, business management competence or networking and relationship-building. In Nigeria, where youth unemployment and underemployment remain pressing issues, fostering entrepreneurial skills is essential for sustainable development, economic diversification and community growth.

Entrepreneurial skills are often defined as the ability to identify and solve problems creatively and innovatively (Akpan & Etim, 2021). This definition emphasizes the necessity for individuals to think outside the box and develop unique solutions to challenges. Entrepreneurial

skills encompass the capacity to innovate, adapt to changes and turn challenges into opportunities (Akpan & Etim, 2021). This problem-solving ability is crucial in Nigeria, where entrepreneurs frequently face economic and infrastructural challenges. Another definition of entrepreneurial skills focuses on the management and operational competencies required to run a successful business. This includes financial literacy, strategic planning, marketing and human resource management. Ejiogu, Nwosu, and Iwuoha (2020) describe entrepreneurial skills as the competencies that enable individuals to effectively manage business operations and resources. In Nigeria, where many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) struggle with management inefficiencies, these skills are particularly vital.

Entrepreneurial skills encompass a wide range of abilities that enable individuals to innovate, take risks, and effectively manage businesses. These skills include but are not limited to creativity, problem-solving, strategic thinking, financial literacy, and leadership (Njoroge & Gathungu, 2013). Entrepreneurial skills also include the ability to build and maintain networks and relationships. This perspective highlights the importance of social capital and collaboration in entrepreneurship. According to Kanu (2022), successful entrepreneurs leverage their networks for resources, information and support. In the Nigerian context, where informal networks play a significant role in business success, networking skills are indispensable.

The nature of entrepreneurial skills is dynamic and multidimensional, encompassing a broad range of abilities that are essential for business success and innovation. These skills can be broadly categorized into three main areas, in line with the definitions provided above. The first encompasses innovation and problem-solving skills which include creativity (the ability to generate new ideas and solutions), adaptability (the capacity to adjust strategies and operations in response to changing circumstances) and critical thinking (the ability to analyze situations and make decisions based on logical reasoning). The second dimension of entrepreneurial skills is business management competence which includes financial literacy (understanding and managing financial resources, including budgeting, investment and financial planning), strategic planning (developing long-term goals and plans to achieve business objectives) and operational management (efficiently managing day-to-day business activities and resources). Finally, the third dimension is networking and relationship-building skills which comprise communication (effective interpersonal and business communication), collaboration (working with others to achieve common goals), networking (building and maintaining professional relationships and networks) (Linton & Kask, 2021; Wach, Stephan, Weinberger, & Wegge, 2021).

Workforce development programmes (WDPs) refer to structured initiatives aimed at enhancing the employability and productivity of individuals through training, education and support services. These programmes encompass activities designed to improve the skill set of the labour force, thereby enhancing their employability and entrepreneurial capabilities. This is especially pertinent in Nigeria, where high unemployment rates and a growing youth population necessitate innovative approaches to economic participation and community development (Ofem, 2021). WDPs are instrumental in equipping participants with the necessary entrepreneurial skills to launch and sustain their ventures. By integrating practical training with theoretical knowledge, WDPs provide a holistic approach to skill development, which is crucial for fostering entrepreneurship. These initiatives include vocational training programmes, business incubation centres and financial literacy workshops. For instance, the National Directorate of Employment (NDE) has been at the forefront of such efforts, providing training and support to unemployed youth and aspiring entrepreneurs (Oboh, 2020). Similarly, private sector initiatives like the Tony Elumelu Foundation's Entrepreneurship Program have

significantly contributed to building entrepreneurial capacity across the country (Elumelu, 2021).

In Nigeria, where the entrepreneurial ecosystem is still developing, the role of WDPs is critical. Initiatives such as the Youth Entrepreneurship Support (YES) Programme by the Bank of Industry (BOI) and the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) Skill Acquisition and Entrepreneurship Development (SAED) initiative have demonstrated significant impacts on enhancing entrepreneurial capacities among Nigerian youths (Ejiogu et al., 2020). Workforce development programmes aimed at fostering entrepreneurial skills can play a crucial role of promoting self-employment and the creation of small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs). SMEs are recognized globally as engines of economic growth and job creation (Onyebuchi & Anyadike, 2020).

Moreover, these programmes often include mentorship, access to financial resources and networking opportunities, all of which are critical for the success of new businesses (Gibb, 2002). They play a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurial skills by providing structured training, resources and support. These programmes can enhance participants' entrepreneurial capabilities in several way. For example, WDPs offer targeted training programmes that combine theoretical knowledge with practical skills. This holistic approach ensures that participants can apply what they learn directly to real-world business scenarios. According to Ejiogu et al. (2020), such training programmes are essential for developing the necessary competencies to manage and grow businesses in Nigeria. Many WDPs include mentorship components, where experienced entrepreneurs provide guidance and support to participants. This mentorship helps new entrepreneurs navigate challenges, make informed decisions and leverage opportunities. Kanu (2022) emphasized the importance of mentorship in building entrepreneurial confidence and competence. WDPs often facilitate access to financial resources, such as grants, loans or investment capital and provide opportunities to build professional networks. These resources and connections are critical for business growth and sustainability. Akpan and Etim (2021) highlight the role of WDPs in connecting entrepreneurs with essential resources and networks that can significantly impact their success.

This study is crucial as existing literature often overlooks the specific mechanisms through which WDPs enhance entrepreneurial skills, particularly in underrepresented communities. By addressing this gap, the research aims to provide greater insights into programme effectiveness and community-specific strategies that promote economic growth through entrepreneurship. Research on the effectiveness of WDPs can provide valuable insights into these initiatives, helping policymakers to design more effective interventions and allocate resources more efficiently.

Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to examine the role of workforce development programmes in fostering entrepreneurial skills for community growth in South-West, Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

- (i) to determine the influence of workforce development programmes on problem-solving skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria;
- (ii) to assess the influence of workforce development programmes on business management competence among employees in South-West, Nigeria; and
- (iii) to determine the influence of workforce development programmes on networking and relationship-building skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide this paper.

Ho1: There will be no significant influence of workforce development programmes on problem-solving skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Ho2: There will be no significant influence of workforce development programmes on business management competence among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Ho3: There will be no significant influence of workforce development programmes on networking and relationship-building skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Methods

This study adopted the descriptive research design using the survey. The population of this study comprised of 2,450 employees who have participated in workforce development programmes in South-West, Nigeria. A sample of 200 employees was selected through the multi-stage sampling technique.

Instruments

The following instruments were used for data collection:

- Demographic Data Inventory (DDI)
- Entrepreneurial Skills Questionnaire (ESQ)

Further information on each of these instruments is given below.

Demographic Data Inventory (DDI)

The Demographic Data Inventory (DDI) having five items was developed and used by this researcher to gather data on some demographic features of the respondents such as gender, age and work experience.

Entrepreneurial Skills Questionnaire (ESQ)

The Entrepreneurial Skills Questionnaire (ESQ) was developed by this researcher to measure entrepreneurial skills as conceptualized in the study. The ESQ is a 15-item Likert-type instrument with 5 points having responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire has the following three sub-scales: Problem-solving skills, business management competence and networking and relationship-building skills, each sub-scale having five items. Sample items on the scale are:

- *I am capable of generating effective solutions to complex problems*
- *I can effectively manage and lead a team to achieve business goals*

The test-retest method was used to assess the reliability of the ESQ.

Consequently, in a pilot study, the instrument was administered on 30 employees that are similar to but different from the ones used in this study on two different occasions with an interval of two weeks between the two administrations. An analysis of the results obtained yielded reliability coefficients of .77, .73 and .81 for the problem-solving skills, business management competence and networking and relationship-building skills sub-scales respectively. The test-retest reliability coefficient for the scale as a whole was .75. These indices indicate that the ESQ is reliable as it yielded consistent scores over time. Expert opinion was relied upon to determine the validity of the questionnaire.

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval for the study, data collection commenced. The survey questionnaires were distributed manually while adhering to the ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Interested employees were at liberty to complete the survey or refuse to complete it and also to withdraw from the study at any time before its conclusion. Of the 200 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 191 were returned. This gave an attrition rate of 4.5%.

Method of Data Analysis

Each of the three hypotheses formulated for this study was tested by means of simple linear regression analysis at the .05 level of significance.

Results

Hypothesis One

There will be no significant influence of workforce development programmes on problem-solving skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Table 1: Coefficients of the Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Influence of Workforce Development Programmes on Problem-Solving Skills

	B	Std Error	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	9.317	4.063		11.496	.000
Workforce Development Programmes	.094	.022	.275	12.838	.000

Dependent Variable: Problem-Solving Skills

Table 1: revealed significant results ($\beta = .275$, $t = 12.838$, $p < .0005$). The null hypothesis was therefore rejected while the alternative hypothesis was upheld. It was subsequently concluded that there was a significant influence of workforce development programmes on problem-solving skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria. Table 1 further showed that the variable “workforce development programmes” is positively associated with problem-solving skills ($\beta = .275$) and that the latter can be predicted from the former by means of the regression equation:

$$\text{Problem-Solving Skills} = 0.094 \times \text{Workforce Development Programmes} + 9.317$$

Ho2: There will be no significant influence of workforce development programmes on business management competence among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Table 2: Coefficients of the Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Influence of Workforce Development Programmes on Business Management Competence

	B	Std Error	B	t	Sig.
(Constant)	7.204	5.117		10.436	.000
Workforce Development Programmes	.139	.019	.302	10.647	.000

Dependent Variable: Business Management Competence

Table 2 revealed significant results ($\beta = .302$, $t = 14.387$, $p < .0005$). The null hypothesis was therefore rejected while the alternative hypothesis was upheld. It was subsequently concluded that there was a significant influence of workforce development programmes on business management competence among employees in South-West, Nigeria. Table 2 further showed that the variable “workforce development programmes” is positively associated with business management competence ($\beta = .302$) and that the latter can be predicted from the former by means of the regression equation:

$$\text{Business Management Competence} = 0.139 \times \text{Workforce Development Programmes} + 7.204$$

Hypothesis Three

There will be no significant influence of workforce development programmes on networking and relationship-building skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria.

Table 3: Coefficients of the Simple Linear Regression Analysis for Influence of Workforce Development Programmes on Networking and Relationship-Building Skills

	B	Std Error	B	t	Sig.
(Constant)	10.103	6.703		10.855	.000
Workforce Development Programmes	.116	.022	.252	14.387	.000

Dependent Variable: Networking and Relationship-Building Skills

Table 3 revealed significant results ($\beta = .252$, $t = 14.387$, $p < .0005$). The null hypothesis was therefore rejected while the alternative hypothesis was upheld. It was subsequently concluded that there was a significant influence of workforce development programmes on networking and relationship-building skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria. Table 2 further showed that the variable “workforce development programmes” is positively associated with networking and relationship-building skills ($\beta = .252$) and that the latter can be predicted from the former by means of the regression equation:

$$\text{Networking and Relationship-Building Skills} = 0.116 \times \text{Workforce Development Programmes} + 10.103.$$

Discussion

This study provides insightful findings into the role of workforce development programmes in fostering entrepreneurial skills for community growth in South-West, Nigeria. The hypotheses were tested and the results obtained provide compelling evidence on the significant influence of workforce development programmes on fostering entrepreneurial skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria. The results consistently indicated a positive and significant relationship between workforce development initiatives and the enhancement of crucial entrepreneurial competencies.

The first null hypothesis (Ho1) posited that workforce development programmes would have no significant influence on problem-solving skills among employees. However, the analysis revealed a significant influence, with a beta coefficient (β) of .275 and a t-value of 12.838, which was highly significant ($p < .0005$). This suggests that participation in workforce development programmes substantially enhances employees' ability to tackle complex problems effectively. This finding is aligned with previous research indicating that structured training and development activities equip employees with analytical and critical thinking skills, essential for problem-solving in dynamic work environments (e.g., Akpan & Etim, 2021; Ejiogu et al., 2020; Kanu, 2022).

Similarly, the second null hypothesis (Ho2) proposed that workforce development programmes would not significantly influence business management competence. The results refuted this hypothesis, demonstrating a significant positive influence, with a beta coefficient (β) of .302 and a t-value of 14.387 ($p < .0005$). This indicates that workforce development programmes play a crucial role in building business management skills among employees. The significant impact observed here underscores the importance of continuous professional development in enhancing employees' capabilities in strategic planning, financial management and operational

efficiency, which are vital for business success and growth. This finding corroborated those of Linton and Kask (2021) and Wach et al. (2021) who arrived at similar conclusions.

The third null hypothesis (Ho3) suggested that workforce development programmes would not significantly influence networking and relationship-building skills among employees. Contrary to this hypothesis, the findings revealed a significant positive influence, with a beta coefficient (β) of .252 and a t-value of 14.387 ($p < .0005$). This result highlights the effectiveness of workforce development programmes in enhancing employees' ability to build and maintain professional relationships. Networking and relationship-building are critical for entrepreneurial success, facilitating access to resources, information and support networks that are essential for business development and sustainability. This finding aligned with those of Gibb (2002) and Kanu (2022) that building and maintaining networks and relationships contribute to entrepreneurial success.

The significant influence of workforce development programmes on these entrepreneurial skills suggests that such programmes are vital for community growth in South-West, Nigeria. By equipping employees with problem-solving, business management and networking skills, these programmes contribute to the overall capacity building within the community. Enhanced entrepreneurial skills among employees can lead to the creation of new businesses, the expansion of existing ones, and ultimately, economic growth and development in the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides robust evidence that workforce development programmes significantly enhance entrepreneurial skills among employees in South-West, Nigeria. The findings suggest that such programmes are indispensable for fostering a skilled and competent workforce capable of driving community growth and development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this paper, the following recommendations were made:

1. Policymakers and organizations should prioritize and invest in comprehensive workforce development initiatives to ensure sustainable economic development and the cultivation of a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem in the zone.
2. Workforce development programmes should integrate comprehensive business management training components. This includes training in strategic planning, financial management, marketing, operations management and leadership.
3. Organizations should enhance structured networking opportunities, mentorship programmes and collaborative projects within these programmes within workforce development initiatives.

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