Do Human Resources Management (HRM) Practices Impact on Seaport Competitiveness?

Kayode Adeyemi, Shams Rahman and Muhammad Abdulrahman
School of Accounting, Information System and Supply Chain
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University, Melbourne Victoria 3001
Australia
s3263857@student.rmit.edu.au, shams.rahman@rmitedu.au,
Muhammad.abdulrahman@rmitedu.au

Abstract

Efforts at modernising seaports and improve their operational service efficiencies for competitive advantage have remained unabated given the changing demands of shipping customers. To address seaport inefficiencies, most advance nations have generally adopted infrastructural and technological upgrades/implementations. However, this approach has failed to solve the lingering poor seaport performance in emerging economies, suggesting efforts must be directed at other areas to identify and explain the persistent inefficiencies at emerging economies' seaports. This paper therefore examine whether there is a relationship between seaport inefficiency and HRM practices of the seaports. The study is based on a case study of the Nigerian seaport, Nigeria being the largest economy in Africa. Findings reveal that HRM practices have to be fully aligned with seaport business objectives for achieving optimal port competitiveness. Specifically, the Nigerian seaports' HRM Practices exhibits non-alignment with the business objectives due to unfair staff recruitment and promotion practices leading to poor staff morale, loyalty, commitment and productivity, thereby making the seaports uncompetitive, resulting in significant business diversion to neighbouring seaports.

Keyword
Human Resources Management (HRM) Practices, Workforce capability, Seaport, Competitiveness.

1. Introduction
There have been many challenges facing the users and operators of Nigerian seaports over the years. These include corruption, poor management structure and mismanagement (Emeghara et al. 2019); logistics and infrastructure deficiencies, regulatory and policy instability and multiple government agencies with overlapping purpose and responsibilities (Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) 2018). These have resulted in the seaports' inefficiency manifesting in the form of congestion, shortage of qualified manpower, missing cargo, prolong cargo dwell time caused by delay in cargo movement insecurity and illegal charges at the seaports; leading to high cost of operations (LCCI 2018). These have led to high cost of trade and undesirable impacts on the competitiveness of the seaports (Oruwari 2021), with significant effects on patronage, as cargo meant for Nigerian market are now being diverted to neighbouring seaports (Hellenic Shipping News 2020). Given the importance of seaports to the national economy and global competition between seaports for patronage, it is very important to identify and address the factors impacting seaport competitiveness (SC).

Despite the high importance of the seaport to the economy and several efforts at modernising the seaport at various times by the Nigeria government, Nigerian seaports remain inefficient and struggle to cope with the country's volume of export and imports. Many studies have been conducted to find the root cause of the inefficiency and many solution have been recommended based on findings. However, the proffered solutions have failed to solve the lingering poor performance of the seaports. This suggest that apart from the challenges associated with poor infrastructure and administrative structure, efforts must be directed at other areas to identify and explain the persistent inefficiencies at seaports that have defied many solutions. Without proper identification of the key underlying issues, no meaningful and/or effective solutions can be found. This study therefore focuses on examining whether there is a relationship between seaport inefficiency and human resources management practices of the seaports.

Nigeria being the largest economy in Africa with a GDP of $440.78 billion in 2021 (World Bank (WB) 2022) and a very large market with a population of approximately 211 million people in 2021 and a projected population of 217 million people in 2022, has always been of great economic interest locally and internationally (WB 2022). With such potentials, it is expected that her seaports will be efficient to serve as an incentive for economic growth

and development by facilitating local and international trade through ease of flow of goods. The strategic importance of Nigerian seaports in the regional economy has underscored by her contribution. Nigerian seaports represents 60% of West African's consumers, 47% of the GDP and over 50% of industrial and manufacturing potentials (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Club Du Sahel 2001). ECOWAS' share in Nigeria's trade with Africa since 1994 is between 70% and 78% (OECD and Club Du Sahel 2001). Nigeria is therefore perceived as the driving force for economic integration in the region and a 'staging-post' for world trade. Nigeria has a total of six seaports operating along its vast coastal area. The six ports located along the coastal lines of Nigeria constitute the study area for this research.

The six seaports in Nigeria are responsible for 90% of imports and exports of commodities (Ogunsiji and Ogunsiji 2010). The two most important seaports are the Apapa and Tin Can Island seaports. The two seaports form what is known as the Lagos Seaport Complex, which is the largest and the busiest seaport in Nigeria (Eniola et al. 2014). Both account for 75% of Nigeria's imports and exports in 2017 (National Bureau of Staistics (NBS) 2018). This paper therefore investigates the impacts of HRM practices on seaport competitiveness by relating human resources onto workforce capability building. The paper seeks to determine if Nigerian seaports competitiveness be improved within the context of human resources management (HRM) and workforce capability (WC)?

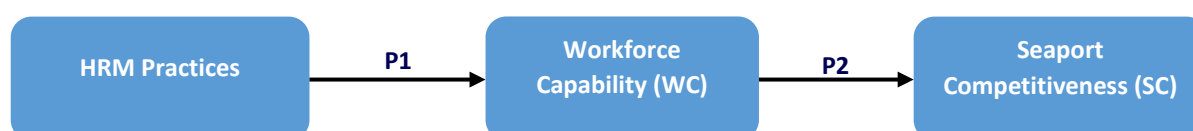## 1.4   Study Model and Constructs

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Figure 1 illustrates the model and constructs for this paper. The model shows HRM practices as a mediator of workforce WC and directly impacting SC. Variables to operationalise the constructs have been taken from preveious studies through a comprehensive review of relevant literature which measures were isomorphically adapted and contextualised to the research to generate a matrix for the study variables (Bechman et al. 2017).

1.4.1   Research Propositions

Given the research is focused on investigating HRM and WC buildings that directly impact seaport competitiveness (SC), the following two research propositions were examined:

P1:   HRM practices is related to WC.
P2:   WC is related to SC.

2. Literature Review

Human resources (HR) play a vital role in the socio-economic growth and development of organisations and countries (Widyanty 2020). Thus, it is regarded as one of the most important of the assets of an organisation (Pham 2020). It has long been accepted that HR functions are critical to the performance of any organisation, but only few organisations are able to harness the potentials in full (Pham 2020). If combined with effective HRM practices, HR is seen as human capital within the control of the organisation which can be used to achieve its strategic goals, (Pham 2020).

Gaining and retaining competitive advantage over competitors is now very critical for a company to grow and remain in business. One of the ways a company can gain competitive advantage is through strategic utilisation of its human resources (Elrehail et al. 2020). According to Wright and Snell (1991), developing a strategic initiative to grow a pool of employees and equip them with skills and knowledge in critical areas of its practices may give a business competitive advantage in an industry. MacMillan (1983, p. 43) defines strategic initiative as "the ability of a company or a strategic business unit to capture control of strategic behaviour in the industries in which it competes". Khatri (2000) sees strategic initiative of management as a way of fitting an organisation into its environment to attract more customers than its competitors. The rationale behind this is that if a company can seize control of the initiative, competitors are forces to respond reactively rather than proactively (Elrehail et al. 2020). Thus, if a company can gain strategic advantage, it will be in control of its own fate and financial fortune, as competitors will find it difficult to catch up (Widyanty et al. 2020).

HRM function is a strategic management function, whereby top management of businesses create conditions to achieve employee engagement (Widyanty 2020); through employee participation, which is the most important element of HRM practices in a company's decision-making process (Phan 2020). Therefore, employee involvement as component of HRM practices is one of the strategies that could be used by seaports to improve their efficiency.

The quality of HR is the dominant and most significant element of attaining a SCA in any business enterprise (Al-Hammadi 2022). However, it has been acknowledged that while the skills and capabilities of staff are required for staff behaviour to be consistent with the aims of the business, they are not enough (Wright et al. 2001). Therefore, to achieve competitive advantage human resources must not only possess high skills and knowledge, but also high level of willingness and commitment to perform with appropriate behaviour needed in productive activities (Wright et al. 2001).

A seaport is complex, unique and dynamic entitiy. Thus they are mostly different from one another (Abbes 2015). The commercial survival of a seaport on the longer term is very critical and is mostly determined by its competitive position in relation to other seaport (Abbes 2015). This is a reflection of the fact that no seaport is an isolated island on its own. They "belongs to a seaport group or hierarchy which is functionally interrelated on local, national or international scale" (Hoyle and Charlier 1995, p. 88). Hoyle and Charlier (1995) also view a seaport as an ever changing phenomenon in its form, structure, status and over a period. In the advent of the globalisation of the world trade and subsequent growth in sea transportation, seaports have adopted various stategies to become more competitive on the world stage in order to attract patronage and satisfy their coustomers (Abbes 2015).

Talley (2017) suggests that seaports are not in competition with one another in a situation where they are blessed with natural hinterland, but in an environement where carriers and shippers are influencial in the selection of seaports, seaport should lay emphasis on its ability to physically process cargo to compete. In support of this suggestion, Abbes (2015, p. 2) states that "in a competitive environment, port time-related costs in addition to port charges incurred by shippers and carriers are important determinants in port selection". Seaports would therefore need to adopt a more aggressive strategies to reduce the current strong bargaining advantage held by carriers and shipping lines (Abbes 2015). The seaport is a critical part of the overall supply chain, thus it must consider as part of its surviving strategies, the factors that can make it competitive in relation to other rival seaports.

HRM practices is considered in terms of HRM established role and responsibilities for recruiting, training, and shaping WC and behaviour towards achieving organisational aims and objectives. An organisation may have acquired the most modern technologies, crafted sound and sustainable operational processes and strategy, however, without appropriate orchestration of human resources to gain their commitment and willingness to face firm's operational challenges, only sub-optimal performance can be achieved (Malik et al. 2021).

Workforce Capability refers to the capacity of the organisation to develop and use its workforce for improved performance (Liu and Van Jaarsveld 2015). This implies that an organisation can attain competitiveness if it is able to develop its workforce and deploy it for effectiveness. For the seaports it means the capacity of the seaports to organise, deploy, and make use of their employees to ensure the seaports business processes can provide more efficient services and enhance competitiveness.

Seaport Competitiveness is achieved when seaport authorities develop strategies to improve operational efficiency and create a sustained superior performance over other seaports located within the same range and serving the same hinterland (Abbess 2015). For seaports performance to improve, HRM practices must be used, within the direction of CG to shape the actions of the employees for efficiency. What constitute SC for this study are:

Terminal Performance: This is considered in terms of infrastructure investment aimed at reducing operational cost for terminal operators and clearance cost for customers (Cullinane & Wang 2009). Efficiency and effectiveness of terminal facilities and equipment and their effects on vessel turnaround time, container dwell time security and the overall impact on cargo clearance are also considered (Ha et al. 2019).

Cost of clearance: It covers cost of all services required for moving the cargo onwards through the seaport and down the supply chain, such as terminal handling cost for loading and unloading, storage (cargo handling charged), custom clearance and forwarding cost etc. (ancillary service charges) (Ha et al. 2019).

Speed/time: This relates to how fast and effective are the physical facilities to facilitate seaport logistics interconnectivity and automation to enhance competitiveness, e.g. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and autonomous equipment (Batista 2012). It relates to how quickly it takes a cargo to be processed through a port from the time the goods arrived at their port of entry until the time it is claimed from customs (Batista 2012).

Customer service/satisfaction: This relates to the ability of seaports staff to provide more reliable services at a faster rate and includes provision of honest, transparent and accurate information to customers and how quickly their complaints are handled (Le et al. 2020).

3. Methods
The case method was adopted for this paper because the research is explorative in nature, given that no previous research has been carried out to study SC from the perspective of HRM practices using the three constructs (see Figure 1) adopted for this paper. A case study methodology is particularly appropriate where the 'lived' experience of the actors are important and an in-depth analysis of context of the undertaking is critical (Yin 2014). The case method is well suited to capturing the knowledge of practitioners and developing theories from it (Yin 2014). For this study, the experience of seaport practitioners was critical in analysing the relationship between SC and HR governance practices within the context of workforce capability.
To identify and compare contrasts and similarities amongst the cases and "across" cases (Yin 2014), this paper adopted a multiple case study to conduct a "within" case and "across" case analysis of the six Nigerian seaports.

4. Data Collection and analysis
Qualitative data was collected through an interactive semi-structured interview conducted individually with 19 respondents (seaport managers) from the six seaports who were purposely selected because they are key stakeholders of the seaports. This interview method was used to collect data for this study because of its flexibility and adaptability to rearrange the order of the questions and how they are worded. The seaport managers represent senior managers/head of departments who make human resources decisions for their departments. For this study, they are heads of seaport human resources, seaports operations, seaport information and communication technology, seaport monitoring and regulatory services and seaport corporate and strategic departments; all with average years of experience of 11.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents (Seaport managers) by Case

Respondents	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Total
Seaport Managers	3	3	2	2	4	5	19

Prior to conducting the interview, a case study interview protocol covering the major topics of the research was developed as a guide for the data collection process (Yin 2014). The questions in the interview protocol for this study were formulated based on prior knowledge of various aspects of the phenomenon of seaport competitiveness relevant to the study. A pre-test of the interview protocol was also conducted with three managers from three seaports that ensured clarity, understanding and relevance of the interview questions (Yin 2014). The feedback and experience gained from the three managers were used to refine the interview protocol and data collection process and subsequent analysis. The in-dept interviews were then conducted online given the Covid-19 travel restriction at the time. Participants for the interview were purposely selected for their knowledge, competence and leadership roles at Nigerian seaports. Each interview duration was between 45 to 90 minutes over a period of five months. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to make them ready for analysis. For validity, the transcripts were content analysed manually and with NVivo computer aided analysis tool.

Data was synthesised from first order to second order and to third order as shown in Table 2 for Seaport 1. Responses of all respondents for each seaport were summarised and aggregated for all the second order variables along with their representative quotes. The same thing was done for all other constructs with respect to the five other seaports.

The interview data was thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify relevant sub themes and items and then compared with study propositions and conceptual framework as well as its variables for consistency (Morse et al. 2016). These were used to map the first and second order categories and items of the conceptual model earlier developed for the study. The themes and items that emerged inductively from the semi-structured interviews were conceptually compared with previous studies to validate their relevance and interrelationship with HRM practices, seaport competitiveness Bazeley (2009).

5. Results and Discussion

Table 2. Summary and Representative Quotes - HRM Practices (Seaport 1)

Second order category item (Variable)	Aggregate summary	First order representative data
Alignment of HRM practices with business objectives of the seaport.	HRM practices only partially aligns with NPA business objectives.	Let me give you two key area where there is no alignment – recruitment and promotion. If NPA will allow the HR department to tidy up in this area, it would be good (PM2) I don't see any full alignment in our HR practices and business objectives… If the HR department is left alone to do its job without fear or favour, then you can talk about proper alignment. (PM3) They only align partially. Some of the challenges we are facing in the union today was because the HR practices implementation were not based on principles of equity and justice... (UR)

Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5 show across cases aggregated summary for HRM practices, workforce capability and seaport competitiveness (Cost of clearance) for all the six seaports. The first key finding with respect to HR is that the **HRM practices of the seaports are not fully aligned with the business objectives of NPA mainly because of unfair recruitment and promotion practices**… a manager in SP1, when asked if there is an alignment in HRM practices with business objectives of the seaport, he said:

Table 3. Across-case aggregate summary - HRM Practices

Second order category item (Variable)	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4	SP5	SP6	Summary (SP1-SP6 and SFF)
Alignment of HRM practices with business objectives of the seaport.	Partially aligned	Partially aligned	Partially aligned	Partially aligned	Aligned	Partially aligned	HRM practices partially aligns with business objectives of the seaport

I don't see any full alignment in our HR practices and business objectives… If the HR department is left alone to do its job without fear or favour, then you can talk about proper alignment. (PM3, SP1).

Another manager from the same SP1 responding to same question also said:

I don't see any full alignment in our HR practices and business objectives… If the HR department is left alone to do its job without fear or favour, then you can talk about proper alignment. (PM3, SP1).

The second key finding is that **the working condition of staff is average and consequently, morale, commitment and productivity are also average**.

Table 4. Across-cases aggregate summary - Workforce Capability

Second order category item (Variable)	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4	SP5	SP6	Summary (SP1-SP6)
Staff commitment and loyalty	Staff loyalty confidence, commitment are positively impacted	Staff loyalty and commitment are positively impacted	Staff loyalty and commitment are high	Staff loyalty and commitment are average	Staff loyalty and commitment are average	Staff loyalty and commitment are average	Staff loyalty and commitment is generally average
Working condition of staff and productivity	Staff working condition is average and productivity is average.	Staff working condition is average but productivity is high.	Staff working condition is good, and productivity is high	Staff working condition improving and productivity high	Staff working condition is average and productivity is average.	Staff working condition is average and productivity is average.	Staff working condition is average and productivity is average.
Staff morale	Staff morale is average	Staff morale is average	Staff morale is low	Staff morale is boosted by career development and advancement opportunities	Staff morale is average	Staff morale is average	Staff morale is average

When the respondents were asked to access staff working condition and its impact on staff morale, loyalty, commitment and productivity, a manager from SP1 said:

Our morale is as good as our working condition, it is just average. (PM1, SP1).

Another manager from SP2 said:

...I will say since our working condition is average, the Impact on staff productivity has also been average. (PM2, SP1).

The third key finding is that **official charges at the seaport are reasonable and competitive, however, if reported illegal and undocumented charges extorted from customers by numerous agencies at the seaports are factored in, the charges become prohibitively uncompetitive.**

Table 5. Across-cases aggregate summary - Seaport Competitiveness (Cost of Clearance)

Second order category items	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4	SP5	SP6	Summary (SP1-SP6)
Reasonableness of overall cost of clearance to attract ships to the Nigerian seaports.	Official charges are reasonable and competitive	Official charges are reasonable and competitive	Official charges are reasonable and competitive	Official charges are reasonable and competitive	Official charges are reasonable and competitive but illegal charges make	Official charges are reasonable and competitive but illegal charges make	Official overall charges are reasonable and competitive enough to attract customers to

					overall cost uncompetitive	overall cost uncompetitive	Nigerian seaports.

When asked to access the reasonableness of overall cost of clearance, a manager from SP5 said:

> *...the overall charges are attractive and competitive to bring in more customers. If you add together all our official charges, they are very modest and affordable for any importer, but they complain that extortion from government agencies make overall cost very high (PM2, SP5)*

A manager in SP6 was asked the same question and he responded that:

> *These costs are very reasonable, that is, the official ones… There are other illegal and unreceipted cost adding to overall clearance cost that are making it to be expensive. (PM3, SP6)*

Proposition Findings

The findings for the two propositions are presented in Table 5. For P1, there is a relationship between HR and WC because generally the status of practices for the variables for both are week. This implies that good HR practices consistent with global best practices will positively impact workforce capability building of the seaport.

For P2 there is also an association between WC and SC because practices status for both are weak. This shows that if there is good workforce capability building practices, it is expected that the seaport will be competitive and vice versa. This implies that a good workforce capability building will translate to competitiveness of the seaport.

Table 5. Propositions and Findings

No.	Proposition	Finding	Decision
P1	HRM practices is related to workforce capability (WC)	There is a relationship between HRM and WC	Related
P2	Workforce capability (WC) is related to seaport competitiveness (SC)	There is a relationship between WC and SC	Related

6. Conclusion

There are two broad implications of this study. These are theoretical and practical. Theoretically, there are two things it will contribute to literature. First is that investment in HR practices will have significant positive impact on workforce capability building in the context of a developing country. The second is that merit-based recruitment and promotion is very vital to improving workforce morale, loyalty, commitment, and productivity in order to improve seaport competitiveness Practically, there are learnings for the seaport managers to improve the competitiveness of seaports. They have to address issues with HR development. They must emphasize merit-based recruitment and promotion and also address issues with working condition of staff to improve productivity. Also, additional provision of modern seaport technology is required. If the issues with HR development and practices are addressed, then this can be used as benchmarking for other African seaports to become competitive.

This study has two limitations. The first is that only one variable is considered under HRM practices and SC. Other variables could still be included to broaden the scope. The second is that only the views of seaport managers were sought during the interview. Views of other seaport stakeholders, such as seaport users and customs personnel could be included for triangulation.

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Biographies

Kayode Adeyemi is currently a PhD student at the School of Accounting, Information System and Supply Chain of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT), Melbourne, Australia. The topic of his thesis is the Impact of Human Resources Management Practices on Seaport Competitiveness: A Case Study of Nigerian Seaports. His research areas of interest include seaport planning and management, and transportation.

Prof Shams Rahman is a Professor of supply chain management who, in 2021 and 2022, has been recognised among the world's top 2% scholars. Shams is dedicated to interdisciplinary research and education, and integrated approaches to defining and unravelling supply chain challenges and societal concerns. His research areas include sustainability and disruptive technology, and talent management.

Dr Muhammad Abdulrahman is a Senior Lecturer of Strategic Operations and Supply Chain Management at the School of Accounting, Information Systems and Supply Chain, RMIT University. He is a Senior Fellow of Higher Education Academy (SFHEA) in recognition of his excellent students-centred teaching and learning contributions. Muhammad is involved in interdisciplinary research in areas of sustainable supply chains, strategic operations management, green supply chain management, reverse logistics and remanufacturing. He has published in leading journals and is on the Editorial board of International Journal of Production and Operations Management (IJPOM).