
Cultural Competence and Corporate Competitive Advantage

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ABSTRACT

The needs for Nigerian organization to pay attention to cultural competence in organization have become necessary because of challenges of cultural competence in work place. Thus the main objective of this paper is to examine the impact of cultural competence on organizational performance. It specifically examined the effect of employee's behaviour on cultural competence in frozen fish industry in Nigeria in selected companies and the impact of cultural competence on organizational performance. In order to gain insight to these objectives, previous research has been investigated and some main theories have been selected. Through this it has been found that cultural competence is a complex subject that can bring both positive and negative effect to organization competitive advantage. It was recommended amongst others that organizations should not adopt a single-sized approach in cultural competence management. This is because cultural competence varies across organizations and hence requires that strategies be formulated to fit the particular scenario.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness, Diversity, Inclusion, Cross-Cultural Communication

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has eliminated barriers not only to trade but also in the selection of workforce in organizations. With elimination of cross-country barriers, there has been increased awareness of the need for cross cultural interactions. Intense globalization requires not just countries to be open to heterogeneity but also organizations. Most organizations, as a result have shifted from homogeneous to heterogeneous cultures in the workplace. The continued growth of organizations is largely dependent on its ability to attract and retain qualified employees who provide different perspectives and have greater understanding of cultural competence of customers and community they serve. With advances in technology and mass media, the environmental forces have become more unpredictable thereby facing out organizations that fail to adapt. Cultural competence has therefore become one of the strategies sought for corporate competitive advantage. According to Prahalad (2011), the company's competitiveness depends on the ability to develop unique core competencies. Core competencies are unique capabilities possessed by an organization that cannot be imitated by competition. The Core Competence Model developed by Hamel and Prahalad, was based on four dimensions; resources, capabilities, competitive advantage and strategy. Cultural competence can be defined as the recognition, understanding and acceptance of individual differences regardless of age, sex, class or race. Over time, employees of an organization have become the source of competitive advantage by using their skills, experience, ideas and knowledge they possess. Cultural competence in the work place calls for training of workforce to ensure cultural synergy. Cultural competence, then, describes a deep and thorough understanding of the importance of cultural identity and how it affects our working relationships. To be considered culturally competent, your staff should be aware of their own cultural identities and be able to respect the cultural differences of everyone around them (in particular, the people they work with). Cultural competence is particularly important in lines of work that require direct and constant interaction with the public, such as health care or education. In these fields, the ability to appreciate the value of culture is directly responsible for successful outcomes. However, in business settings, where the focus is generally on technical skills and the ability of the entire group to meet financial goals, cultural competency is still very valuable. It helps teams work together more productively. It also helps them better understand and communicate with customers and partners. Culturally competent companies can do things like branch into new territories and markets more easily than companies without culturally competent workforces.

Farren and Nelson (1999), introduced the cross-cultural training as a strategy that allows managers and employees adapt different cultures essential for management. Adler (1997) emphasized the importance of recognizing differences in cultures in the organization and considers it as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Cultural competence gained prominence in 1990s when organizations discovered the need to develop competitive strategies for corporate competitive advantage. Investment in human capital also increased due to discovery that individual performance had a significant impact on overall organization performance. An organization that effectively manages its cultural competence succeeds with a well-deserved competitive edge while others lack (Stevens & Ogunji, 2011). Esty, Griffin and Hirsch (1995), suggested that cultural competence in the workplace could be a source of corporate competitive advantage. They summarized how well managed cultural competence can lead to competitive advantage through; improvement in productivity, business retention, large pool of talent during recruitment, increased marketing abilities due to cultural competence and reduced lawsuits as a result of favourable working environment. How a business achieves and sustains a competitive advantage has long been the central focus of strategic management research. The dominant paradigm in the field has been the

competitive forces approach that posits the intensity of competition determines the profit potential for individual firms (Porter, 1980). According to this framework, a firm seeks a position in an attractive market that can be defended against both existing and potential competitors. Although the identification and development of the requisite capabilities is important, management's primary focus is on achieving a defensible low-cost or differentiation position, and on keeping rivals off balance through strategic investments, pricing strategies, and competitive signaling. Simply put, competitive advantage is a position that a firm occupies in its competitive landscape. According to Porter (1985), a company has competitive advantages over its rivals if it generates profits that exceed the average of its industry. Porter (1985) identifies two basic types of competitive advantage.

Therefore, this research will attempt to explain how best to explore cultural competence to attain competitive advantage. Cultural competence and corporate competitive advantage have over the years become intertwined in the business world. Cultural competence has become a strategy that gives businesses an edge over its competitors. This research sought to further explore the importance of cultural competence in gaining competitive advantage in an organization.

Statement of the Problem

Cultural competence management is a process designed to create a positive atmosphere in which similarities and differences between individuals are assessed. But for cultural competence to be effective, this strategy must be recognized as an asset rather than a liability. Cross-cultural competence is an ongoing concern for most organizations that must be addressed in an attempt to attain competitive advantage. Individuals are governed by different beliefs and attitudes they strongly subscribe to.

These form the core of managing cultural competence by ensuring equal treatment of individuals which results in development of policies and procedures that facilitate harnessing of cultural competence potential benefits. Potential benefits of cultural competence include and not limited to flexibility in decision making, exploration of full potential, creativity and receptivity to new ideas and future competitiveness. Managers should develop geocentric mindset and cosmopolitan outlooks that will enable them provide leadership devoid of favouritism and ethnocentrism. Hofstede (1980), stressed the significant effects of culture and its contribution to management.

Business is a growing concern which has witnessed increased players in the business industry. Turbulence in the external environment has resulted in increased competition. Businesses must continue redefining themselves in an attempt to survive the continuous changes in the market. Customer satisfaction is key for survival of any businesses. In order to do this, the business has to also appreciate customer cultural competence in terms of their needs and preferences.

K'Obonyo and Dimba (2007) examined the influence of culture and strategic human resource management (SHRM) and deduced that culture has a great influence on SHRM practices in multinational companies in Kenya. Darwin (2014) conducted research on effect of cultural competence on organizational performance. He concluded that cultural competence has a positive effect on organizational performance by creating a pool of skills and learning opportunities that the company can take advantage of to achieve positive results. Moore (2011), argues that cultural competence is an essential tool for achieving competitive advantage and optimal organizational performance. Muhura (2012) studied the influence of

workforce cultural competence and strategy implementation among manufacturing firms. He concluded that cultural competence of employees led to better decision making, better implementation of customer-related strategies and the achievement of strategic targets. Therefore, this study sought to find out how cultural competence affects corporate competitive advantage.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of cultural competence and corporate competitive advantage. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- i. Ascertain the extent to which written policies affect cost advantage
- ii. Determine the extent to which sensitivity training affect differentiation advantage
- iii. Examine the effect of problem solving on cost leadership

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Cultural Competence

Culture can be defined differently depending on the various aspects it seeks to explain. Hofstede (1991) defines culture as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. Culture can also be defined a set of standards, values, beliefs and attitudes held by members of a specific group that influences the way they behave. According to Jones and George (2011), cultural competence is differences among people in age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and socio-economic background. Loden and Rosener (1991) define cultural competence as that which differentiates one group of people from another along primary and secondary dimensions. Primary dimensions include race, gender, ethnicity and age. These are factors which are innate in individuals. Secondary dimensions include religion, education, marital status and professional experience. Clemons and McLaughlin (2004) explained that by aligning the goals of cultural competence with the goals of the organization, it is much more likely that the cultural competence will be integrated into the culture of the organization and not fall by the wayside over time.

Companies and employees with cultural competence are knowledgeable of and interact effectively with people of different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Culturally competent companies value cultural competence and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, and policies that help them do business with diverse people. Employees who are culturally competent are knowledgeable of individuals from various backgrounds and effectively communicate and work in diverse teams and partnerships. Domestically, the workforce is gradually shifting to becoming more culturally diverse, which is seen as a positive for companies who operate on a global scale. A diverse workforce means leveraging employee's knowledge and experiences to speak to a worldwide audience and expand to other markets. There are huge differences between companies that merely preach cultural competence and those that live and breathe it. Culturally competent companies' value and integrate cultural competence and inclusion into their policies and everyday practices. These principles are established amongst the top and are transferred to all levels of the organization through training and hiring employees with cultural competence. Diverse employees offer different cultural perspectives that are useful in achieving a variety of business objectives in areas like new product development and marketing.

Companies who prioritize and are committed to creating a company culture of cultural competence have proven longstanding benefits. Even still, most companies lack cultural competence and still have a long way to go before they have a representative amount

minority groups in executive and management positions. Shifts in the workplace explaining cultural competence include increased proportion of women, accommodation of individuals with physical disabilities, employment of individuals with higher education levels and maintaining a balance between older and younger aged workers. Different forms of cultural competence in organizations include; age, gender, religion, ethnicity, disability, education level and experience and nationality.

Age differences are as a result of different generations at the workplace. Gender based cultural competence has seen more women take up positions traditionally reserved for men. This has been made possible through affirmative action that seeks to ensure parity. Freedom of worship is a constitutional right which allows individuals to practice their religious beliefs without violations. Disability can be mental, physical or emotional which is accommodated in organizations to ensure standards of performance are reasonably set. Ethnicity and nationality describe individuals in terms of ethnic affiliation and country of origin respectively. Education level and experience influence how different individuals perceive the world and how they relate to each other. All these forms are critical in organizations as they influence attitude, behaviour and expectations at the workplace, which consequently affects attainment of organization goals. To reap maximum benefits from cultural competence, organizations must be able to develop mechanisms to manage such cultural competence. Cultural competence if not well managed, can result in prejudices and stereotyping which can affect the overall organization performance and productivity.

Cox (1993) states that cultural competence management is the planning and the implementation of organizational systems and practices for managing people in order to maximize potential advantages while minimizing potential disadvantages. Cultural competence needs to be managed on different levels which include individual, personnel and organization. It is a fact of the business world which can impact negatively or positively on employee daily behavior and work productivity.

Proxies of Cultural Competence

Written Policies

Companies should include their policy in relation to cultural competence in their employee handbook. The policy should contain information about non-discrimination laws, the code of conduct and the compensation and benefits policy.

Sensitivity Training

Employees should be provided with sensitivity training to create a better workplace culture. Sensitivity training can help employees to value views that are different, understand words, and actions that cause offense and what needs to be done if they've been offended

Problem Solving

In a diverse workplace, employees are readily exposed to new cultures, ways of thinking and new ideas. Through this, problem solving skills often increase due to multiple viewpoints being combined as a whole. Dependent upon cultural background, people will often approach problems differently and perspectives will be greatly varied. This often leads to innovative ideas and approaches not before considered.

Communication

In a diverse environment, there can be communication barriers between co-workers which can reduce the rate of productivity via misinterpretation of data and information. However,

on a long term basis through continued collaboration and proper cross-cultural training, this is greatly minimized. In addition, an organization can leverage cultural difference by capitalizing on specific cultural backgrounds of certain employees. These employees can be used to market to a particular audience. The use of this method has proven effective because clients will feel more comfortable conversing or doing business with a representative that understands his culture. This in turn boosts productivity for the organization.

Integration

Large organizations have realized that employees tend to form small social cliques among themselves along cultural and social lines. This largely impacts integration among employees because cross-cultural intermingling is often nonexistent. This can limit growth and effectiveness in teams. However, proper intercultural training can help mitigate this problem and create more effective, multicultural teams.

Experience

One major advantage of working within a cross-cultural environment is the ability to capitalize on the array of experiences of different employees. Each employee possesses different strength and weakness derived from their cultural background. Through proper managerial tactics and cross-cultural training, strengths can be exploited and weaknesses diminished. In most cases, the quality of a diverse team is always greater than that of a mono-cultural team.

Improves Employee Engagement

Better way to learn about other culture and ethnicity is from colleagues that come from a different background than our own. Ask and learn them from employees during lunch break or after work drinks. What is the point of having a pool of diverse employees when they do not learn more about each other's lifestyle and culture. When employees are sharing their personal experiences when they were in high school or what each or every festive season meant to them, they have built a trusting relationship among their colleagues. This is great because it increases employee engagement and at times increase employee motivation as well, which is great for the company.

Reduce Employee Turnover

A company that embraces cultural competence in the workplace would immediately entices a wider pool of candidates for its job vacancies. Higher-educated candidates who experienced cultural competence while at university may feel that a diverse company is more progressive and therefore will want to work there. The more candidates that applied for a job with a company, the company would generally enjoy a larger pool of candidates; the company is than spoilt for choice. Companies who are recruiting from a diverse pool of candidates only mean a more qualified workplace. When companies recruit from a diverse set of potential employees, they are more likely to hire the best of the best for the industry. In a constantly increasingly competitive economy where skills and talents are crucial to improving the company, put together the most diverse set of candidates is increasingly necessary to succeed in the market. Studies also show that job seekers are often drawn to companies with diverse workforces because it is publicly obvious that these companies do not practice employment discrimination.

Reflects Positively on Reputation

Another benefit of cultural competence in the workplace is the positive reputation that the company would receive. Companies who recruit and encourage individuals from a wide

range of backgrounds generally gain a reputation for being a good employer. Potential clients often feel more valued and thus give more business to these organizations. A diverse collection of skills and experiences allows a company to provide service to customers on a global basis because the company is able to relate and understand their clients better, and some even on a personal level

Corporate Competitive Advantage

Companies all over the world have always tried to create and capitalize on competitive advantages, ensuring profitability and long term survival. Due to the increasing competition in most markets, mainly caused by globalization, liberalization and better information of the customers, the need to gain advantages in competition is now more essential than ever.

Barney (1991) stated that a company has a competitive advantage when implementing a value creation strategy that is not implemented simultaneously by any current or potential player. For an organization to take advantage of competitiveness, it must develop appropriate strategies to ensure that it stays ahead of competition. Michael Porter developed three generic strategies that aimed at ensuring firms' competitive advantage was gained. These are Cost Leadership, Differentiation and Focus.

Cost Leadership

Cost leadership aimed at producing goods and services at a lower cost relative to competitors thereby enabling an organization to charge premium prices. Differentiation is production of unique products and services aimed at attracting and retaining customers. Focus refers to developing products and services for certain market segments. The growing turbulence in the external environment with increased globalization has changed the dynamics of competition. No single organization can boast of dominating certain market segments as opportunity in the market attracts more players thereby providing substitutes that eliminate leverage of dominating organizations.

Due to these factors, organizations need to exploit different sources of competitive advantage. The success or failure of any company depends on the competitive advantage that the product is delivered at a lower cost or offers the buyer unique benefits that justify a premium price. According to Wang (2014), if an organization develops or acquires a set of attributes that allow it to outperform its competitors, it is said to have competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is as a result of factors such as infrastructure, business complexity, technology and macroeconomics. In the face of turbulence in the external environment, businesses must continuously re-invent new strategies to gain a competitive edge. Competitive advantage does not necessarily mean lower prices and high quality, but it is largely defined by how fast a business responds to changes in its environment and adoption of innovation and technology in its business processes. Other sources of competitive advantage in organizations include; distribution networks, brand identity, intellectual property, location in terms of proximity to supply chain, management and employees of the organization.

Type of leadership in an organization is a critical factor in gaining competitive advantage. Burns (1978) differentiate transactional and transformational leadership. Transformational leaders motivate followers to attain extraordinary outcomes through putting their interests first so as to attain the desired goal. Transactional leaders as the name suggests, provide guidance through ensuring social exchange. Menguc et al., (2013) suggested that improvements to transformation-based leadership skills should lead through competitive strategies to market positional advantages. Efficient distribution network plays a critical role

in the launch of a new product in the market and availability of the product when demanded. Intellectual property forms the basis of knowledge based competitive advantage which ensures that knowledge is locked up and is exchanged through exclusive rights granted by the proprietor.

Location in terms of proximity to the supply chain presents an organization with cost advantage through ensuring flexibility in distribution and reduced operation costs. Therefore, an organization should determine its various sources of competitive advantage and capitalize on ensuring it reaps maximum benefit from it.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

An organization's core competence – that which it does better than anyone else does and is valued by the customer – is in a state of constant change. Each company identifies its core competency: Nordstrom's focus is on exemplary customer service, Black and Decker's expertise is on electric motors, and Sony's is on its miniaturization skills and its commercial applications. A company's core competency provides a direct benefit to its customers, is not easily replicated by competitors, and can be leveraged into multiple units of an organization. Today, core competencies can be found within the employees themselves. The ability to capitalize on the creativity of its employees is a key ingredient to sustainability in the fast changing world. There is a trust and respect that the organization has for its employees. It demonstrates this trust and respect by directing problem solving and opportunity development downward to those people who actually build and deliver the product or service and interact with the customer.

Cultural competence promotes understanding and appreciation of differences among individuals. The employees of an organization possess what is considered a score competence. This is in the skills, experiences and ideas that are transformed into processes that businesses can manage to ensure they gain competitive advantage. Singh and Point (2004) defined the competitive advantage of the cultural competence in the human resource by explaining the positive consequences in terms of better performance, adding values, understanding stakeholder's needs, corporate reputation, creativity and reputation. Cultural competence spurs creativity and productivity among individuals through fostering a healthy work environment which creates freedom of exploration and development of new ideas.

An organization that invests in a diverse workforce will benefit largely in attraction and retention of top talent in the market. It also enforces strong brand loyalty through developing products for a diverse consumer base. It creates an environment where individual differences are appreciated therefore promoting a culture of teamwork and mutual respect. According to Porter's generic strategies, each of them require different skills which often translate to differences in culture. Differentiation can be facilitated by a culture that encourages innovation and risk taking while frugality and attention to detail can facilitate

Bogaert and Vloeberghs (2005) emphasized that cultural competence of employees could reflect the range of customers: understanding employees' needs means understanding customers' needs. Cultural competence opens the doors of organizations seeking to expand into global markets which is a step towards competitive advantage. Cultural competence promotes synergy through use of different skills and talents towards a common goal. Ignoring contribution of cultural competence towards profitability and outwitting competition will see an organization lose out on the benefits of globalization and expansion into new territories.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Resource Based Theory

Resource Based Theory was advanced by several theorists. Some of the major contributions include; Penrose (1959) emphasized that the growth of a company is based on the resources of a company and limited by management resources, Andrews (1971), emphasized on internal resource management, Wernerfelt (1989), emphasized that strategic formulation models use firm resources as sources of sustainable competitive advantage and Barney (1991), emphasized that key strategic resources could be sources of competitive advantage if they are scarce, difficult to imitate, irreplaceable and valuable. In a turbulent environment, organizations should continuously re-invent themselves in order to survive. This theory shows that organizations with strategic resources tend to have greater competitive advantage over their competitors. In turn, these competitive advantages can help the organization benefit from strong profits (Barney, 1991).

Inputs into the production process are resources. Financial, physical, human, technological, reputational and organizational resources are the main categories of resources. Strategic resources are considered to be precious, rare, hard to imitate and irreplaceable. Valuable resources are useful in creating strategies that will help an organization capitalize on opportunities while neutralizing on threats. Rare resources belong to few or no competitors. Inimitable resources are those that are legally protected. Non-substitutable resources are those that competitors cannot find alternative ways to gain access to benefits that they provide.

Resources and capabilities form the basis of competitiveness through development of appropriate strategies. Capabilities define what the firm can do i.e. company's ability to perform some activity. They are important to an organization as they are essential in bundling, managing and exploiting resources in a way that adds value to customers and offers advantage over competitors. With the state of flux in the external environment, resources and capabilities provide a more stable basis for the company to define its market position. Strategic positioning of the firm has been attributed to cost and differentiation advantage, yet fundamental to these choices is the resource base of a firm. Resources can be grouped into tangible and immaterial resources.

Tangible resources can be quantified e.g. plant, equipment, land and cash. Immaterial resources are those not quantifiable e.g. employees' skills and expertise, culture, intellectual property and trademarks. To attain long term competitive advantage, the theory explains the importance of investing in intangible resources as opposed to tangible resources. Intangible resources meet the criteria of strategic resources.

Competitive advantage is gained when an organization acquires a set of attributes that help it outwit its competitors. It involves adoption of value creating strategy that is not replicable by competitors. In addition to the previously discussed traits of strategic resources, durability and transparency are key to attaining competitive advantage. Durability defines how long resources can be maximized to develop long term strategies while Transparency involves ease of strategy duplication. Therefore, an organization resource must be well exploited to ensure it gains competitive advantage theorists therefore advised that instead of a firm focusing on external environment, it should invest in its internal environment to develop its capabilities which would form sources of competitive advantage.

Competitive Advantage Theory

The theory was advanced by Michael Porter (1985), an economic researcher who examined competitive behaviours that led to businesses being successful. In the early 1980s, he set out to uncover ways companies maintained long term advantages over their competitors. Through his work, he created three generic strategies that would assist most organizations outwit competitors and gain competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is gained when an organization acquires a set of attributes that help it outwit its competitors. This may involve access to natural resources, skilled labour and technological innovations. Porter (1985) emphasized that competitive advantage will increase as long as the value presented by the business exceeds the cost of the product. He came up with 3 generic strategies which would help businesses gain competitive advantage over its competitors. These included cost leadership, differentiation and focus strategies.

Cost Leadership strategy involves production at a lower cost than competitors. This involves finding a low-cost base in terms of available resources to a firm. Differentiation strategy involves producing goods and services that are unique relative to competitor's goods and services. This requires innovative skills and ideas that result in development of high-quality products. Focus strategy involves addressing certain segments of the market by narrowing focus to such chosen segments. To gain competitive advantage, a firm's business strategy must be able to manipulate resources over which it has direct control so as to generate competitive advantage (Reed & Fillippi, 1990). In the wake of globalization, various management styles have been born that are used in the field of competition. These include managing heterogeneous structures, tolerance for ambiguity and use of different marketing strategies.

Conclusion

The present study highlighted the importance of cultural competence as an important basis of sustained corporate competitive advantage in medical tourism. It has also touched upon the ways to build and foster cultural competence, including transnational partnerships, cultural immersion programs, and cross-cultural training. Corporate competitive advantage through cultural competence is limited to the extent of maintaining such quality of care and is constrained by how far one can hold competitors from mimicking such competence. In a positive vein, even as the world is becoming increasingly homogenized in terms of intellectual capital, cultural capital remains greatly inimitable.

The increasing pace of globalization in the world has changed the dynamics in the workplace. The management of cultural competence has gained momentum due to the pressure on businesses that become internationally competitive and changing composition of the workforce. In reviewing literature, this study has revealed that there still exists gender imbalance in the workplace. Therefore, organizations should consciously seek to promote gender balance in recruitment processes. Diverse work groups have been seen to contribute greatly towards high value, great brand reputation and high productivity to the organization. Promoting differences in cultural orientation will enable an organization enjoy a competitive edge through employee motivation. Regulation on equal employment opportunities should be enforced to promote synergy and equal access to opportunities.

Understanding the forms of cultural competence within an organization will form the basis of strategy formulation and implementation. Understanding cultural competence also applies to an organization's customer base. Customers will often feel at home in organizations where employees' opinions are valued. Integrating cultural competence at the managerial level often

transcends to adoption of cultural competence into all dimensions of the organization thereby creating a culturally diverse profile. Training should seek to reinforce acceptable norms and values that promote cultural competence.

Recommendations

It was recommended that:

- i. Organizations should not adopt a single-sized approach in cultural competence management. This is because cultural competence varies across organizations and hence requires that strategies be formulated to fit the particular scenario.
- ii. Cultural competence should be effectively maximized to promote the interests of the organization.
- iii. Organization should establish structure that will encourage good ethical behaviour of all levels of managers and employees as this has significant impact on organization competitive advantages.
- iv. Organizations should establish core corporate values consistently throughout the organization.
- v. Organizations should have employee - focused leadership who understands the importance of the most valuable resources of employees.
- vi. Organizations should establish consistency in the organization system using inclusive and practical policies and procedures.
- vii. Employees should be free to contribute towards strategy formulation as part of motivating them whilst management should maintain control of strategy implementation to ensure the organization goals are met.

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