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Precautionary Skills Required by Office Managers to Counter Job Hazards in the Automated Office of the Millennium

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ABSTRACT

The office environment today is surrounded by so many hazards that pose serious health problems to the human elements of the organization and the organization in totality. This study was designed to identify the precautionary skills required by office managers to counter the hazards in the work setting. The middle executive and administrative officers and secretaries in Ebonyi State were the respondents. A structured questionnaire was used to elicit responses from the respondents. The study used a total population size of one hundred (100) respondents as sample. Out of the 100 copies of questionnaire distributed, 96 were returned and utilized for analyses. Data collected were analyzed using mean statistics. Results showed that office managers adherence to organizational rules and policies would enable them counter job hazards. The study recommended that possession of required precautionary skills and competency in manipulating modern equipment and machines will enable the managers counter job hazards in the automated offices. Safety rules made available by pasting in staff offices could be an added advantage while in-house training on the enormity and usefulness of the skills as well as strategies for overcoming precedent/or unprecedented difficulties in applying the skills should be enforced.

*Keywords***:** precautionary principles; emergency; radiation; environment; automation

1. INTRODUCTION

Safety is important everywhere, especially in the workplace. Although the typical office does not seem, to many people, to include heavy-duty or dangerous equipment, the environment appears to have no such obvious hazards. The somewhat played down hazards can still be disastrous if precautionary measures are not put in place to avert occurrence, either by the individual or organization.

Precaution is the act of taking measures ahead of time in order to prevent something dangerous, unpleasant or difficult from happening. These things constitute risk, hindrance or inconvenience to the individuals concerned. According to Wikipedia (2010), the precautionary principle or approach demands that action(s) or policy(ies) suspected of causing risk to the public or the environment, in the absence of scientific consensus that the action or policy is harmful, should have the burden of proof falling on those taking the action. This implies some form of social responsibility to protect the public from exposure to harm when scientific investigation has found a plausible risk. The need for control measures increases with both the level of possible harm and the degree of uncertainty.

When hazardous, a situation constitutes threat to life, health, property or environment. As a result, decision makers have the social responsibility to anticipate harm before it occurs and so notify or bridge the likely risks attendant there from. There is a range of mechanical, physical, chemical, electrical and psychological hazards that office workers may be exposed to. Sometimes, occurrences of these hazards at workplaces constitute challenges for office workers and even the office administrator in their bid to enjoy both work and surrounding environment.

Job hazard is often used interchangeably with occupational hazard which is seen as any condition of a job that can result in illness, injury, endangerment, or jeopardy, etc (International Hazard datasheets on occupation (HDO) is a multipurpose information resource) www.thefreedictionary.com/occupationalhazard.

The following 5 (five) types of hazards according to the Environmental Information System of India can decrease productivity and lower performance. They include:

1. Physical hazard – this includes poor lighting (that could lead to eye strain, headache, vision blurring and can lead to accident); noise (leading to auditory defects, nervousness, but intensity and duration of the noise can be injurious depending on individual susceptibility); and vibration (leading to ultraviolet radiation and can be discomforting).
2. Chemical hazard – this includes skin infection and allergies (dermatitis); inhalation of dust can lead to respiratory problems; ingestion of chemical substances like zinc, mercury, cigarettes from others who smoke can be injurious to health of a worker.
3. Biological hazard – infection through a sick colleague(s) like antrax, cold and catarrh, waste pain, etc.
4. Mechanical hazard – use of machinery could cause accident as they fall when lifted by Office managers.
5. Psychosocial hazard – frustration from inability to adapt to environment, lack of job satisfaction, poor human relationships in the office and emotional tension are part of this and could be categorized into two, viz;

I. Psychological which includes hostility, aggression, depression, anxiety as a result of emotional, psychological, sexual harassment, etc.

II. Psychosomatic which includes fatigue, headache, propensity to peptic ulcer, hypertension, rapid aging, etc.

It is obvious that the increasing stress on automation, electronic operations and nuclear energy may introduce newer psychosocial health problems in the industry. They are therefore assuming more importance than chemical and physical hazards. (Environmental information System of India). www.envisnioh.org/occupationalhazards.htm.

Workplace violence and aggression which include verbal and emotional abuse or threats and physical attack to an individual or to property by another individual or thing include abuse in person or on telephone, physical or sexual assault, written abuse, gang up, bullying and intimidation, malicious damage to the property of staff or customers or the business, repeated refusal of on-going education\training, withholding important information needed to complete a job, continual allocation of low work (inequality), repeated sporadic roster. All these constitute hazard in the office and its availability hinders the efficiency of office manager's job. The Office manager's position in any organization is a strategic one. The Officers are those organizational staff trained in office administration skills, acquisition of secretarial skills and are competent to function in world business or those who can become self-employed. Also included are those who rose from order ranks to such positions through growth on the job. They carry out tasks that require use of office machines, communication skills, and supervision of those who carry out these tasks and so on. The role of the Office Manager, therefore, cannot be overemphasized. The office, which is a room(s), building(s) or space(s) utilized for activities involving paper, pen, materials and individuals in order to serve an organization or the public; has witnessed unprecedented shift from manual to automation (Achilike, 2005). Automation refers to tools and methods applied by people aiming at using computer-aided facilities to carry out office activities. The automated nature has come with some heavy objects and greater use of electrical appliances. On its part, office automation is intended to provide elements which make it possible to simplify, improve and automate the organization of the activities of a company or a group of people; in the management of administrative data, synchronization of meetings, etc.

The Office Managers in tackling increased communication demands of the day's activities are saddled with the following according to Ndukwe (2011) and Achilike (2005);

i. Exchange of information
ii. Management of administrative documents
iii. Handling of numerical data
iv. Meeting planning and management of work schedules
v. Handling of equipment
vi. Handling minor repairs and or electrical appliances (in the sockets such as fans, machines, air-conditioners, lighting, and so on)

It has been observed that

The real administrator's/manager's work require high level of performance, demand vibrant retentive and alert mind and body for accurate recording and eventual reproduction of writing materials. As users of the automated

office facilities, they are likely to engage in Internet services such as research collaboration, sharing of resources, distant education and other education delivery services. (Nwosu, 1997:115)

Precautionary skills, therefore, would be referred to as tools to correct hazards in the organization for effective functioning which are as a result of the knowledge of the equipment and machines manipulated to enable the Office Manager do his work effectively. According Achilike (2005) studies, precautionary skills could be summed up under the following abilities:

1. Ability to carry and use IT (Information Technology) equipment carefully to avoid falling on the ground and wounding the individual.
2. Ability to properly socket and unplug equipment in order to use power without being electrocuted.
3. Ability to obey safety rules while carrying out responsibilities
4. Ability to apply the skill of shielding the eyes from screen rays in the process of work.
5. Ability to exhibit good behaviours and grooming that would reduce physical and emotional assault in the environment
6. Ability to impart knowledge of precautionary skills to others in the office.
7. Ability to source assistance when necessary.
8. Ability to grow independently of others on the job.
9. Ability to seek redress in case of hazard.
10. Ability to respond quickly to emergency.

Despite the variance in role of office administrators, an online Director (Randall Olson) pointed out that customer service, data entry, document processing, even planning, internet research, keyboarding, mail processing, multi-line telephone system, travel planning, office equipment operation, purchasing, records management, scheduling, and working with promotional materials, among others; constitute parts and wholes of the functions performed by them at one point or the other.

Wikipedia (2010) opined that with the impending hazards that can accrue as a result of their jobs, there is need to learn about safe lifting techniques, keep work area clear of cluster, sit properly, ensure comfortable and conducive environment, follow company safety rules and take breaks when needed.

Problem Statement

It is disheartening that despite the fact that the world has gone into the superhighway of Internet and planet discoveries which entails the use of high technology, the country is still fraught with offices that use moribund equipment that are hardly functional. Epileptic power supply has not helped in the bid to internalize precautionary skills in our automated offices while the poor standard of education which has only enabled the country to churn out poorly trained graduates, has made the managers understanding of existing hazards to be shallow. These problems have, however, increased the need for regular training and retraining. The study, therefore, aimed at identifying precautionary skills required for handling office hazards.

Purpose of the Study

The study identified precautionary skills required by Office Managers to counter job hazards in the automated office under the following specific items:

1. Skills required by Office Managers in carrying out their duties
2. Job hazards encountered by Office Managers that require precautionary skills
3. Difficulties attendant in the application of precautionary skills

Research Questions

1. What are the precautionary skills required by Office Managers in the discharge of their duties?
2. What are the job hazards which demands that Office managers exhibit precautionary skills?
3. What are the difficulties encountered by Office Managers in the application of precautionary skills on the job?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study applied survey design because it sought the opinion/views of middle level administrators and secretaries in three (3) institutions of higher learning in Ebonyi State. The population and sample reachable was 100 personnel. Of the 100 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 96 (96%) were returned. Instrument utilized for data collection was the questionnaire which was validated and subjected to reliability test that yielded a 76% affirmation. A 4-point rating scale was used to gather data relating to questions concerning hazards, precautionary skills and difficulties encountered while applying the skills on the job. Weighting of the rating scales are; (a) Strongly agreed – SA = 4 points, (b) Agreed – A = 3 points, (c) Disagreed – D = 2 points and (d) Strongly disagreed – SD = 1 (one) point. The frequency table was utilized for presentation of data while decision rule of 2.50 and above showed an acceptance of finding as tenable in tandem with the question. Results below 2.50 were conversely rejected.

3. ANALYSES OF RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Question 1. Mean responses on the importance of precautionary skills required by Office Managers on the job.

S/n	Variables	SA	A	D	SD	Weight 4 3 2 1	$f\bar{x}$	$\bar{x}$	Decision	Rank-ing
1	Ability to handle and manipulate modern machines	82	10	-	04	328 30 00 04	362	3.77	Accepted	1st
2	Adherence to safety policies, rules and regulations	40	46	-	10	160 138 00 10	308	3.20	A	3rd

S/n		SA	A	D	SD	Weight 4 3 2 1	fx̄	x̄	Decision	Ranking
3	Efficiency in office communication technique	24	60	08	04	96 180 16 02	296	3.08	A	6th
4	Honesty in dealing with people	30	36	10	20	120 108 20 20	268	2.79	A	7th
5	Competence in the use of teleconferencing technology	20	50	06	20	80 150 12 20	262	2.73	A	8th
6	Ability to handle sensitive information	60	36	-	-	240 108 00 00	348	3.64	A	2nd
7	Ability to respond quickly to emergency	36	50	-	10	144 150 00 10	304	3.17	A	5th
8	Efficiency in duty delivery	40	40	10	06	160 120 20 06	306	3.19	A	4th
	Grand mean							3.19	A	

The above table reflects the fact that the respondents rated item 5 "competence in the use of teleconferencing technology" ($\bar{x} = 2.73$) as the lowest precautionary skill while item 1 "ability to handle and manipulate modern machines" ($\bar{x} = 3.77$) was rated highest. However, all ratings show that the precautionary skills were generally regarded as important, hence the grand mean of 3.19. The decision rule of acceptance was, therefore, upheld.

Research Question 2: Mean responses on job hazards encountered in job performance that should be evaded by Office Managers.

S/n		SA	A	D	SD	Weight 4 3 2 1	fx̄	x̄	Decision	Ranking
9	Sexual, emotional and psychological harassment are great hazards	72	20	02	02	288 60 04 02	354	3.68	Accepted	2nd
10	Politicization of office system	30	40	16	10	120 120 32 10	282	2.93	A	6th
11	Use of electrical cables leading to electrocution can be a hazard	80	16	-	-	320 48 00 00	368	3.83	A	1st
12	Underutilization of officer	34	26	20	16	136 78 40 16	270	2.81	A	7th
13	Lack of training/manipulative skill can inhibit productivity	36	44	16	-	244 132 32 00	308	3.20	A	4th
14	Absence of modern machines	50	40	-	6	200 120 00 00	326	3.39	A	3rd

						Weight				
15	Poor office environment (lighting and arrangement)	38	40	06	12	152 120 12 12	296	3.08	A	5th
16	Poor screening of equipment surface to reduce electronic rays against the eyes	18	36	20	22	72 108 40 22	242	2.52	A	8th
	Grand mean							3.18	A	

Table 2 above shows that item 8 "poor screening of equipment surface to reduce electronic rays against the eyes" was regarded/rated as the least of the job hazards encountered by Office Managers in job performance followed by item 4 "underutilization of officers" ($\bar{x}$ = 2.52 & $\bar{x}$ = 2.81). On the other hand, item 3 "use of electrical cables leading to electrocution" ($\bar{x}$ = 3.83) was rated highest. Generally, all the variables of job hazards were rated highly as deserving to be evaded and so the acceptance rule was tenable.

Research Question 3: Respondents' mean responses on difficulties encountered by Office Managers in applying precautionary skills on the job

S/n		SA	A	D	SD	Weight 4 3 2 1	f$\bar{x}$	$\bar{x}$	Decision	Rank-ing
17	Office Politics played by Higher Executives	22	46	08	20	88 138 16 20	262	2.72	Accepted	9th
18	Bureaucracy is a hindrance	30	38	20	08	120 114 40 08	282	2.94	A	7th
19	Lack of managerial competence	40	50	-	06	160 150 00 06	316	3.29	A	3rd
20	Lack of prioritization on part of the Office Manager	38	48	04	06	152 144 08 06	310	3.22	A	4th
21	Ethnicity is a social problem that hinders officers in applying the skills	40	54	-	06	160 162 00 06	330	3.44	A	1st
22	Religious problem is national and can hinder officers in applying the skills	36	60	-	-	144 180 00 00	324	3.37	A	2nd
23	Negative attitude of employees to work	32	52	06	06	128 146 12 06	132	3.14	A	5th
24	Inadequate funding is a setback	16	70	02	08	64 210 04 08	286	2.97	A	6th

25	Power outages and poor lighting are constraints	26	40	10	20	104 120 20 20	264	2.75	A	8th
26	Office arrangement	20	36	16	24	80 108 32 24	244	2.54	A	10th
	Grand mean							3.04	A	

Respondents' responses on difficulties encountered in applying precautionary skills, in Table 3, revealed the lowest rating against item 10 "office arrangement" ($\bar{x} = 2.54$); followed by item 1 "office politics played by Higher executives" ($\bar{x} = 2.72$). The highest rating was accorded to item 5 "ethnicity is a social problem that hinders officers in applying the skills" ($\bar{x} = 3.44$). All the variables attracted acceptance decision ruling because their means were above the 2.50 mandate.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

4. 1. Introduction

The issue of precautionary skills was premised upon occupational safety hazards which have been considered as precarious to an organization's growth and quest for high performance. Wikipedia and Merriam-Webster (2010) saw emergency as a serious unexpected and often impending dangerous occurrence requiring/demanding immediate and urgent action. Perhaps it is in the bid to give solution to this problem that the Nigerian National Assembly has prepared and made ready, the occupational health safety bill 2012 for Presidential assent. It is a well known fact that a Nation cannot grow economically, unless her sources of supply and demand are made viable in the interest of consumers. Organizations cannot thrive if the workforce is subjected to hazards of various kinds, hence the need for precautionary skills to overcome the problem.

4. 2. Discussion and Implications of Research Question 1 Findings

The highest rankings of 1st and 2nd for abilities to handle and manipulate modern machines/sensitive information have once again reiterated the importance and relevance of precaution in the use of tools/materials in the world of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) work-setting. Rules and regulations adherence guide the workplace to higher productivity and performance, hence; the 3rd ranking which is a prelude to efficiency in service delivery as depicted in rank 4th as well as quick response to emergency ranked 5th. Efficiency in communication and handling people were seen as next areas of precautionary skills while issues of teleconferencing technology (though not so popular with Nigerian office functions) was ranked lowest – 8th.

In order of ratings/rankings (highest to lowest), the respondents have tipped - handling and manipulating modern machines; handling sensitive information; adherence to safety policies, rules and regulations; efficiency in duty delivery; responding quickly to emergency; efficiency in office communication technique; honesty in dealing with people and competence

in the use of teleconferencing technology. According to Michael (1987) cited in Achilike and Njuru (2004), the new and improved ICT (Information Technology) was borne and has continued to improve in magnitude in order to afford man the superior reasoning faculty well above his manual dexterity.

This is the only way adaptation to sporadic technological changes can be properly handled without Office Managers being overwhelmed.

4. 3. Discussion and Implications of Research Question 2 Findings

Automation which has brought about the use of highly trained people using sophisticated machines and well articulated procedures has come with hazards of various types. Respondents rated from highest to lowest as listed – electrical cables leading to electrocution; sexual, emotional and psychological harassment; absence of modern machines; lack of training/manipulative skills inhibit productivity; poor office environment (lighting and arrangement); politicization of office system; underutilization of officer; and poor screening of equipment surface to reduce electronic rays against the eyes.

The essence of precautionary skills is invariably to avert such hazards as ranked by respondents here. The use of electrical appliances that could lead to harm was ranked 1st since most gadgets used for job performance in our automated offices are electrically manipulated (run) and organizations do not usually employ someone to take care of this except when there is serious fault detected or the organization is very large.

Second ranking was allocated to sexual, emotional and psychological harassment; as these are often experienced, although seldom reported in the work-setting and yet hinders performance. The absence of modern machines in a modern/automated office of today is considered hazardous (hence 3rd ranking), as some staff are often sent to get jobs done outside the workplace and thus face mishaps which could be avoided if the machines were available. The 4th ranking was credited to lack of training/manipulative skills fall closely with the absence of machines which could enhance employee productivity, competence and performance.

Poor office environment could be hazardous when arrangement could harm or endanger the health of staff and poor lighting could damage an employee's sight, hence the 5th ranking of mean 3.08. The 6th and 7th rankings for politicization of office system and underutilization of staff which could lead to redundancy and retrenchment/layoffs are instruments of emotional harassments faced by Office Managers as hazards. It is obvious that politicization of office setting can constitute a hindrance to Office Managers as they aspire to apply precautionary skills on the job.

Politicization, according to Merriam-Webster (2010) indicates the establishment of a system of shrewdness in managing, contriving or dealing with people. It could involve a system that is sagacious in promoting policy or prudent in practical matter as well as tactful diplomatic handling of official matters. It could be counter-productive when it creates inferiority complex in officers.

Rays is seen to involve shining and realistic light ray effects quickly and easily created through computer graphics. It is also known as volumetric light. The lowest ranking of 8th may have been so tipped because of the ignorance of the availability of screen for computers and laptops as well as the expectation of eye-shades that could help individual workers shield their eyes against such rays just as the case of the 3D glasses used in cinemas.

4. 4. Discussion and Implications of Research Question 3 Findings

In the attempt to apply precautionary skills on the job, Office Managers have often met with brick walls due to obstacles posed either by the environment, system, and/or individuals especially executives.

In the quest for these obstacles, respondents rated encountered difficulties from highest to lowest to include, among others – ethnicity is a social problem that hinders officers (ranked 1st) could be observed where a certain precautionary measure may be unacceptable in a certain zone especially as Nigeria is fraught with multiplicity of ethnic groups; religious problem is national and can hinder officers (ranked 2nd) as a hindrance could be seen in situations where a precautionary skill exhibited is repugnant to a superior of a certain religious background; 3rd ranking for lack of managerial competence may have been so tipped because it could lead to the Officer mishandling the skills thus creating more problems than solving them; the 4th ranking for lack of prioritization on part of the Office manager could be exhibited where a careless officer who does not consider the precautionary skill as very serious.

The 5th ranking for negative attitude of employees' to work may have been on the premise that it could be more injurious to their relationship with others and the employer; while inadequate funding is a setback (ranked 6th) oftentimes lead to unavailability of the wherewithal for acquiring the precautionary skills that would be helpful; the 7th ranking for bureaucracy is a hindrance could be because this would hinder application of precautionary skills on the job, in the process of following laid down procedure; power outages and poor lighting (ranked 8th) are constraints which would be a setback for the use of gadgets that should enhance automation as an instrument of higher performance; office politics played by higher executives; and office arrangement have been ranked 9th and 10th but still accepted as bottlenecks because they constitute bureaucratic processes that could hinder the application of precautionary skills on the job.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the findings of the study, it became obvious that the importance of precautionary skills in the training of Office Managers cannot be overemphasized. The level of health hazards attributable to the use of machines, environment and relationships in the office setting is so enormous that the skills are inevitable if the officer is to survive till retirement age in the work setting. Both administrators and secretaries rated all the tested skills as important.

The number of job/occupational hazards necessary to be handled by the officer far outweighed what was listed, hence the need to impart officers with precautionary skills during on-the-job training. There were high indications that in trying to apply these skills on the job, officers often face myriad of difficulties and efforts need to be made by both individual workers and organizations to reduce these difficulties through company policies and regulatory systems.

Consequently, Resources Technology (1990) projected the contemporary analysis view that information can be used as a substitute enhancement for labour in order to achieve efficiency of a production process.

Recommendations from the above include

- ✓ Staff should be trained to take care of their personal welfare in so much as it involves carefulness in exposure to avoidable hazards.
- ✓ Organizations should have regulatory policies on precautionary measures pasted at different offices, given as handbills and adherence supervised.
- ✓ Working environments should be improved upon from time to time.
- ✓ Suggestion boxes should be provided for staff to participate on ways of improving welfare of staff and the environment for greater productivity.
- ✓ Environmental assessment should be made periodically with a view to determine its impact on performance assessment.
- ✓ As much as possible there should be democracy in organizational leadership.

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