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MANAGERS' RATING OF HUMAN RELATION SKILLS NEEDED BY BUSINESS EDUCATION GRADUATES FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

This study ascertained human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State. One research question guided the study while two null hypotheses were tested. The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The study was carried out in Imo State. The population of this study comprised 130 SMEs registered with the Imo State chamber of Commerce and Industry as at 2019. The entire population of 130 registered SMEs was used for the study since the size is considered manageable. Data for the study was collected using a validated research questionnaire. Cronbach Alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient value of 0.81. Arithmetic mean and standard deviation was used to answer research questions and determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the respondents' ratings. The t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses. The findings of the study revealed among others that applying positive reinforcement when relating with others, developing good customer orientation for effective operation, persuading customers and stakeholder as expected were highly needed human relations skill. The finding also revealed that there was no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that business education graduates should attend more workshops, seminars, and conferences that emphasizes on the importance of human relations skills for sustainability of SMEs.

Keywords: Human Relations, Skills, Sustainability, Business Education

Introduction

Business education is a branch of vocational education concerned with exposing its recipients to the functioning of business and the workplace. Business education as a discipline is expected to expose its recipients to diverse curricula, hence, it is that type of education that inculcates in its recipients attitudes, knowledge, skills, values that are required in the business world. It is a means of producing healthy, literate, self-reliant citizens that would create wealth for human development thereby helping in sustaining the nation's development at large (Kaegon, 2009). Succinctly, business education is that aspect of general education that prepares students foremployment and advancement in a broad range of office occupations, accounting professions, marketing occupations, teaching profession and entrepreneurship ventures.

Operationally, business education is the type of education that equips one to carry out some of the business practices both in the office and other business ventures irrespective of the person's profession.

According to Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2013), the objectives of business education includes: (i)to empower the individual with desirable skills, knowledge and values to perform specific functions so as to become self-reliant; (ii)to empower the individual in such a way that the individual will develop his intellectual capacity that would help him to make informed decisions in all spheres of life; (iii)to understand the political framework of a nation and contribute to national economic growth and development. Therefore, the success of business education graduates in the global business world lies on the content of the business education programme (Obi & Otamiri, 2010). It is however expected that business education programme provides requisite knowledge and entrepreneurial skills needed to compete and survive in the global businessworld.

According to Okoli and Ibeh (2017), skills encompass the abilities, capabilities, aptitude and expertise acquired through deliberate, systematic and sustained training, and necessary to adaptively perform job functions effectively. These skills are regarded as generic because they are readily transferable across different work settings. In the context of this study, skill means the ability to carry out specific functions which is gained through training or experience. It is important to note that when business education graduates are empowered through the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills, there is the possibility that the skills are used to create new avenues for wealth Ihebereme (2010). Ihebereme defined entrepreneurial skills as the process of acquiring or gaining effective and ready knowledge in developing ones' aptitude and ability in a particular field. Also, Okoli and Osi (2019) defined entrepreneurial skills as competency based resourceful skills that are capable of making an individual self reliant, independent and productive in meeting life's challenges. Okoli and Osi further noted that these skills provide the graduates with enhanced competence which makes them productive entrepreneurs. Therefore, graduates of business education need different skills such as human relation skills, problem solving skills, managerial skills, marketing skill and ICT skills to run any kind of business enterprise (Adeniji, 2016). In a similar fashion, Egwanyenga and Ranor (2012) enumerated entrepreneurial skills for business operation as follows: accounting and financial competency skills, marketing skills, problem-solving skills, and general business skills. But for the purpose of this study, human relation skills will be put into consideration because it is a key skill needed by a business owner to interact with others and create sustainable business relationship which in turn brings about the sustainability of the business.

The possession of human relation skills is an advantage for graduates who wish to successfully own and run their private business and prove their mettle in the world of business. Human relation skills involve the ability to work with, understand and motivate others Jaja (2015). In doing this, graduates who establish and run their own business stands a better chance of business growth and sustainability.

Sustainability involves reducing waste and unnecessary energy, fuel and other inputs and all other actions taken to improve a business. According to Ben-Eli (2018), sustainability means maintaining good relationship with customers, suppliers and the immediate environment of the business. When this is achieved, the business stands a better chance of success and growth and can equally save SMEs cost

Adeusi (2015), noted that SMEs occupy a place of pride in virtually every country or state. They play a significant role in the development and growth of various economies, as a

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result of which they are aptly referred to as the engine for growth and catalyst for socio-economic transformation of any country. SMEs are seen as catalysts in economic development and plays a major role in employment generation, rural development, and national income growth and even produces for exports to attract foreign exchange, Eze and Nwogo (2017). According to a survey conducted by the National Bureau of statistic and Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency of Nigeria, MSMEs in Nigeria account for 48 percent of our GDP, constituting about 96 percent of registered businesses and employ about 84 percent of the labour force SMEDAN (2021). This is so because government alone can no longer create enough jobs which will absorb these graduates and successfully keep them away from all forms of social vices associated with unemployment. Deen (2013) observed that entrepreneurial skills are capable of equipping graduates of business education with requisite skills needed for productivity hence achieving economic growth. This can be done by the establishment of small and medium enterprises. More so, Onyeoke and Owenvbiugie (2021) maintained that to ensure entrepreneurship survival which in turn aids the growth of the Nigerian economy, it requires an energetic private sector driven by entrepreneurship and basic people skills which are also a very important aspect of entrepreneurial skills.

Unfortunately, all efforts by handlers of business education programme seem not to have affected the sudden collapse of businesses. Kanu (2015) and Oroka (2013) revealed SMEs experience minimal growth rate and that some have closed down in the first five years of operation. This is a worrisome development for everyone concerned. This could be traced to the lack of human relations skills which is a key skill that will help business education graduates relate very well with their customers thereby ensuring continuous patronage of their business which will in turn grow and survive. The study therefore ascertained the human relations skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State.

Theoretical Framework

This study hinged on the human capital theory propounded by Theodor Schultz in early 1961. Schultz (1961) states that as the global economy shifts towards more knowledge based sectors, skills and human capital development becomes a central issue for policy makers and practitioners engaged in economic development, both at the national and regional levels. According Schultz (1961), a more educated/skilled workforce makes it easier for a firm to adopt and implement new technologies, thus reinforcing returns on education and training. Theory of human capital views schooling and training as investment in skills and competencies. This theory is related to this study in that it emphasizes the need for business education graduates to acquire human relations skills to be able to handle business challenges that they may encounter in carrying out business activities and achieve success.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to determine;
SME managers' ratings of human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises in Imo State.

Research Question

What are the human relations skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability.

Review of Related Literature

Human Relation Skills Needed for Sustainability

Human beings live and work together and they need some skills to be highly productive. Human relations try to find out what behavior and attitudes that encourage people to work, do business together and be productive. Human relation is the interaction and integration of people into a work or business situation that motivates them to work together productively, co-operatively and with economic, psychological and social satisfaction (Nwosu & Maben, 2008). Human relations can be said to be the ability to get along with others. This skill is expected of entrepreneurs, office managers, directors, supervisors and foremen.

Human relation skills are integral personal characteristics in relations and interactions between an individual with other people which helps in resolving social situations efficiently. Constantin (2020) stressed that it allows for successful achievement of several significant professional goals. It helps to adapt to new environment, be ready for inner and international professional mobility, work in teams, efficiently collaborate with peers, be a good team leader, manage people and innovations, be self-aware, know personal strengths and weaknesses, manage self-development and life-long learning process. Human relation skills can be basically classified as interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Interpersonal skill is the ability of an individual to relate with co-workers, inspire others to participate, and mitigate conflict with co-workers (Etonyeaku, 2009). This skill is essential given the amount of time spent at work each day. Interpersonal skills are life skills one uses every day to relate and interact with other people, both individually and in groups. Organizations often seek to strengthen relations with their customers to achieve sustainability. Owing to global competitions, cultural diversity, latest technologies and process of new management, interpersonal skills is critical in the business environment if meaningful interaction and business must take place. Cameron and Pickering (2012) noted that interpersonal skills in a professional setting are individuals' ability to get along with others while getting through a business transaction. It is how people express their confidence, ability to listen and understand, solve problems, decision making, personal stress management and many others. Developing good interpersonal for business begins with personal appearance, non-verbal communication, verbal communication, clarifying, reflection, decision making and thinking are core interpersonal skills. It is creating an authentic, appropriate, attractive, and affordable image. Intelligence, knowledge, ability, initiative, and effort are vital to the success of any kind, but regardless of whom one is, how old, and what ones role or goal, ongoing image management can give one the

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personal/professional presence one needs. Graduates must come to terms with the need of the business world in terms of personal appearance. They must be prepared to create an image that is in conformity with the need of the industry.

Non-verbal cues as described by Hall (2012) are potentially informative behaviors that are not purely linguistic in content. It includes facial expressions, head movements, posture, body and hand movements, self and other-touching, leg positions and movements, interpersonal gaze, directness of interpersonal orientation, interpersonal distance, and synchrony or mimicry between people. Rush (2013) noted that non-verbal communication encompasses numerous modes such as posture, gesture, eye contact, touch among others. The authors further stated that the knowledge of non-verbal skills in business plays two roles. Managers use non-verbal communication to effectively lead other employee and team members. Team members in business, whether they realize it or not also use non verbal cues to communicate information to individuals within and outside the business. Business education students must be fully equipped with necessary nonverbal cues that project them as positive and ready for the world of work and business. Non-verbal communication in business occurs on a daily basis. Rush further noted that crossed legs or folded arms during a business meeting may signify relaxation or resistance to the idea being presented, eye contact with the speaker during a business meeting communicates interest, and a manager in a company may maintain eye contact more than a subordinate employee does. A firm handshake might be interpreted as confidence while other physical touches such as a lingering touch on the shoulder might be seen as invasive of personal space. Business education students must be familiar with various non-verbal cues so as not to present themselves as offensive before their potential employers, customers and partners.

Verbal Communication is an activity that people view with concern particularly in the public. Few people feel entirely comfortable standing in front of an audience to speak; even fewer actually enjoy it. In fact, a survey carried out in America on common fears, suggested that fear of speaking in front of a group was rated higher than fear of death (Rasberry & Lemoine, 2012), The reasons behind this are simple, People fear that public speaking may result in humiliation, embarrassment or loss of dignity. Even the most adept speakers recognize feelings of fear in anticipation of and during delivery of a presentation. In a very general sense, varying the tone, pitch, rate and other vocal features can communicate enthusiasm and can create a sense of interest in the listener. This can be of importance when giving a presentation or when pitching for a business.

Effective listening is a specific skill that can be consciously developed and practiced in various workplace situations, whether a meeting, supervision session, telephone conversation or chance meeting in the corridor. Listening is not simply a matter of hearing, it is an active psychological process which enables us to attach meaning to all the information we receive.

Intra-personal skills are the foundations of a successful career. Kowald (2014) described intrapersonal skills as another term for self-awareness or introspection. Intrapersonal skills are talents or abilities that reside within the individual and aid the individual in problem solving. The National Research Council (2010) identified two broad skills that fall within this cluster; adaptability and self management. Adaptability is the ability and willingness to cope with uncertain, new, and rapidly changing conditions in business, including responding effectively to emergencies or crisis situations and learning new tasks, technologies, and procedures. Adaptability also includes handling work stress, adapting to different personalities,

communication style and cultures and physical adaptability to various indoor or outdoor work environments. On the other hand, self-management is our ability to manage our behaviours, thoughts and emotions in a conscious and productive way. Knowing what to do and how to act in different situations also forms an integral part of self-management.

Method

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The study was carried out in Imo State. The population of this study comprised 130 SMEs registered with the Imo State chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2019. The entire population of 130 registered SMEs will be used for the study since the size is considered manageable. Therefore, there will be no sampling for the study. Data for this study will be collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The instrument is titled “Questionnaire on Human Relation Skills Needed for Sustainability” (QHRSNS) which has two sections, A and B. Section A contains information on the personal data of the respondents while section B contains 10 items on human relation skills. The instrument is structured on a 5 point scale of; Very Highly Needed (VHN); Highly Needed (HN); Moderately Needed (MN); Slightly Needed (SI); Not Needed (NN) with values of 5,4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. The instrument was face validated by two experts. The reliability of the instrument was determined by administering the instrument to 40 registered SMEs in Abia State which was not part of the study. Cronbach Alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient value of 0.81 which was considered high enough to judge that the instrument is reliable. Arithmetic mean was used to analyze data related to the one research question posed and standard deviation was used to determine the homogeneity or otherwise of the respondents’ ratings. The t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses. The mean ratings will be interpreted using the real limit of numbers of: Very Highly Needed (VHN) 4.50 – 5.00; Highly Needed (HN) 4.50 – 4.49; Moderately Needed (MN) 2.50 – 3.49; Slightly Needed (SN) 1.50 – 2.49; Not Needed (NN) 0.50 – 1.49.

Results

Research Question

What are the SME managers’ ratings of human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability in Imo State?

Table 1: Respondents’ Mean and Standard Deviation Ratings of Human Relation Skills Needed by Business Education Graduates for Sustainability

S/N	Item Statements	X	SD	Remarks
1	Apply positive reinforcement when relating with others	3.38	0.77	Highly needed
2	Develop good customer orientation for effective operation	3.70	0.59	Highly needed
3	Persuade customers and stakeholder as expected	4.55	0.58	Very highly needed
4	Organize customer meetings to improve their buying behavior	3.47	0.82	Highly needed
5	Establish linkages with other businesses and stakeholders for mutual learning and collaborative	4.71	0.52	Very highly needed

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	undertaking			
6	Demonstrate genuine regards to customers	3.69	0.69	Highly needed
7	Recognize the behavioral style of customers	3.23	0.88	Moderately needed
8	Apply basic ideas to motivate customers	4.39	0.49	Highly needed
9	Respond promptly to customers' needs	4.32	0.44	Highly needed
10	Ability to listen, understand and solve problems	3.69	0.51	Highly needed
Cluster mean		3.91		Highly needed

Table 1 shows that out of 10 items rated by SME managers on human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State, eight were highly needed, one was moderately needed, and one was very highly needed. With the cluster mean of 3.91, it is confirmed that human relations skills are highly needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs in Imo State.

Test of statistical Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability based on their years of experience.

Table 1: ANOVA Analysis of the significant difference among SME Managers on Human Relation Skills Needed by Business Education Graduates for Sustainability based on their Years of Experience

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	66.599	2	33.300	2.515	0.85
Within Groups	1681.832	127	13.243		
Total	1748.431	129			

Data in Table 1 show that there is significant difference among SME managers on human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability based on their years of experience. The analysis result revealed that p -value (0.85) is greater than the alpha level $\alpha = 0.05$, $p (0.67) > 0.05$. This result indicates that the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability.

Table 2: t-test analysis of the significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability

Variables	N	\bar{X}	SD	Df	t-value	p-value	Remark
Urban	100	33.82	3.72	128	1.961	0.52	Not significant
Rural	30	32.33	3.36				

Data presented in Table 2 show the significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability. The result shows a p-value of 0.052 with 128 degree of freedom and α -value of 0.05. Since the p-value of 0.52 is greater than the α -value of 0.05 ($0.52 > 0.05$), the null hypothesis is accepted. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers in rural and urban areas regarding human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability.

Discussions of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that the human relation skills that are needed by business education graduate for sustainability include- applying positive reinforcement when relating with others, developing good customer orientation for effective operation, persuading customers and stakeholder as expected, organizing customer meetings to improve their buying behaviour, establishing linkages with other businesses and stakeholders for mutual learning and collaborative undertaking, demonstrating genuine regards to customers, recognizing the behavioural style of customers, responding promptly to customers’ needs and ability to listen, understand and solve problems.

This finding agrees with the finding of Okoli and Ibeh (2017) that business education graduates need skills for interactions with people and interpersonal relationship. These skills will help graduates of business education in persuading customers and stakeholder as expected, organizing customer meetings to improve their buying behaviour, establishing linkages with other businesses and stakeholders for mutual learning and collaborative undertaking as human relation skills for employability. The finding supported the views of Jaja and Arugu (2015) that human relation skills are required of manager of businesses at various stages of business transaction for growth and sustainability of their businesses. This also aligned with the finding of Ezenwafor and Olaniyi (2017) that human relation skills as highly needed by business education graduates for handling of business enterprise in south west Nigeria. Equally, the finding supported Banabo, Ndiomu and Koroye (2011) that human relation skills are required of tertiary administrators in the Niger Delta States for relating with others at the workplace. With all indications from the findings, it is pertinent that human relation skills play vital role in the sustainability of SMEs managed by business education graduates which will translate to business success..

The findings of the study also discovered no significant difference in the mean responses of SME managers on human relation skills needed by business education graduates for sustainability of SMEs based on their years of experience and location.

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Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that graduates of business education need human relations skills to enable them maintain relationships with customers, business partners and others they come in contact with during the process of business transactions. These skills include: applying positive reinforcement when relating with others, developing good customer orientation for effective operation, persuading customers and stakeholders as expected and organizing customer meetings to improve their buying behavior among others. When human relation skills are practiced in business, it will bring about increased patronage on goods and services rendered and customer retention which will lead to business success and sustainability of the SMEs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

3. Institutions of higher learning should organize workshops, seminars, and conferences for business educators in order for them to gain more knowledge on human relation skills that will help them to teach and impart the knowledge to the students which will in turn help the students manage businesses to achieve success and sustainability of SMEs owned by them.
4. Business education curricula in universities should be reviewed at all levels by programme developers and curriculum planners to further stress and emphasize on the importance of human relation skills that contributes to sustainability of SMEs.
5. Business education undergraduates should practice during training using businesses established by the institution operating within the school environment for them to gain firsthand knowledge and experience on human relation skills which will help them during business activities of their own.

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