

EFFECT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FIELD EXTENSION WORKERS ON THEIR JOB PERFORMANCE IN IMO STATE, NIGERIA

NGOZI OKEREKE AND D.O. ONU

ABSTRACT

The study focused on the effect of socioeconomic characteristics of field extension workers on their job performance in Imo state agricultural development programme, Nigeria. Data was collected with the aid of questionnaire form 83 respondents. Findings revealed that the field agents have performed poorly in achieving the objectives of the Extension Service. It was found that age, educational qualification, working experience, and household size were the significant socio-economic characteristics that affected the level of job performance of respondents. Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that Imo State ADP should approve systematic-in-service training courses for extension agents to enable them update their skills and competencies in the relevant areas of agriculture. The training of agents should focus almost exclusively on those skills or competencies that are directly relevant to their current assignments. Also, Block extension supervisors should ensure frequent monitoring and constructive feedback to the extension agent. The academic/professional qualification for employment as an agricultural extension agent should be the Diploma in Agriculture, only. The use of agents without requisite professional qualification should be discouraged.

Key words: socioeconomic characteristics, field extension workers, job performance

INTRODUCTION

Job performance is the principal issue, the focal point of employee morale (motivation) at work. Management efforts at boosting workers' morale have the ultimate target of more productive job performance. Thus motivation and employee job performance are very closely linked. Accordingly, the following proffer possible explanations of job performance; performing or doing a job; performance at a job or work, work or job accomplishment; expected work behaviour. Employee job performance comprises both quantitative and qualitative aspects. The qualitative will define those desirable behavioural attributes that are conducive to actual task performance. These include such qualities of humility and a sense of maturity and responsibility. Actual work accomplishment is measurable against set work output standards. This quantitative dimension of job performance yields a performance score, an index of how much performance, which is used in describing employees performance in such terms as high, low, or medium; poor, average good or excellent. A number of measurement techniques have been developed to operationalize employee job performance. They include graphic and self-rating scales, check lists and free-form evaluations. Their use enhance an understanding of worker performance from a quantitatively measurable perspective. These techniques find copions applications in personal appraisal exercises in personnel management, with enormous implications for employee motivation and productivity (Druoker, 1977; Pigors and Myers, 1980).

The reward system must also be internally equitable. The relative importance of field level extension functionaries has to be realized in terms of pay compensation and other amenities. Lower level extension workers often have to work under unpleasant and isolated conditions. A carefully planned system of field allowance will compensate this (Barter 1990). The living conditions of field extension workers must be improved by providing adequate facilities for housing transport and medical and educational allowances for their children.

As part of career development extension personnel should be provided with opportunities to develop their technical and Managerial skills to enable them to occupy higher positions. Extension workers should have a salary structure as well as promotion opportunities of extension workers are comparable to other government employees (Onyango, 1987). The personality of the extension personnel goes a long way in shaping his performance on the job. This is why socioeconomic characteristics are relevant. This study ascertained the effect of socioeconomic characteristics of field extension workers on their job performance in Imo State Agricultural Development Programme, Nigeria

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in Imo State, Nigeria which is located in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria with a total Land Mass of about 25, 289.40km² (State Directorate of Lands, survey and urban planning, 1995) and population of 2,485 million people (NPC 1991). The State lies with in the humid topical ecological zones of Nigeria, with relative humidity ranging between 70-80 percent (Meterological Department, 1995). Farming is the main occupation of the people. Administratively, Imo State is divided into three Agricultural zones namely; Okigwe, Owerri and Orlu zones, and has 27 Local Government Areas (LGAs). There are 38 extension blocks and 246 extension circles under the supervision of the Imo State Agricultural Development Project (Imo ADP Calendar; 1995). The 38 extension blocks and 246 Extension circles are further broken down in the zones, for convenience and effective supervision training and visit. The blocks are made up of many communities with the block extension supervisor resident and controlling all field visits in the block. The Extension Agents (EAs) are resident in the circle, and each circle consist of about 6 or 7 villages. The size of the circle derived from the broad ratio of effective operating farm families for good extension work (Imo ADP, 1995).

A representative sample was chosen using a multi-stage stratified sampling procedure, the study area was stratified into the existing three agricultural zones, and three extension blocks was then selected through purposive sampling procedure from each agricultural zone. A list of extension agents was compiled, with the help of the staff of the ADP staff. Random sampling technique was used to select 50 Extension agents from Owerri zone, 40 from Orlu zone and 30 from Okigwe zone, giving a sample size of 120 Extension Agents. From the 120 respondents involved in the study, data for 83 respondents were used for this study. Data analysis

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

Table 1 shows that majority (62.7%) of the extension field agents are of the middle age bracket (31-40) years. The mean age of the respondents was 37.3 years. The finding implies that respondents were middle aged, matured for the job and in their economically active stage of life, it also shows that such work force could cope with the tedious and time bound function of extension delivery, as stated by Ironkwe (2006). This result is in line with the findings of Jibowo (1992) who asserted that age usually has direct influence on level of performance, hence majority of extension workers will be expected to perform maximally. Also, 46.9% of the respondents have worked for 2-9 years. The average years of extension experience as field agent among respondents was approximately 10 years. This indicates that most of the extension agents served for considerably long period as to be able to know their Job description better and perform appreciably well. Oladele (1999) reported that long years of service means that enough experience would have been developed and could be passed down to subordinates on the job. Extension agents who indicated being married accounted for 83.1%, while 16.9% were single. This suggests that majority of extension agents were

married. The implication here is that the married extension agents have more responsibilities at home, and therefore spend less time at work place.

Also, Table 1 shows that a larger proportion (59%) of the field agents have 5-9 persons in their households. Also, 59.0% of extension workers were males, while only 41.0% were females. This reflects an imbalance in the gender – distribution of extension workers in the state. This may affect women in obtaining information on basic production opportunities and improved farm technologies. The results indicate that a higher proportion (49.4%) of the extension agents had higher National Diploma (HND). This is followed by 33.7% of them that had NCE. The implication of this finding is that respondents were qualified for their job and were also in their formative stage of learning on the job and extension delivery. This will assist them in the effective performance of their duties. This confirms Ogunfidiimi and Meretiwon's (1981) remarked that education is vital to the success of agricultural production and enhance the effectiveness of agricultural extension agent work.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Characteristics of Extension Workers In Imo State

Age (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
20-30	8	9.6
31-40	52	62.7
41-50	16	19.3
51 and above	7	8.4
Working Experience		
2-9 years	39	46.9
10 – 17 years	32	38.4
18 – 25 years	10	12.0
26 – 33 years	2	2.4
Marital status		
Single	14	16.9
Married	69	83.1
Household size		
0 - 4	32	38.6
5 – 9	49	59.0
10 - 12	2	2.4
Gender		
Male	49	59.0
Female	34	41.0
Educational Qualification		
OND	8	9.6
NCE	28	33.7
HND	41	49.4
BSc	6	7.2
Trainings attended		
0	60	72.3
1 – 4	17	20.5
5 – 8	3	3.6
9 – 12	3	3.6
Residence in Job Location		
No (Not resident in the cell)	5	6.0
Yes (Resident in the cell)	78	94.0
Monthly Income (₦)		

11, 825 – 15, 119	54	65.1
15, 120 – 18, 414	7	8.4
18, 415 - 21, 709	15	18
21, 710 – 25, 004	7	8.4

Source: Field survey data, 2006

Majority (72.3%) of the extension agents have not attended any in-service training since they were employed. Considering the importance of extension training and manpower development, the present situation which shows that majority of Extension agents have not attended any inservice training is not satisfactory. Perhaps the fortnightly training compensates for this lack of formal institutional training on the job. This is in line with Agumagu and Nwaogwugwu (2006) who postulates that the ADPs should intensify efforts at boosting the fortnightly trainings workshops, seminars and other staff development programmes with innovations relevant to farmers needs and environment. This does not look adequate considering the fact that the nature of their work requires frequent training and re-training to up-date their knowledge. According to Asiabaka (2002), all levels of staff of the extension organization need to have competencies in the area of communication skills, programme planning, monitoring and evaluation. Respondents also provided data on whether they lived in their operational areas (the cell) or not. About 6.0% indicated that they resided in their cells, while 94.0% of the respondents lived outside their operational cell areas. It is important and necessary that the agent live in his or her area of operation: Agumagu (1992) opined that for extension agents to be effective, it is essential that she/he should reside within his or her circle so that she/he will not waste time travelling. It was further noted to the agent will become acquainted with the farming community and its resources, will be more readily accepted by the farmers of his circle, and will always be readily available when required by the farmers. Findings shows that respondents were less satisfied with their salary considering the fact that the average salary earned was N13, 300. This is however not adequate considering the present economic situation. Enhanced incentive is an important motivator to the average individual. This agrees with Ejiofor and Aniagoh (1984) and Ngadiukwu (1999) which reported that adequate motivation is important for sustained staff morale.

Job performance

Agents Perception of their Normative Extension Functions

In table 2, the mean response to each of the item were determined and rank ordered. The twenty normative functions were determined using a 5-point Likert type rating scale of very poor (1), poor (2), averagely well (3), very well (4), exceptionally well (5). A midpoint of 3.00 was established for the purpose of making decision, any mean response that is less than or equal to 3.00 implies poor function, while a mean score greater than 3.00 implies good function. Following from these scores, the normative functions of the field extensions agents that were effectively performed includes; Proving farmers with information on farm/innovation farmers problem with high officials, bringing to the attention of his superior officers problems requiring study and action, helping to organize farmers into cooperatives, mapping out work schedule for co-operations and teaching farmers how to keep farm records. While the rest 13 normative functions of the extension agents were poorly performed.

Table 2 shows the mean response of extension agents self-rating and supervisors rating of extension agents job performance. From the table, extension agents rated their function of making home and farm visit good (mean = 3.78). However, supervisors rating was (mean = 2.98). The table also shows that extension agents rated their function of living in the area assigned to them good, (mean = 3.84), while supervisors rating was (mean = 91).

This is followed by extension agents self-rating of writing reports good (mean = 4.07) while that of supervisors rating was poor (mean = 2.93). This suggests that the extension agents are not performing their function effectively.

Organizing young farmers club were rated by both the extension agents self rating and supervisors rating as poor (mean 2.78) and (mean = 2.23) respectively. The table also shows that the Extension self rating on planning and implementation was poor (mean = 2.19) and supervisors rating was (mean 2.54). Also in selecting and training of local leaders extension agents self-rating was (mean = 2.98) and the supervisor rating (was 2.97), teaching how to keep farm records was rated by extension agent (mean = 2.83) and supervisors rating was (mean = 1.94). The implication of this study is that the extension agents are aware of their normative functions, while supervisors rating shows that the extension field agents have not been performing their function effectively.

Farmers Perception of the Extension Agents

Table 3: Distribution of Farmers by their Perception of the Extension Agents

Farmers Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Farmers see Agents as partners in progress	23	32.9
Farmers see Agents as friends	12	17.1
Farmers See Agent as government Employees	35	50.0
Total	70	100.0

Source: Field Survey Data, 2006

The assumption in this study was that the effectiveness of agents in their duties is enhanced if the farmer sees them as friends and partners in progress and depressed if they saw them simply as officials of the government. It is assumed that an effective agent would have built up enough rapport with the farmers such that they would perceive him as a friend of the family and not merely as a Government employee. If such rapport is lacking, then farmers are expected to see the agents as strangers imposed on them by the government Onu (1988). Table 3 shows that 32.9% of the farmers saw the extension agents as partners in progress while only about 17% of the farmers saw them as friends. On the other hand, 50 percent of the farmers saw the extension agents simply as Government employees who were detailed to rural areas to probably execute government policies and decisions.

The implication here is that the agents have not been particularly effective in building up the required level of rapport with the farmers. Perhaps to the farmers the agents are still wanted outsiders not as insider.

Farmers Rating of Extension Services/Delivery Mechanism

Table 4: Distribution of Farmers according to Rating of Extension Service/delivery mechanism

Extension Service/Delivery Mechanism	Mean
Visit extension office	6.39
Listen to Agric. Radio talk	4.99
See agricultural film.	2.53
Attend lectures by Co-operative Officers	2.46
Receive agric news	4.14
Visited by an extension workers	1.04

Source: Field Survey Data, 2006.

Table 4 shows that in the average, farmers indicated that they visited the extension office for about 7 times during the past 12 months, listened to agric radio talk for about 5 times and saw agric film for about 3 times. In the same vain, lectures were given by co-operative officers for about 3 times, received agricultural news for about 4 times and visited by an extension worker once.

The implication of this finding is that Extension service provided to farmer is inadequate. This finding contradicts the self-rating of Extension Agents who indicated good services. It is obvious that adequate monitoring mechanism is not in place to ensure that extension services are provided: Onu et al (2003) had opined that inadequate monitoring of extension actions significantly influenced extension agents work – related stress.

Relationship between socio-economic characteristics of field extension workers and their level of Job Performance.

Table 5 is the result of multiple regression analysis showing relationship between level of job performance and socio-economic characteristics of respondents. The four functional forms of linear, semi log, exponential log and double were tried. However, the exponential form was chosen as lead equation and then used for further analysis.

The coefficient of multiple determination (R^2) was 0.594, which implies that about 59% of the variation in the level of job performance of field extension agents is accounted for by the joint action of the independent variables investigated.

Four out of the eight variables were significantly related to level of job performance and these are age, (X_1) educational qualification (X_5), working experience (X_7), and household size (X_8). Age was negatively and significantly related to job performance at 1% level of significance (coefficient = $-8.785E - 03$, $t = -3.623$). The explanation for this finding is that the older the field extension worker, the lower his job performance, what this implies is that younger field workers performed better than the older workers. This finding is in line with the finding that the average age of field workers is 37.3years which means that extension workers were in their economically active stage in life hence can work more.

Level of education was negatively and significantly related to the level of job performance with coefficient of $-4.004E - 02$, and t – value of -2.390 . The negative relationship means that those with lower qualification performed better. This may be because they need to work harder to enable them rise on the job. Promotion is a very important factor in job performance hence the lower qualified extension agents may want to justify promotions they hope they get. Working experience also showed negative relationship with job performance. The coefficient for the variable is $-3.504E - 03$ while the t – value is -2.404 . The negative sign implies that respondents who had spent less time on the job, performed better than those who had spent more time. This means that respondents who had spent less time may have the zeal to perform their duties in such a way as to get rewards when necessary.

Household size showed positive and significant relationship with job performance (Coeff = $8.658E - 03$, t – value = 2.118). This variable was significant at 5% level. The finding suggests that respondents with larger household sizes most likely will perform better on the job. This does not conform with apriori expectation. However, it may mean that more members in the household could be a source of inspiration for improved performance.

The multiple regression coefficients for marital status (X_2), gender (X_3), income (X_4) and extension training (X_6) were not significant at 0.05 level. Therefore, the hypothesis is hereby rejected with respect to the significant variables, and accepted with respect to the non-significant variables.

Table 2: Distribution of Extension Agents by Perception of their normative functions

Normative function	Extension agents themselves		Supervisors agents	
	Mean Scores	Remark	Mean Scores	Remarks
- making home and farm visit	3.78	Good	2.98	Poor
- Providing farmers with information on farm/innovation	4.01	Good	3.49	Good
- Living in the area assigned to him	3.84	Good	2.91	Poor
- Writing Reports	4.07	Good	2.93	Poor
- Helping farmers to Purchase farm input	3.41	Good	3.43	Good
- Discussion of farmers problems with high officials	3.92	Good	3.94	Good
- Conducting demonstrations of farmers plot	3.90	Good	3.00	Poor
- Organizing young/youths farmers club	2.78	Poor	2.23	Poor
- Participating in Committee meetings for planning, implementation of agricultural development programmes in the area	2.19	Poor	2.54	Poor
- Bring to the attention of his superior officers situation and problems requiring study and action	3.82	Good	3.74	Good
- Conducting/Organizing meetings with farmers	3.93	Good	3.00	Good
- Helping to organize farmers into co-operations	3.83	Good	3.14	Good
- Mapping outwork schedule for co-operations	3.10	Good	3.09	Good
- Representing farmers interest at zonal level.	3.66	Good	2.74	Poor
- Providing information on agricultural credit	3.47	Good	2.71	Poor
- Selecting and training local leaders	2.98	Poor	2.97	Poor
- Distributing farm input	3.82	Good	2.96	Poor
- Training of contact farmers	3.65	Good	2.88	Poor
- Teaching farmers how to keep farm record	2.83	Poor	1.94	Poor
- Evaluation of Extension Programme in his area	3.61	Good	3.01	Good
Grand Mean	3.53		2.98	Poor

NB: Mid point = 3.00; any mean score \leq 3.00 poor; any mean score $>$ 3.00 good

Table 5: Multiple regression results on the relationship between job performance and socio-economic characteristics of respondents

Function forms	Consta nt	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆	X ₇	X ₈	R ²	F-value
Exponential	2.182 (17.878)	-8.785E-03 (-3.623)**	7.581E-03 (0.858)	3.831E-03 (1.285)	-1.734E-02 (0.648)	-4.00E-02 (2.390)*	1.165E-02 (0.442)	-3.50E-03 (-2.404)*	8.658E-03 (2.118)*	0.594	13.533**
Linear	118.67 (7.786)	-1.130 (-3.666)**	0.806 (0.811)	3.716E-04 (0.979)	-2.262 (0.664)	-4.960 (-2.322)*	1.230 (0.373)	-0.456 (-2.458)*	1.052 (2.086)*	0.499	9.213**
Double log	2.416 (4.414)	-0.722 (-3.196)**	8.556E-02 (1.329)	0.145 (1.079)	-8.172E-02 (-0.888)	-0.132 (1.841)*	2.65E-02 (0.298)	-9.45E-02 (-1.574)	0.115 (2.187)*	0.442	7.327**
Semi log	167.57 (2.415)	-92.552 (-3.232)**	10.338 (1.267)	13.283 (0.780)	-10.009 (-0.858)	-16.489 (-1.812)	2.081 (0.184)	-12.252 (-1.610)	15.401 (2.306)*	0.373	5.503**

NB: Values in first rows are coefficients, t-ratios are in parentheses, *t ratios significant at 5% level
 **t and f-ratios significant at 1% level

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of performance status of the normative extension function, desirable personal characteristics and overall performance of the field agents, and the level of awareness and adoption of recently recommended agricultural innovations used in this study as criteria for approximating their effectiveness, shows that the field agents have performed poorly in achieving the objectives of the Extension Service. It was also observed that the extension agents were aware of their expected roles in agricultural research delivery. This development is considered good, as proper role perception is very necessary for effective coordination and performance of such a role. Extension field agents are the catalyst for effective extension service. It was found that age, educational qualification, working experience, and household size were the significant socio-economic characteristics that affected the level of job performance of respondents.

Based on the findings of the study, it is therefore recommended that Imo State ADP should approve systematic-in-service training courses for extension agents to enable them update their skills and competencies in the relevant areas of agriculture. This will equip them better to tackle the high technical challenges in some of their activities. The training of agents should focus almost exclusively on those skills or competencies that are directly relevant to their current assignments. This calls for modification in the operational arrangements of the fortnightly training. Also, Block extension supervisors should ensure frequent monitoring and constructive feedback to the extension agent. The academic/professional qualification for employment as an agricultural extension agent should be the Diploma in Agriculture, only. The use of agents without requisite professional qualification should be discouraged.

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