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Smart work-Hard work; An Enquiry into which Strategy Academic Staff of Federal University Otuoke Adopts to Improve Work Efficiency.

By

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Abstract

The study investigates the preferences of academic staff at the Federal University Otuoke towards hard work and smart work strategies to enhance their work efficiency. Using the Job Demand Resource Model as a framework, a mixed-method approach was adopted, involving quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with a sample of 171 academic staff members. The findings reveal that a significant portion of staff members value a balanced approach between hard work and smart work, highlighting the importance of efficiency, work-life balance, and adaptability for improved job performance. Particularly, 45.5% of respondents emphasized work-life balance as the leading factor influencing their performance, while adaptability and motivation followed. Interviews provided deeper insights, illustrating how staff members are increasingly recognizing that a combination of both work methods can lead to better educational outcomes and personal well-being. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the need for university management to cultivate a supportive work environment that encourages both strategies. Recommendations include promoting a work culture that rewards innovative teaching practices, investing in training for digital tools, and implementing flexible scheduling options to enhance staff satisfaction and productivity.

Key Words: Hard work, smart work, academic staff, job performance.

Introduction

Work is a fundamental part of human life and is shaped by specific strategies that guide how tasks are completed. The way we choose to work, whether through smart strategies or hard work, can impact our performance. In organizations lacking a strategic approach, performance can suffer. Ross and Kami (2011) note that without a clear strategy, operational inefficiencies emerge, leading to unproductive activities. In the academic world, universities are unique because they not only create knowledge through research but also share it through teaching (Romainville, 1996, as cited in Bersin, 2023). Furthermore, Jenkins (2004) describes the commitments of academic staff as complex and multifaceted. He emphasizes that the relationship between teaching, research, and other roles requires clear strategies to prevent negative effects that can arise from conflicting demands.

At a global level, recognizing the importance of work strategies is more crucial now than ever. Reports highlight a trend where organizations are becoming more focused on effective work strategies that enhance performance, especially in an age where technology is rapidly changing the landscape of work (World Economic Forum, 2023). This shift shows that investing in employee training to develop smart work skills is on the rise. Specifically, many organizations expect to improve their employees' hard work performance as well (World Economic Forum, 2023). In academic settings, the situation can be different. While non-academic sectors might lean towards hard work, academic institutions like FUO often blend both hard work—defined by long hours and determination—and smart work, which prioritizes efficiency and strategic planning (Nag, 2024). This blending is essential as universities face unique challenges related to their dual commitment to teaching and research.

In Nigeria, the understanding of hard work is traditionally linked with the amount of time and effort spent on tasks. Hard work reflects qualities such as resilience and a strong work ethic. In contrast, smart work focuses on efficiency and using strategies to achieve more with less effort (Adeniyi & Adeyemi, 2020). An effective mix of both types of work is believed to enhance job performance for academic staff. Afolabi and Ogunleye (2018) argue that balancing these approaches leads to better outcomes in Nigerian higher

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education. Research also highlights that heavy workloads can negatively affect academic staff's performance, with studies indicating that excessive traditional hard work can lead to burnout and decreased job satisfaction (Adeyemi & Akanbi, 2018). This point reflects the need for institutions to cultivate strategies that balance both hard and smart work, resulting in higher productivity and job satisfaction among staff.

At the Federal University Otuoke, the balance between hard and smart work is crucial due to the unique demands faced by academic staff. Many challenges, such as work overload and the need to balance academic and administrative responsibilities, require thoughtful strategies to navigate effectively. Previous studies suggest that traditional hard work practices are still prevalent but may not be ideal for long-term performance (Abdullah & Shah, 2014; Olu-Akinnawo & Ayodele, 2017). Despite various studies addressing aspects of academic performance, very few have focused specifically on the preferences of academic staff between smart work and hard work. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring which working strategy is favored by the academic staff at the Federal University Otuoke and why this preference exists.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the preferences of academic staff at the Federal University Otuoke between smart work strategies and hard work approaches in their daily tasks.
2. To identify the factors influencing the academic staff's preferences for smart work or hard work and their perceived impact on job performance.

Literature Review

When discussing hard work or smart work in any organization, it is important to find the right mix of both. Hard work means putting in a lot of time and effort into tasks, while smart work means working efficiently and effectively, using strategies to get the same results with less effort. In many educational settings, hard work is often necessary. Academic staff are usually required to spend long hours teaching, researching, and managing various administrative tasks. This commitment is essential especially in maintaining educational standards and ensuring students receive a good learning experience. Olaniyan (2016) points out that many educators go the extra mile, spending additional time on lectures, research, and grading assignments. Such dedication is admirable and plays a key role in creating a high-quality academic environment. The effort educators put in is closely linked to their students' success and the institution's reputation (Olaniyan, 2016).

However, relying only on hard work can lead to problems like burnout. Uche (2018) notes that while hard work is requisite, putting in too much effort without corresponding efficient methods can hurt effectiveness. Interestingly, in academic environment where deadlines, evaluations, and administrative jobs can become overwhelming, relying solely on hard work can be risky (Uche, 2018). Staff who work excessively may feel stressed, which can reduce their enthusiasm for teaching and hinder their productivity. Therefore, it is important for academic staff to blend hard work with smarter strategies to maintain their effectiveness in the long run (Nwafor, 2017).

Suffice to say that finding a balance between hard work and smart work can help academic staff manage their workloads better. Smart work focuses on working intelligently rather than just hard. It includes using technology and creative teaching methods to improve learning without putting too much pressure on staff (Uche, 2018). For instance, using online platforms for lectures can save time and make materials more accessible for students. This approach not only enhances student learning by offering flexible options but also helps relieve some of the stress on academic staff (Nwafor, 2017).

Additionally, a smart work approach also involves careful planning and prioritizing tasks. Nwafor (2017) mentions that tools like calendars and project management software can be very helpful for academic staff. By using these tools, educators can better organize their responsibilities, focus on priorities, and manage their time effectively. When they can see their tasks and deadlines clearly, they can concentrate on what is most important, which boosts their productivity. This organized approach helps reduce stress, allowing staff to put their energy into significant projects while efficiently handling routine tasks (Nwafor, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Job Demand Resource Model developed by Bakker and Demerouti in 2007 as a theoretical framework. This theory is anchored on the assumption that every job has both demands and resources. Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require effort and can lead to negative outcomes, such as burnout, when they are high. As posited by Aliyu and Salami (2018), these demands can include heavy workloads, time pressure, and emotional challenges. On the other hand, job resources are those aspects that help individuals achieve their goals, reduce job demands, and promote personal growth, such as support from colleagues, autonomy, and opportunities for development (Balogun, 2020).

One key assumption of the Job Demand Resource Model is that high job demands lead to stress and negative health outcomes when they are not balanced with adequate job resources. This means that if an academic staff member faces significant demands—like a heavy teaching load or extensive research responsibilities—without enough support, they may experience fatigue or burnout (Bersin, 2023). Conversely, having ample resources can help mitigate these demands, leading to better well-being and performance.

Another important assumption of the model is the concept of motivational processes. When employees have access to the necessary resources, they are more likely to engage in their work, feel energized, and be motivated to perform better. This motivational aspect emphasizes the positive effects that resources can have, making people more resilient in the face of job demands. It's crucial to recognize that the interplay between demands and resources creates a dynamic

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environment that influences employees' well-being and productivity (Chen & Zhang, 2020).

Following these propositions, the theory is considered suitable and useful for this study as it provides a comprehensive lens to understand the experiences of academic staff in universities. Academic staff often juggles multiple responsibilities, such as teaching, research, and administrative tasks, which can be overwhelming. The Job Demand Resource Model allows us to analyze how these job demands impact their work life while considering the resources available to them.

Through the adoption of this model, we can identify specific demands that academic staff face, such as the pressure to publish research or manage large classes. We can also examine the resources that may alleviate these pressures, including support from colleagues, institutional resources, and personal coping strategies. Understanding this balance helps us to propose solutions that can improve the work environment for academic staff. For example, if we find that teaching loads are excessive and support is lacking, universities could consider reducing workloads or enhancing support systems.

Furthermore, applying this model facilitates a closer examination of how academic staff can be empowered through resources. By nurturing strengths, such as professional development opportunities and strong mentorship programs, universities can help academics thrive even in demanding environments. Additionally, this model underscores the importance of creating an optimal balance, where job resources are harnessed to counterbalance job demands, thereby promoting enhanced engagement and well-being.

Methods

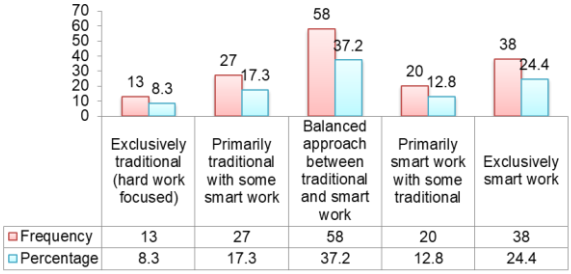
This study adopted a mixed-method approach as its research design. The mixed method design is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods provides a systematic analyses using numerical and statistical data to elicit and quantify behaviours and attitudes of people while qualitative methods offers a detailed insights into people's perception, thought, and experiences using focuss group discussion(FDGs), key interviews, images, text and observations. The population of this study consists of the entire population of Federal University Otuoke academic staff. According to FUO (2023) Bulletin; the total number of academic staff of the University stood at (590) five hundred and ninety, spread across eight faculties and Departments. The sample size for this study is 156 for the academic staff. This was arrived at through the use of Taro Yamane sample size determination formula $\{TY:=N\div(1+N(e)^2)\}$. To select the respondents, the the simple random sampling and stratified sampling techniques were employed to select academic staff members across the faculties and departments. In addition to the above, 15 key persons made up of senior academic staff members were drawn purposively for the KPI sessions. This raised the total sample size to 171. The primary and secondary methods of data collection were used. The data analysis was done using descriptive methods for quantitative data while verbatim quotations were used to present the qualitative data concurrently with the quantitative data.

Results and Discussion

The findings from the questionnaire shall be done based on the research objectives since the charts clearly reflect them. All questionnaire distributed were duly completed and collated.

Objective 1: To investigate the preferences of academic staff at the Federal University Otuoke between smart work strategies and hard work approaches in their daily tasks.

Fig 4.1: Smart work vs Hard work strategies
On which among the two approaches academic staff of FUO prefer adopting to enhance their job performance



	Exclusively traditional (hard work focused)	Primarily traditional with some smart work	Balanced approach between traditional and smart work	Primarily smart work with some traditional	Exclusively smart work
Frequency	13	27	58	20	38
Percentage	8.3	17.3	37.2	12.8	24.4

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Fig 4.1 presents data regarding the Smart work vs Hard work strategies, showing which approach respondents prefer to use to enhance their job performance. The chart reveals some interesting insights into how academic staff view these two work methods. Firstly, a small percentage of respondents, 8.3%, indicated that they rely exclusively on traditional hard work strategies. This suggests that very few people believe solely in putting in long hours without any modern adaptations. Next, we see that 17.3% of the respondents lean towards a primarily traditional approach but also incorporate some smart work strategies. This group seems to recognize the benefits of balancing old and new methods, even if they still favor hard work. The largest group, making up 37.2%, adopts a balanced approach between traditional and smart work. This indicates that a significant number of respondents see value in both methods and strive to find a middle ground to enhance their productivity. Additionally, 12.8% of respondents fall into the category of primarily using smart work strategies while still using some traditional methods. This shows that there are people who strongly prefer smart work but acknowledge the need for some of the tried-and-true practices from the past. Finally, 24.4% of respondents indicated that they rely exclusively on smart work strategies. This group recognizes the potential of modern techniques and tools to optimize their work without the need for traditional efforts.

Suffice to say that while these quantitative findings are concise, the qualitative insights provide more in-depth knowledge of these two approaches. For instance, to understand importance of each approach better, one of our respondent noted;

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> I believe that smart work is way more effective than just hard work. In the classroom, I can spend hours lecturing, but let us say I use engaging tools like videos and group activities, the students learn better. For example, instead of talking for an hour, I might set up a project where students work in teams. They get to collaborate, and I can see how much they understand. This way, I feel like I'm truly teaching and not just filling time with my voice. These are approaches that other civilized societies are already making us of, but lack of such facilities hamper these ideas. (KII Participant, Male, Senior lecturer, aged undisclosed).

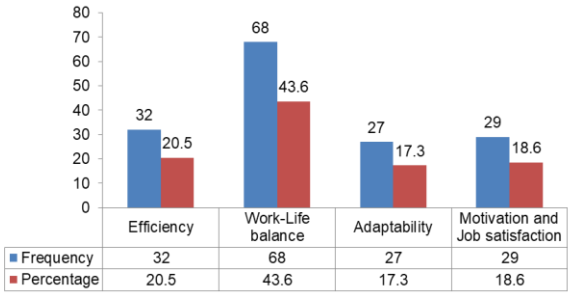
This goes further to prove that using smart strategies, like engaging methods, is more beneficial for learning than simply working hard by lecturing for long periods. This shows that academic staff can actually enhance their students' learning experiences and their job performance by being thoughtful about how they teach. If more teachers adopt smart approaches, it could lead to better student performance and deeper understanding of the subject matter, making lessons more enjoyable for everyone involved and project overall better job performance ratings. Similarly, another participant noted;

> For me, balancing hard work and smart work is important. I used to think that staying in the lab late hours showed dedication. But that often meant I was too tired to think clearly. Now, I work hard on my projects, but I also make time to plan and think through my experiments during regular hours. That way, I put in the effort where it really counts, and I actually getting better results without feeling overwhelmed. (KII Participant, Male, Senior lecturer, aged undisclosed).

This opinion as was with the quantitative data reflects a balanced approach between hard work and smart work. The fact that the respondent recognizes that simply putting in long hours does not guarantee success is encouraging. This also justifies the simple notion that the combination of hard work with careful planning can lead to better outcomes. The perspective also suggests that for anyone in research or similar fields, finding a balance can improve both the quality of work and personal well-being, ultimately leading to more meaningful achievements.

Objective 2: To identify the factors influencing the academic staff's preferences for smart work or hard work and their perceived impact on job performance.

Fig 4.2: Factors influencing the Academic staff's preference for Smart work or Hard work.



Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Fig 4.2 presents data pertaining to the factors influencing academic staff's preference for smart work or hard work. The chart shows that various elements plays important role in how staff choose to approach their work. Amongst the key factor is efficiency, with 20.5% of respondents highlighting this as important. This suggests that many academic staff recognize the value of working smarter to get tasks done more quickly and effectively. They may believe that using smart work strategies can help them achieve better results with less effort. Another crucial factor is work-life balance which stood out as the most important factor, mentioned by 43.6% of respondents. This indicates that a significant majority of academic staff in FUO prioritize having a good balance between their work and personal lives. They likely value flexible work methods that allow them to manage their time better and reduce stress, suggesting that finding harmony in life is a top priority. Adaptability became another identified factor, with 17.3% of respondents identifying this as influencing their preference. This indicates that some staff members appreciate the need to adjust and change their work methods to meet new challenges. They may feel that being open to new ways of working is crucial in the ever-evolving academic environment. The final factor identified is, motivation and job satisfaction which were noted by 18.6% of respondents. This shows that many academics consider how their work strategies impact their overall happiness and engagement at work. In other words, they might believe that smart work allows them to feel more fulfilled in their roles.

To corroborate these quantitative findings, the interview insights reveals affirming perspectives, confirming that there are notable factors that impact the choice of any of the approaches. For instance, one interviewee highlighted some social conditions that may necessitate the adoption of a given strategy at a given time. According to this participant;

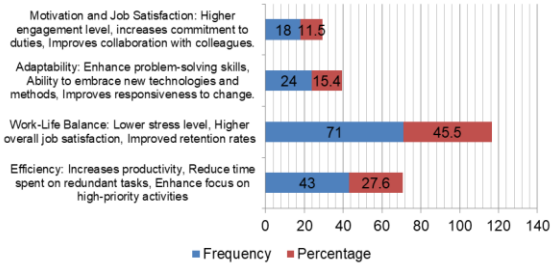
> Deciding on any one of these approach is not an easy one. Firstly I believe in both hard work and smart work, there are times that you have to employ the hard work approach and there are times that smart work can be employed. For instance, let us say I decide to go digital with my lessons or homework, there are some students who may be constrained by one social condition or the other and may not be able to meet up with the requirements for digital platform lessons or assignment. So that kind of situations would warrant the lecturers to go for physical lessons and also engage in classroom continuous assessment. (KII Participant, Female, Senior lecturer, aged undisclosed).

This perspective or factor involving students' consideration reflects the need for flexibility in teaching methods. The opinion stresses the importance of recognizing that not all students have the same resources or circumstances. Therefore, balance is key; lectuers must adapt their strategies to ensure that every student can engage with the material, whether through online or in-person learning. This flexibility can lead to better learning outcomes because it meets students where

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they are, allowing for both hard work and smart work to play a role in their learning outcomes.

Fig 4.3: On how the identified factors impact job performance of Academic staff



Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Fig 4.3 presents data regarding how the identified factors impact the job performance of academic staff at FUO. The chart shows that several elements play essential roles in enhancing how effectively staff can perform their roles. Beginning with efficiency, which was emphasized by 27.6% of respondents, the data indicates that many academic staff believe that being efficient leads to better productivity. When they can reduce time spent on repetitive tasks, they can focus more on what truly matters, such as important projects and student engagement. This prioritization of efforts through efficiency can help staff members achieve more in less time, which is essential in the academic environment.

Next, the most significant factor reported was work-life balance, noted by 45.5% of respondents. These respondents believe that maintaining a good balance between their work and personal lives greatly benefits their performance. They mentioned that when staff experience lower stress levels and higher job satisfaction, they are likely to be more committed to their roles and stay longer in their duties, indicating that a healthy work-life balance clearly contributes to a happier and more productive workforce.

Moving on to adaptability, which was considered impactful by 15.4% of respondents suggests that some academic staff see the ability to adapt as important for their job performance. This means that staff who can embrace new technologies and methods tend to be better problem solvers and can adjust more easily to changes. This adaptability can help them respond effectively to the evolving demands of their roles. Motivation and job satisfaction were noted by 11.5% of respondents as the least factor that impact their job performance. This indicates that while it is a crucial factor, it ranks lower compared to the others suggesting that higher levels of motivation and job satisfaction can lead to greater engagement among staff. When they feel motivated, they are more likely to take responsibility for their duties and work well with their colleagues.

Interestingly, qualitative insights from the interviewees also corroborate the findings presented in Fig 4.3 above pointing out efficiency, Work-Life Balance, adaptability and motivation/job satisfaction as ways through which their job performance has been impacted irrespective of any approach they adopt. According to a respondent;

> From the moment I discovered the importance of efficiency within the academic environment, I have been able to manage my duties and responsibilities, ensuring that I do not spend more time on redundant duties, instead I now pay close attention to important activities that are primary responsibilities of an academic staff. Though we remain role models, mentors, counselors, educators, teachers, guardian and so on to our students, but this is without forgetting our primary obligation. (KII Participant, Female, Senior lecturer, aged 39years)

Another participant noted;

> The motivation that I get from employing smart tools to aid my lecturing has greatly impacted my job performance. Before now I get discouraged coming to class to dictate notes to the students. The thoughts of even losing my voice while speaking to a class of over a hundred students in a GES class further escalated my displeasure. However, contemporary tools such as the use of digital platform to share lesson notes and the use of public address system while teaching a crowded class has motivated me in some ways, thereby improving my performance outcomes. (KII Participant, Male, Senior lecturer, aged undisclosed).

These insights present how different factors play a role in influencing job outcomes within the academic space. The first participant stressed on the importance of being efficient in their work by paying attention to what truly matters—like teaching and mentoring students—so as to avoid wasting time on tasks that do not contribute to their main responsibilities. This awareness helps them balance their many roles as educators while ensuring they fulfill their essential duties effectively. The second participant emphasizes how using smart tools has made a significant difference in their teaching experience noting how they used to feel overwhelmed by the idea of talking for long periods to a large class, which made them less excited about teaching. However, with the help of digital platforms for sharing notes and tools like a public address system, the process has become easier and more enjoyable. This not only makes teaching more manageable but also boosts their motivation and performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the preferences of academic staff at the Federal University Otuoke regarding their working strategies, balancing between hard work and smart work to enhance work efficiency. The findings reveal that most staff members value a blend of both approaches, with an emphasis on strategies that lead to efficiency, work-life balance, adaptability, and overall job satisfaction. These factors significantly influence their performance and job outcomes, portraying the necessity for academic staff to adopt a flexible mindset that can adapt to varying demands. Based on this, the study offers the following recommendations;

1. The university management should encourage a culture that values both hard work and smart work strategies. This can be achieved by recognizing and

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rewarding staff who demonstrate effective time management and innovation in their teaching methods, thereby fostering a more productive environment.

2. The university should invest in training and providing resources for academic staff to effectively use digital tools and smart teaching strategies. This will not only improve their teaching experience but will also lead to more engaging and efficient learning environments for students.

3. Academic staff should be encouraged to adapt their teaching strategies based on students' needs and circumstances. This flexibility can include a mix of traditional and modern teaching methods, catering to diverse learning styles and situations.

4. The university management can implement policies and programs that promote work-life balance for academic staff. This could include flexible scheduling, mental health support, and wellness programs that help reduce stress and enhance job satisfaction, there by leading to better overall performance.

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