



ROLE OF EMPLOYEE COMPETENCE AND JOB AUTONOMY ON EMPLOYEE
INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE OIL AND GAS SECTOR IN DELTA STATE.

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ABSTRACT

It has been observed that insufficient attention has been given to the link between employee empowerment proxies and their innovative behavior, especially in the oil and gas sector. Drawing on the resource-based view theory, this study explored the influence of two proxies of employee empowerment - employee competence and job autonomy, on innovative behavior. Primary data were collected from one hundred and twenty (120) staff of oil and gas firms in Delta State, while simple regression was employed for data analyses. The study revealed that employee competence and job autonomy have a positive impact on their innovative behavior. The study, therefore, concludes that both employee competence and job autonomy enhance their innovative behavior. The recommendation is that Oil and gas firms in Delta State that are desirous of enhancing innovative behavior of their employees should first increase their psychological empowerment by enhancing their employee competence and job autonomy, which, in turn, can be achieved through appropriate skill and knowledge training.

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Introduction:

In the contemporary competitive business landscape, characterized by the prominence of knowledgeable workers (Wimalasiri & Kouzmin, 2000; Jarrar & Zairi, 2002) and a shift toward decentralized, organic organizational structures (Houghton & Yoho, 2005), the relevance of employee empowerment has become increasingly pronounced, especially in the oil and gas sector. The oil and gas sector in Nigeria has played a pivotal role in shaping the country's economic landscape and global standing, providing direct and indirect jobs in exploration, production, refining, distribution, and related industries. This sector demands a workforce with diverse competencies and innovativeness due to its multifaceted nature involving exploration, extraction, refining, and distribution processes (Bizanti & Alrumah, 2020). Employees' innovative behavior in the workplace is considered an essential prerequisite for organizational survival. To be innovative, organizations require the input of their employees in terms of novel ideas generation and suggestions. Furthermore, continuous innovation requires work behavior from employees above and beyond their standardized job responsibilities and can be enhanced through empowerment (Kebraie, Rakhshaninejad, & Afshari, 2015). Hence, organizations striving for innovation need to capitalize on the abilities and willingness of their employees to innovate (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007; Mittal & Dhar, 2015). According to Park and Jo, (2018), continuous innovation requires work behavior from employees above and beyond their standardized job responsibilities and can be enhanced through empowerment.

Psychological empowerment of employees can lead to increased engagement, organizational commitment, and decreased intention to leave and stress ("Employee Empowerment: The Rhetoric and the Reality", 2011). When employees are empowered and given autonomy and flexibility, they are likely to be more motivated and take full responsibility to find new ways and develop new skills to respond to challenges. Furthermore, psychological empowerment has been found to have a positive correlation with employee engagement and satisfaction, leading to increased team performance (Ugwu, Onyishi, & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2014). When employees are empowered and given autonomy and flexibility, they are likely to be more motivated and take full responsibility to find new ways and develop new skills to respond to challenges (Luoh, Tsaur, & Tang, (2014). Psychological empowerment can result in increased employee engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and decreased intention to leave and stress.

Despite the claimed benefits associated with employee empowerment, there is evidence which suggests that the implementation of empowerment practices is not as prevalent as would be expected, with many employee empowerment initiatives unable to achieve the levels of empowerment intended (Collins, 1994; Foster-Fishman & Keys, 1997; Cunningham & Hyman, 1999). Insufficient attention has been given to the link between the dimensions of employee empowerment and innovative behavior especially, in the oil and gas sector. Drawing on the resource-based-view theory (Barney, 1986) which argues that empowered employees can enable an organization to build sustainable performance through improved innovation. This study intends to address the gap in the literature by providing a more detailed analysis of the two dimensions of empowerment (competence and autonomy) and how they relate to employee innovative behavior within oil and gas firms in Delta State.

Review of the Literature

Employee Innovative Behavior

The prime role of innovation in promoting socioeconomic prosperity has been a preoccupation of researchers and policymakers for several decades (Campo, Díaz, & Yagüe, 2014, Bayraktar, Hancerliogullari, Cetinguc, & Calisir, 2017, Jaiswal & Dhar, 2016). Employees' innovative behavior in the workplace is considered an essential prerequisite for organizational survival as a result, it has become increasingly important to organizations because of the changing economic environment, globalization, and growing competing demands, hence the increasing research interest in this topic (Kim & Lee, 2013; Akram, Haider, & Feng, 2016). The definition of individual innovative behavior proposed by Scott and Bruce (1994) has laid the foundation for various other definitions (e.g. Zhou & George, 2001; Yuan & Woodman, 2010). Some scholars have defined individual innovative behavior as a multistage process of implementing new and novel ideas (Scott & Bruce, 1994; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996). Others have defined it as how an individual recognizes a problem, generates ideas or solutions, and sets a course to implement the perceived solution (Waheed et al., 2016).

Employee innovative behavior is a cognitive and motivational process (Afsar & Masood, 2018) that is directed at introducing, developing, and implementing new ideas (Scott & Bruce, 1994) to provide useful and novel solutions to complicated and ill-defined problems (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). According to De Jong and Den Hartog (2008), innovative behavior refers to “an individual’s behavior that aims to achieve the initiation and intentional introduction (within a work role, group or organization) of new and useful ideas, processes, products or procedures.” Part of the basis of individual innovative behavior is formed by empowering leadership, workgroup cohesiveness, and individual learning orientation (Amundsen, 2019; Bos-Nehles et al., 2017b; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009). It is the process in which new ideas are generated, created, developed, applied, promoted, realized, and modified by employees to benefit their role performance in organizations (Thurlings & Vermeulen., 2015). In this study, employee innovative behavior is defined as how employees adopt, implement, or use creative ideas to solve problems in their work role, unit, or organization (Yuan & Woodman, 2010).

Talent Psychological Empowerment

Empowerment refers to employees' beliefs about their role in an organization and their sense of control at work (Spreitzer, 2008). Schlesinger and Heskett, (1991), and Bowen and Lawler, (1992) defined empowerment as giving employees discretion or latitude over certain task-related activities. It gives the employees autonomy to exercise discretion on task-related activities. More explicitly, Carlzon, (1987) views empowerment as freeing someone from rigorous control by instructions, policies, and orders, and giving that person freedom to take responsibility for his/her ideas, decisions, and actions. It is to release hidden resources that would otherwise remain inaccessible to the individual and the organization (Carlzon, 1987). Empowerment is generally referred to as a state of mind (Berry, 1995; Bowen & Lawler, 1995). Hence, an employee with an empowered “state of mind” experiences the

following qualities: feelings of control over how the job shall be performed; awareness of the context in which the work is performed; accountability for personal work output; shared responsibility for unit and organizational performance; and equity in the rewards based on individual and collective performance (Berry, 1995).

Randolph and Sashkin (2002) recently argued that empowerment is recognizing and releasing into the organization the power that people already have in their wealth of useful knowledge, experience, and internal motivation (Randolph, 1995). It is the release of an appropriate amount of power and the freedom to use that power to execute assigned tasks. Employee empowerment refers to the delegation of power and responsibility from higher levels in the organizational hierarchy to lower-level employees, especially the power to make decisions (Langbein, 2000; Dainty, Bryman, & Price, 2002; Arneson & Ekberg, 2006). These decisions must be geared towards achieving set organizational goals. There are two main conceptions of empowerment: structural and psychological (Mathieu, Gilson, & Ruddy, 2006). In this study, our focus is on the psychological perspective of talent empowerment which focuses on the micro level (individuals) and refers to intrinsic task motivation engendered by meaning, choice, competence, and impact.

According to Thomas and Velthouse (1990), psychological empowerment heightens intrinsic task motivation or internalized commitment to a task. Psychological empowerment primarily focuses on an employee's personal beliefs related to their organization which enables them to feel a sense of work control (O'Brien, 2011; Oyer, 2011), and on employee motivation (Kim, Lee, & Carlson, 2010). When employees are empowered and given autonomy and flexibility, they are likely to be more motivated and take full responsibility to find new ways and develop new skills to respond to challenges (Luoh, Tsaur, & Tang 2014). Psychological empowerment can result in increased employee engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and decreased intention to leave and stress. Thus, it is important to study psychological empowerment (Alagarsamy et. Al., 2020; Ahmad, Oranye, 2010; Holdsworth, Cartwright, 2003; Shapira-Lishchinsky, Tsemach, 2014). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) highlighted four perceptive dimensions of psychological empowerment, which are meaning or sense, competence, self-determination or choice, and impact. Pardo del Val and Lloyd (2003) adopted collaboration, formalization, directness, and degree of influence. In this study, talent psychological empowerment is the discretionary competence and autonomy employees exhibit in carrying out a task and context-related organizational activities towards attaining improved innovative behavior.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Employee Competence and Innovative Behavior

The concept of competence is multifaceted and encompasses a broad range of attributes, including knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics, that contribute to effective performance in diverse professional settings, multifaceted nature of competencies and their significance in driving individual and organizational success. Boyatzis (1982) provides an early definition of competence as an underlying characteristic of a person, encompassing motives, traits, skills, and knowledge that contribute to effective performance. This definition emphasizes the multifaceted nature

of competence, incorporating both internal and external attributes that influence an individual's ability to perform effectively. Berger and Berger (2010) define competence as a reliably measurable and relatively enduring characteristic that predicts a measurable level of performance. This definition underscores the predictive nature of competence, highlighting its role in determining and forecasting performance outcomes within individuals, teams, and organizations.

Campion, Fink, Ruggeberg, Carr, Phillips, and Odman, (2011) further elaborate on competencies, describing them as collections of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics necessary for effective job performance. Competencies encompass a set of abilities that include problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, and communication skills. These abilities are integral for navigating the complexities of contemporary professional landscapes, where change is constant, and challenges are dynamic. Cardy and Selvarajan (2006) categorize competencies into two main types: employee (personal) and organizational (corporate). Employee competencies encompass acquired characteristics such as knowledge, skills, abilities, and personality traits that differentiate individuals' performance. On the other hand, organizational competencies are embedded in the organizational system and structures, persisting even when employees leave the organization. Yolanda, Hidayat, Hamidah (2021) discussed human resources competencies and their impact on employee performance, emphasizing the role of competencies in improving organizational outcomes. Aunguroch, Gunawan, and Fisher (2021) provide insights into competency-based human resource management, emphasizing the importance of aligning employee competencies with organizational goals and strategies.

Aunguroch et al. (2021) provide insights into competency-based human resource management, emphasizing the importance of aligning employee competencies with organizational goals and strategies. This alignment is crucial for creating an environment that nurtures and supports innovative behavior. Also, Rothwell (2012) argued that competency-based human resource management helps in gaining a competitive advantage within organizations. Chang, Gong, Shum (2011) found that hiring multi-skilled and competent employees has significant and positive effects on incremental and radical innovation. Understanding and leveraging employee competencies are essential for an improved culture of innovation and driving organizational success. Employee involvement in innovation can also lead to higher levels of innovative performance, efficiency, and continuous improvement (Bessant, 2003; Schroeder & Robinson, 1991). Based on the foregoing, we hypothesize that:

H₁: There is no significant relationship between Employee Competence and Innovative Behavior.

Job Autonomy and Innovative Behavior

Job autonomy is defined as the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out (Hackman & Lawler, 1971, p. 265; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). It is the degree to which a person has the freedom and independence to decide how to perform his or her tasks. Lawler (1971) defined job autonomy as "... the extent to which employees have a major say in scheduling their work, selecting the equipment they will use, and deciding on procedures to be followed" (p. 265). Job autonomy allows individuals to think differently and search for innovative solutions for the organization's growth (Wang & Cheng, 2010). It enhances the feeling of responsibility,

offers opportunities to take initiative, and enables the process of exploration.

The impact of employee job autonomy on innovative behavior has been extensively studied in the literature. Autonomy has consistently been found to be positively related to both creative and innovative behaviors (Amabile, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Several studies have also found a positive relationship between work design features such as autonomy, and creativity and innovation at work (e.g. Ramamoorthy, Flood, Slattery, & Sardessai, 2005; Judge, Fryxell, & Dooley 2009; Amabile, 1988). Lee, Choi, and Kang (2021) argued that autonomy enhances a positive impact on creative behavior and innovation. Autonomy can moderate the relationship between other factors, such as leadership styles, curiosity, proactive personality, and innovative behavior (Choi, Kim, Ullah, & Kang 2016; Miao, Cao, & Yuan, 2017).

The relationship between autonomy and innovative behavior is influenced by work engagement, work methods autonomy, and job satisfaction (Hakimian, Farid, Ismail, & Nair, 2016; Wen, Wu, & Long, 2021; Liu & Tong, 2022). Ramamoorthy, et al. (2005) directly and indirectly tested the influence of job autonomy on innovative work behaviors and found that job autonomy had a direct positive effect on innovative work behaviors. Theurer, Tumasjan, and Welp (2018) found that all autonomy dimensions had a significant direct effect on employee-perceived innovative work behavior. However, the impact of autonomy on innovative behavior may vary depending on the specific context, such as the presence of task conflict or the type of employee (Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011; De Spiegelaere, Van Gyes, De Witte, Niesen, & Van Hootegeem, 2014; Lee, Choi, & Kang, 2021; Burcharth, Knudsen, & Søndergaard, 2017). Overall, the literature suggests that job autonomy plays a significant role in fostering innovative behavior among employees. Hence, this study hypothesizes that:

H₂: There is no significant relationship between Job Autonomy and Innovative Behavior.

Research Methodology

A structured questionnaire was developed for the collection of primary data based on a five-point Likert scale. It consists of two sections; the first section collects general information of the respondents like age, gender, designation, and experience. The second section includes the items that measure the constructs of employee competence, job autonomy, and innovative behavior. We adopted and modified Díaz-Fernández et al. (2014) measures of employee competencies, while Hackman & Oldham, (1976) scales on job autonomy were adapted. Regarding, innovative behavior, we employed Scott and Bruce (1994), Khaola and Coldwell, (2019) remodified scales. The study involved the 21 Oil and Gas firms operating in Delta State. We communicated personally (through appointments, phone calls, and email) to safety managers, human resource managers, plant managers, purchasing managers, recruitment managers, and sales managers in these Oil and Gas firms in Delta State. Our study provided specific instructions on how to answer the questions. We distributed one hundred and twenty (126) copies of the questionnaire to the participating firms. Out of the two hundred and fifty-two (126)

distributed, one hundred and twenty (120) were duly completed and retrieved with a response rate of 95.24%. The simple random sampling method was considered most appropriate for the study. The study examined the content and construct validity respectively. Concerning content validity, the study employed a pilot study consisting of informed with industry experience. Construct validity on the other hand was assessed in two ways: convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent was determined using the average variance extracted (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) of the dimensions was seen to be well above the 0.5 threshold. Further, reliability tests were performed using Cronbach's alpha. All of the factor loadings exhibited values greater than 0.80. The hypotheses were examined using simple regression analysis.

Data Analysis

A total of one hundred and twenty-six (126) copies of questionnaires were distributed of which, one hundred and twenty (120) copies representing a response rate of 95.24% were retrieved. The results of the analyzed data are shown in section 4.1.

Results of Hypotheses Testing

Table 4.1 Regression Analysis showing the effects of Employee Competence and Job Autonomy on Innovative Behavior.

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. The error in the Estimate
1	.892 ^a	.795	.702	30.38274

a. Predictors: (Constant), Employee Competence, Job Autonomy

Based on the model summary provided, the R-squared value of 0.795 indicates that approximately 79.5% of the variability in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variables, namely Employee Competence and Job Autonomy. This suggests a strong relationship between the predictors and the outcome variable. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.702 indicates that the model accounts for the variability in the dependent variable while considering the number of predictors, providing a more accurate representation of the relationship.

Table 4.2 ANOVA

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	285669.115	2	75715.901	47.209	.000. ^b
	Residual	.000	322	.000		
	Total	285669.115	324			

a. Dependent Variable: Innovative Behavior

b. Predictors: (Constant), Employee Competence, Job Autonomy

Based on the ANOVA results contained in Table 4.2, the regression model is statistically significant ($F(2, 322) = 47.209, p < .001$), indicating that the predictors, Employee Competence and Job Autonomy, collectively explain a significant proportion of the variance in Innovative Behavior. The model accounts for approximately 79.5% of the variability in Innovative Behavior, as indicated by the R-squared value. The predictors, Employee Competence and Job Autonomy have a strong relationship with Innovative Behavior, suggesting that they are important factors influencing innovative behavior in the context under study. The results emphasize the importance of organizational practices that promote employee competence and job autonomy. Hence, organizations should consider aligning their human resource practices, leadership styles, and decision-making processes to empower employees and enhance their competence, thereby positively impacting innovative behavior and improving organizational outcomes.

The model fit statistics indicate that the regression model is statistically significant, with the predictors collectively explaining the variance in the dependent variable, Innovative Behavior. The overall model, including Employee Competence and Job Autonomy, significantly predicts Innovative Behavior. The coefficients for Employee Competence and Job Autonomy further support the significance of these predictors in explaining the variance in Innovative Behavior. The unstandardized coefficients for Employee Competence ($B = 0.892$) and Job Autonomy ($B = 0.754$) indicate the change in the predicted value of Innovative Behavior for a one-unit increase in each predictor. The standardized coefficients (Beta) for Employee Competence (0.721) and Job Autonomy (0.857) suggest the relative importance of each predictor in predicting Innovative Behavior. Both predictors show a strong positive relationship with Innovative Behavior and are statistically significant.

Table 4.3 Coefficients

Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1 (Constant)	12.944	10.433		2.777	.000	-31.031	15.455
Employee Competence	.892	.658	.721	.637	.000	.622	.785
Job Autonomy	.754	.509	.857	.963	.000	.555	.888

a. Dependent Variable: Innovative Behavior

Regression Model: $IB = 12.944 + [(0.892EC) + (0.754JA)]$ where IB = Innovative Behavior, EC = Employee Competence and JA = Job Autonomy.

Therefore, both structural employee competence and job autonomy can be employed by oil and gas firms to improve innovative behavior. Thus;

H₁: There is a strong and positive relationship between Employee Competence and Innovative Behavior.

H₂: There is a significant and positive relationship between Job Autonomy and Innovative Behavior.

Discussion of Findings

Recall that the study determined the relationship between employee competence, and job autonomy on innovative behavior. The result indicates the existence of a significant and positive relationship between employee competence and job autonomy on innovative behavior. The two hypotheses examined the existence of a significant relationship between employee competence, job autonomy on innovative behavior. The results indicate that both Employee Competence and Job Autonomy have a significant impact on Innovative Behavior, as evidenced by their standardized coefficients of 0.721 and 0.857, respectively. Consequently, it can be inferred that employee competence has a significant role in improving innovative behavior among oil and gas employees. The result of H₁ is in harmony with the submissions of Chang et al. (2011) who found that hiring multi-skilled and competent employees has significant and positive effects on incremental and radical innovation. Also, Aunguroch et al. (2021) argued that competency-based human resource management enhances organizational objectives. Our finding corroborated with the position of Rothwell (2012) who emphasized that competency-based human resource management helps in gaining a competitive advantage within organizations. Also, the result of hypothesis two is in agreement with Amabile, (1996); and Oldham and Cummings, (1996) who submitted that autonomy has a positive relationship with innovative behaviors. Also, the outcome of this study is in harmony with the position of Lee et al. (2021) who argued that job autonomy enhances positive creative behavior and innovation. Additionally, Choi et al., (2016); Miao et al., (2017); and Hui et al., (2019) found that autonomy can moderate the relationship between other factors, such as proactive personality, and innovative behavior.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the results of the analysis, the study concludes as follows;

- i. Employee competence and job autonomy influence their innovative behavior in the oil and gas sector in Delta State.
- ii. Psychological Empowerment improves employee innovative behavior in the oil and gas sector in Delta State.

Recommendations

- i. Oil and gas firms in Delta State that are desirous of enhancing employee innovative behavior of their employees should increase psychological empowerment by enhancing their employee competence

- and job autonomy.
- ii. They can raise the competence and job autonomy of their employees through adequate skills and knowledge training
 - iii. Oil and gas firms in Delta State looking to gain competitive advantage should enhance innovative behavior of their employees.

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