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Role of Human Resource Strategies on Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage within Telecommunication Sector in Kenya

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Abstract:

Sustained firm competitive advantage is one of the important objectives for an establishment of long-term survival in any business. This can be achieved by human resource strategies aligned to business strategies which in turn result in a sustained firm competitive advantage. The firm's success depends on the collaboration of human resource strategies with business strategies. This paper aims to review current literature and contributes a set of empirical evidence that relates human resource strategies and sustained firm competitive advantage which affects the success of telecommunication firms in Kenya. Pragmatism philosophical paradigm and explanatory survey research design were utilized. Target population of 116 registered telecommunication firms was considered, out of which a sample of 90 Chief Executive Officers obtained using Yamane's sample size formula representing the firms selected by simple random sampling technique. Questionnaires were administered to these CEOs. Data collected was analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The findings indicated significant positive relationship between resourcing strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage, between human resource development strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage, between reward strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage and between employee relations strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage. Similarly, the overall test of significance with F-test confirmed a high significant effect of human resource strategies on sustained firm competitive advantage. It was concluded by the findings the extension use of resource-based view theory and theory of competitive advantage. Subsequently, it contributed towards enriching the literature of human resource strategies and sustained firm competitive advantage. The findings clarified that human resource practitioners should align human resource strategies to achieve sustained competitive advantage of firms.

Keywords: Human resource strategies, Business strategies, sustained firm competitive advantage, Resource-based view theory and Theory of competitive advantage

1. Introduction

Human resource strategies (HRS) set out what the organization intends to do about its human resource management policies and practices and how they should be integrated with the business strategies. The integrated strategies are described by Dyer and Reeves (1995) to be internally consistent bundles of human resource practices which according to Peter Boxall (1996) they provided a framework of critical ends and means of the firm. Furthermore, he emphasized that HRS occur where a firm build and sustain competitive advantage (SCA) substantially through the quality of its human capital and organizational processes.

In addition, Wright *et al.* (2002) noted that HRS involves the acquisition, development, reward, relations and deployment of human resources while anticipating and responding to a large variety of market forces. It also involves anticipating and responding to the tactics of direct competitors in an effort to maintain competitive parity and incrementally building a sustained firm competitive advantage. Firm's commitment to HRS mean better performance on core tasks, more going beyond the call of duty, greater willingness to share knowledge and lower quit rates or turnover (Sun *et al.*, 2007).

Admittedly, HR strategies are people oriented, formalized and aligned with human resource management (HRM) to create a sustained firm competitive advantage. According to Heathfield (2000), HRM is the organizational function that deals with issues related to people such as compensation, hiring, performance management, organization development, safety, wellness, benefits, employee motivation, communication, administration, and training. In support, Noe *et al.* (2003) referred HRM to the policies, practices and systems that influence employees' behavior, attitudes, and performance in terms of SCA of the firm. Some studies such as Batt's (2000) supported the point that HR strategies affect competitive differentiation in services. SCA only occurs where there is a sustained source of superior profitability, despite the best efforts of rivals to imitate or outflank it (Barney, 1991).

Aligning HRS with firm resources affect its SCA as Vakola *et al.* (2007) argued that SCA is highly affected by a firm's ability to use its resources like technology, capital, and labor. Therefore, the focus is on how the firm can avail, increase and develop the competency of its members (Ozcelik & Ferman, 2006). Firm competency can be referred to as collective learning in the organization, especially how to coordinate diverse production skills and integrate multiple streams of technologies (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990).

Accordingly, if a company possesses the competence and understands how to take advantage of it, it can lead to sustained firm competitive advantages. It is important, given the growing recognition of the role of intangible resources of the firm for generating sustainable competitive advantage (Leonard, 1995).

Moreover, sustained firm competitive advantage is an organizational capability or competence to perform in one or many ways that competitors find difficult to reproduce now and in the future (Kotler, 2000). Also, Barney (1991) suggested some resources of competitive advantages namely: financial resources, physical resources, human resources, technological resources, reputation and organizational resources. Hence, competitive advantage is a relative quality benefit that organizations maintain to exceed their rivals' performance and achieve long-run success through the cost leadership, differentiation and niche strategies (Porter, 1985).

These HRS dimensions focus on and show great interest in firm success while providing services and products to meet market demand and help to achieve competitive advantage in the organization in which competitive dimensions are cost, quality, time and flexibility (Krajewski & Ritzman, 1999). In support, it is the achievement of the three main sources of competitive advantage identified by Porter (1985) to be: innovation, quality and cost leadership as expounded by the theory of competitive advantage.

The theory of competitive advantage developed by Michael E. Porter (1990) established the system of determinants which determine competitive advantage. He described the system of the determinants, to be the so-called "diamond"; these involve the factorial ones which deal with the endowment of production factors, the determinants of the demand of the markets, upstream and downstream industries, the strategy and structure of the companies in the market supported by resource-based view theory.

Moreover, resource-based view theory (RBV) is based on the assumption that firms are fundamentally heterogeneous regarding their resources and internal competencies. It deals with the strategy of how firms can exploit their internal resource base and capabilities to obtain SCA (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). The rationale for placing the RBV as the underlying foundation of business strategy and organizational model is that it is necessary to identify and develop resources and capabilities which are crucial to SCA (Schweizer, 2005). Thus; RBV theory defines the integration process between the human resource strategy and policy and the end results being SCA. It pays major attention to human resource management, that is, strategic human resource management which is determined by a firm's strategies explained by internal capabilities and core competencies (Pauwe & Boselie, 2003).

HR strategies in fostering ongoing, systemic learning in developing skills must play a large role in any successful story of sustained competitive advantage (Boxall & Purcell, 2003). The skills need to be strongly embedded in the firm's strategies and routines matched with environmental sensing and strategic planning and not solely dependent on heroic leaders, if they are to withstand imitation (Mueller, 1996). Thus, there is an important role for astutely formed HR strategies, for a blend of people-management practices and investments which helps the firm to develop innovatively and agile behavior, while not neglecting the stable harvesting of its existing operations. HR strategies are better explained by resourcing strategy, human resource development strategy, reward strategy and employee relations strategy.

Resourcing strategy ensures that the organization obtains and retains the employees it needs and employs them efficiently. Recruitment and selection processes are based on particular competencies commonly used by firms in making staffing decisions. The aims of these processes are to employ individual with the appropriate level of competencies and behavior (Ozcelik & Ferman, 2006). Subsequently, dealing with the rapidly changing and dynamic environment in order to defend its superior performance and competitive advantage, firms are always forced to face the demand of employee flexibility both internally and externally (Michie & Sheehan, 2005).

It is about matching human resources to the strategic and operational needs of the organization and ensuring the full utilization of those resources. It is concerned not only with obtaining and keeping the number and quality of staff required but also with selecting and promoting people who 'fit' the culture and the strategic requirements of the organization. The culture focuses on variables associated with strategy implementation capabilities such as the firm's ability to attract, develop, and retain required human capital (Jiang *et al.*, 2012).

The objective of HRM resourcing strategies as expressed by Keep (1989) is to obtain the right basic material in the form of a workforce endowed with the appropriate qualities, skills, knowledge and potential for future training. The aim of this strategy is, therefore to ensure that a firm achieves competitive advantage by employing more capable people than its rivals. It can and often does mean radical changes in thinking about the skills and behaviors required in the future to achieve sustainable growth and cultural change.

Human resource development strategy (HRD) is defined as a function that includes all forms of planned learning experiences and activities whose purpose is to effect changes in performance and other behavior through the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, beliefs, values and attitudes (Kyprianou & Kasket, 1998). Meanwhile, Walton (1999) asserted that HRD involves introducing, eliminating, modifying, directing and guiding processes in such a way that all individuals and teams are equipped with the skills, knowledge and competences they require to undertake current and future tasks required by the organization. As described by Harrison (2000) HRD is the development that arises from a clear vision about people's abilities, potential and operates within the overall strategic framework of the businesses. Human RD takes a broad and long-term view about how policies and practices can support the achievement of business strategies.

Strategic HRD policies are closely associated with that aspect of strategic HRM that is concerned with investing in people and developing the organization's human capital. As Keep (1989) asserted that recent studies into HRM practices have demonstrated that HR development practices can be used to achieve organizational objectives (Nankervis, 1995). In addition, Pfeffer and Veiga (1999) have emphasized that the training is an essential component of high - performance work systems because these systems rely on frontline employee skill, the initiative to identify and resolve problems, to initiate changes in work methods and to take responsibility for quality.

Reward strategy underpinned by reward philosophy expresses what the organization believes should be the basis upon which people are valued and rewarded. According to Armstrong *et al.* (2001), reward strategy is ultimately a way of thinking that you can apply to any reward issue arising in your organization to see how you can create value from it. It is linked to understanding of the needs of the organization and its employees and how they can best be satisfied. Hsi-An *et al.* (2006) emphasize that as an HRM area, compensation refers to the determination of salary and benefit. The compensation practices of the firm are important in creating, maintaining specific behavior and performance outcomes from employees.

According to Noe *et al.* (2003) wages, bonuses and other types of pay have an important influence on an employee's standard of living. This carries at least two important implications. First, pay can be a powerful motivator. An effective pay strategy can substantially promote an organization's success; conversely, a poorly conceived pay strategy can have detrimental effects. Second, the importance of pay means that employees care a great deal about the fairness of the pay process. A recurring theme is that pay programs must be explained and administered in such a way that employees understand their underlying rationale and believe it is fair. Employee relations strategies define the intentions of the organization about what needs to be done and changed in the ways in which the organization manages its relationships with employees and their trade unions. Management of resource use is also more likely to occur when management-employee relations are characterized by trust, defined as mutual confidence that neither party to the exchange will exploit the other's vulnerabilities (Barney & Hansen, 1994). The employee relations strategy may concentrate on how this can be achieved by maximizing cooperation with the unions and employees and by minimizing detrimental effects on those employees and disruption to the organization. The scope of employee relations covers, institutional relations, employee safety, health, employment security, working conditions and assistance with non-work problems.

2. Methodology

Explanatory survey research design was adopted in the study to advance the relationship among variables. This approach sought to collect data in an attempt to establish the influence of human resource strategies on the sustained firm competitive advantage. This allows for statistical inferences to be made to the broader population and permits the generalizations of findings to real life situations, thereby increasing the external validity of the study (Frankfort & Nachmias, 1996). Furthermore, surveys are helpful to learn about trends or characteristics of individual attitudes, opinions, beliefs, practices, successes or effectiveness of a program or to identify needs (Creswell, 2008).

Target population of 116 registered telecommunication firms was considered, out of which a sample of 90 Chief Executive Officers was obtained using Yamane's (1967) sample size formula representing the firms selected by simple random sampling technique. Traditionally, CEOs of the firms are taken to be the unit of analysis or source of information (Siegel, 2009). Questionnaires were then administered to these CEOs. Data collected was analyzed using multiple regression analysis.

3. Results

Hypotheses were tested using multiple linear regression analysis after correlation analysis has been performed to check the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

3.1. Correlation Analysis of Human Resource Strategies and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

Correlation analysis was carried out to test the theoretical proposition regarding the relationship between human resource strategies and sustained firm competitive advantage. There was significant positive correlation between resourcing strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage ($r = 0.854$, $P < 0.01$). The correlation of human resource development strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage was positively significant ($r = 0.869$, $P < 0.01$). The correlation of reward strategy and sustained firm competitive advantage was positively significant ($r = 0.670$, $P < 0.01$). The correlation of employee relations strategy and the sustained firm competitive advantage was positively significant ($r = 0.966$, $P < 0.01$). This shows that there is a degree of association between human resource strategies and sustained firm competitive advantage as shown in Table 1.

		SFCA	RS	HRDS	REWS	ERS
SFCA	Pearson Correlation	1	.854**	.869**	.670**	.966**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90
RS	Pearson Correlation	.854**	1	.576**	.421**	.824**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90
HRDS	Pearson Correlation	.869**	.576**	1	.638**	.836**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90
REWS	Pearson Correlation	.670**	.421**	.638**	1	.586**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	90	90	90	90	90
ERS	Pearson Correlation	.966**	.824**	.836**	.586**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	90	90	90	90	90

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1: Correlation of Human Resource Strategies and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

Notes: *Significant at $p < 0.01$, SFCA= Sustained firm competitive advantage, RS= Resourcing strategy, HRDS = Human resource development strategy, REWS= Reward strategy, ERS= Employee relations strategy.

3.2. Model Summary of Human Resource Strategies and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

Regression model summary results between human resource strategies and sustained firm competitive advantage, indicates that the four dimensions of independent variable explained 97.9% ($R^2 = 0.979$) of the variance on the sustained firm competitive advantage and they were statistically significant and positively related to sustained firm competitive advantage. The Durbin-Watson statistic for this regression was 1.803 and falls within the acceptable range which indicated that the residuals were positive and not correlated as presented in Table 2.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df 2	Sig. F Change	
1	.989	.979	.978	.119	.979	977.243	4	85	.000	1.803
a. Predictors: (Constant), Employee relations strategy, reward strategy, Resourcing strategy, human resource development strategy										
b. Dependent Variable: Sustained firm competitive advantage										

Table 2: Model Summary of Human Resource Strategies and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

3.3. ANOVA Model of Human Resource Strategies and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

ANOVA model results as indicated in model 1 shows good model fit as illustrated by the overall test of significance with F-test value of 977.243 with p-value $0.000 < 0.05$ (level of significance) was statistically highly significant (Table 3). Thus, the model was fit to predict sustained firm competitive advantage using resourcing strategy, human resource development strategy, reward strategy and Employee relations strategy.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	55.417	4	13.854	977.243	.000 ^b
	Residual	1.205	85	.014		
	Total	56.622	89			
a. Dependent Variable: Sustained firm competitive advantage						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Employee relations strategy, reward strategy, Resourcing strategy, human resource development strategy.						

Table 3: ANOVA Model of Human Resource Strategies and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

3.4. Effect of Human Resource Strategies on Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

The multiple regression results of standardized beta coefficients indicated that resourcing strategy ($\beta = 0.293$, $t = 9.778$, $P < 0.05$), human resource development strategy ($\beta = 0.251$, $t = 7.705$, $P < 0.05$) reward strategy ($\beta = 0.129$, $t = 6.227$, $P < 0.05$) and employee relations strategy ($\beta = 0.439$, $t = 9.778$, $P < 0.05$) were positive and statistically highly significant predictors of sustained firm competitive advantage. The variables had tolerance values of above 0.2 and VIF of less than 10 hence multicollinearity was not a problem as displayed in Table 4.

Model 1	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics					
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial	Part	Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	-.513	.054		-9.548	.000					
	RS	.357	.037	.293	9.778	.000	.854	.728	.155	.278	3.595
	HRDS	.344	.045	.251	7.705	.000	.869	.641	.122	.236	4.231
	REWS	.184	.030	.129	6.227	.000	.670	.560	.099	.583	1.714
	ERS	.465	.048	.439	9.778	.000	.966	.728	.155	.224	4.464
a. Dependent Variable: Sustained competitive advantage											
b. Notes: *Significant at $p < 0.05$, SFCA= Sustained firm competitive advantage, RS= Resourcing strategy, HRDS = Human resource development strategy, REWS= Reward strategy, ERS= Employee relations strategy.											

Table 4: Coefficient Analysis for Green Production and Sustained Firm Competitive Advantage

4. Discussion

Results indicated by ANOVA model 1 shows good model fit as illustrated by the overall test of significance with F-test value of 977.243 with p-value $0.000 < 0.05$ (level of significance) was statistically highly significant. In other words, resourcing strategy, human resource development strategy, reward strategy and employee relations strategy were statistically highly significant predictors of sustained firm competitive advantage. The findings concurred with (Becker *et al.*, 1997) argument that it involves the operation of rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, performance-contingent incentive compensation systems, management development

and training activities linked to the needs of the business. In addition, Karen Legge (1995) asserted that human resources are valuable and a source of competitive advantage.

From the model summary results, the four independent variables explained only 97.9% ($R^2 = 0.979$) of the variance on sustained firm competitive advantage and they were statistically significant and positively related to sustained firm competitive advantage. This indicated that the four independent variables predicted sustained firm competitive advantage. The findings were in line with Karen Legge (1995) that human resources may be tapped most effectively by mutually consistent policies that promote commitment which as a consequence, foster the willingness in employees to act flexibly in the interests of the “adaptive organization’s” pursuit of excellence. Moreover, Armstrong and Baron (2002) stated that people and their collective skills, abilities and experience, coupled with their ability to deploy these in the interests of the employing organization, are now recognized as making a significant contribution to the organizational success and as constituting a significant source of competitive advantage.

5. Conclusion

Empirical findings of this study confirmed the positive significant relationship between human resource strategies and sustained firm competitive advantage. Moreover, the study confirms the extension use of resource-based view and competitive advantage theories. Results of this study provided valuable information and guidelines that would be useful to Kenyan telecommunication firms’ policy makers and implementers, in addressing issues and designing appropriate measures or interventions on human resource strategies to impact positively sustained firm competitive advantage.

6. Recommendations

Future studies might explore what other types of human resource strategies that could lead to the sustained firm competitive advantage, in respond to contemporary issues, as a result of environmental agility.

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