

The Contribution of Trade Unions to Promotion of Employee Performance: Perspective from Officials of the Uasu Egerton University Chapter, Kenya

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Abstract

Trade unions have been reported to influence employee performance in an organization. In Kenya, the Universities' Academic Staff Union (UASU) was formed to, *inter alia*, ensure better welfare and terms of service for its members, provision of a favourable working environment, and protection of its members from harassment and firing by their employers. Since the inception of the UASU, little information is documented about its contribution to the promotion of employee performance. Through a cross-sectional survey, this study evaluated the contribution of the UASU to promotion of employee performance from the perspective of the UASU officials at Egerton University Chapter. It also examined the challenges faced by the UASU Chapter. Results indicate that the activities of the UASU promoted employee performance in the University. Broadly, the UASU positively influenced employee wage rates, morale, terms and conditions of service, employee job commitment, individual output, and employee training and development. It also positively affected union performance, and organizational layout/ work practices. Regarding challenges faced, it was evident that there were neither leadership problems nor declining membership within the Chapter. However, victimization of the officials and social factors were a challenge. Responses were neutral on political interference, recognition of the UASU by University management, employer sincerity on implementation of collective bargaining agreements and inadequacy of finances for the operation of the activities of the UASU. Generally, it is vital to engage the UASU in the activities of the University to enhance and sustain effective and quality service delivery in the University.

Keywords: Trade Unions, Employee performance, UASU, Egerton University, Kenya

1. Introduction

Trade unions have been reported to influence employee performance in an organization (Addison 2005). A trade union is supposed to contribute to employee welfare through bargains with the employer on behalf of its members. This would lead to motivated employees and, subsequently, improved performance at work (Lagat *et al.* 2014a). There is evidence that employee voice through unions makes an important contribution to workplace performance by reducing exit behaviour, including quits, absenteeism, malingering and quiet sabotage, and facilitating employee involvement (e.g., Delery *et al.* 2000; Addison 2005; Ramirez *et al.* 2007). Employee commitment to employers occurs in a cooperative industrial relations climate, with a hostile climate that leads to high commitment to unions and low commitment to management (Deery *et al.* 1994). Good industrial relations are associated with employee commitment to the organization and the union (Carson *et al.* 2006). Employee commitment to the union and the employer brings positive outcomes, which include satisfaction and morale (Moreton 1999). It is, therefore, productive for management and unions to compete for employee loyalty.

In Kenya, the Universities' Academic Staff Union (UASU) was formed in 1993 as a trade union for academic staff in all the public universities in the country, with a Chapter in every university (UASU Constitution 1993). This Union was formed to address the issue of declining academic standards, owing to poor terms and conditions of service for the academic staff. The objects of the UASU include ensuring better welfare and terms of service for its members, provision of a favourable working environment, and protection of its members from harassment and firing by their employers (UASU Constitution 2006). Since the inception of the UASU, little information is documented about its contribution to the promotion of employee performance. Lagat (2014) reported on the contribution of the UASU to employee training and career advancement while Lagat *et al.* (2014a) reported on the influence of the UASU on employee welfare and performance. Lagat *et al.* (2014b) studied the influence of UASU on effective communication and employee performance. The current study evaluated the contribution of the UASU to promotion of employee performance from the perspective of the UASU officials at the Egerton University Chapter. It also examined the challenges faced by the Chapter.

2. Research Methodology

A cross-sectional survey was undertaken at Egerton University, Njoro, Kenya, in which primary data was collected from all the seven officials of the UASU Chapter using sets of pre-tested structured and unstructured

questionnaires. Secondary data was obtained from records and documents (e.g., collective bargaining agreements, the UASU Constitutions, publications and reports) at the Union's Offices. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The respondents provided information regarding promotion of employee performance by the activities of the UASU. General statistics were used to analyze the data and results presented in tabular summaries.

3. Research Results

3.1 General Characteristics of the UASU Officials

Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the UASU officials at the Egerton University Chapter. Male officials were the majority (71.4%), with females comprising about 28.6%. The officials who were married were more (71.4%) than the singles. Most (85.7%) of the UASU officials were aged 46–55 years, with no official below 46 years or above 65 years of age. On academic qualification, approximately 71.4% of the respondents had masters degrees, with no official having qualifications below this level. All of them had served as officials for more than six years.

Table 1. The general characteristics of the UASU officials at Egerton University

Variable	Response	N	%
Gender	Male	5	71.4
	Female	2	28.6
	Total	7	100.0
Marital status	Single	2	28.6
	Married	5	71.4
	Total	7	100.0
Age (years)	46-55	6	85.7
	56-65	1	14.3
	Total	7	100.0
Academic qualification	Masters	5	71.4
	Doctorate	2	28.6
	Total	7	100.0
Duration served as an UASU official	above 6 years	7	100.0

Table 2 depicts the mean responses for the general characteristics of the UASU officials at Egerton University. The means ranged from 1.29 for gender of the respondents to 4.14 for age of the officials of the UASU.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the general characteristics of the UASU officials at Egerton University (n=7)

Parameter	Characteristics				
	Gender	Marital status	Age	Academic qualification	Duration as official
Mean	1.29	1.71	4.14	2.57	4.00
SE	0.18	0.18	0.14	0.37	0.00
SD	0.49	0.49	0.38	0.98	0.00

SE = standard error of the mean; SD = standard deviation.

3.2 The impact of the activities of the UASU Chapter on employee performance

Table 3 gives the general responses of the officials of the UASU on the impact of the activities of the UASU on employee performance at Egerton University. The Chapter officials agreed that employment terms and conditions of the employees had improved due to the services of the UASU. Correspondingly, 14.3% and 85.7% of the UASU officials agreed and strongly agreed with this view. No official disagreed or was neutral on the matter.

Table 3. General responses of the officials of the UASU on the impact of the activities of the UASU on employee performance at Egerton University

Variable	Response	N	%
Improved terms and conditions of employees	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	6	85.7
	Total	7	100.0
Improved employee commitment	Agreed	4	57.1
	Strongly agreed	3	42.9
	Total	7	100.0
Satisfaction with Union performance	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	6	85.7
	Total	7	100.0
Improved individual output	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	6	85.7
	Total	7	100.0
Improved employee training and development	Neutral	1	14.3
	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	5	71.4
	Total	7	100.0
Improved wage rates	Strongly disagreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	6	85.7
	Total	7	100.0
Improved employee morale	Agree	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	6	85.7
	Total	7	100.0
Better organizational layout and working practices	Strongly disagreed	1	14.3
	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	5	71.4
	Total	7	100.0

The Chapter officials agreed (57.1%) and strongly agreed (42.9%) that the services of the UASU had improved commitment of members to their jobs (Table 3). Satisfaction with performance of the UASU Chapter (strongly agreed, 85.7%), individual output (strongly agreed 85.7%), and employee training and development (strongly agreed, 71.4%) had also improved. Similarly, the officials agreed that the activities of the Union had improved wage rates (strongly agreed, 85.7%), employee morale (strongly agreed, 85.7%), and organizational layout/working practices (strongly agreed, 71.4%).

Table 4 depicts the mean responses of the UASU officials on the impact of the activities of the UASU on employee performance. On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), the means of the variables were all above 4.00, corroborating that these factors improved employee performance. The Chapter officials agreed that the activities of the Union had enhanced terms and conditions of service, satisfaction with performance of the Union, individual output, wage rates, employee morale, and organizational layout/working practices.

Table 4. Mean responses of the UASU officials on the impact of the activities of the UASU on employee performance at Egerton University (n=7)

Parameter	Improved/ satisfaction							
	Wage rates	Employee morale	Organizational layout/working practices	Terms and conditions	Employee commitment	Union performance	Individual output	Employee training and development
Mean	4.43	4.86	4.29	4.86	4.43	4.86	4.86	4.57
SE	0.57	0.14	0.57	0.14	0.20	0.14	0.14	0.30
SD	1.51	0.38	1.50	0.38	0.54	0.38	0.38	0.79

SE = standard error of the mean; SD = standard deviation.

3.3 The challenges facing the UASU Chapter

Table 5 presents the general responses of the UASU officials on the challenges facing the UASU Chapter while Table 6 gives the mean responses, based on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), of the UASU officials on the these challenges. Regarding existence of leadership problems within the Chapter, majority

(71.4%) of the officials strongly disagreed (mean response, 2.00) that these existed. On the question if membership was declining, 42.9% of the officials strongly disagreed (mean response, 2.14) that this was so. Cumulatively, 57.2% of the officials disagreed and strongly disagreed that membership was declining compared to 42.8% who were neutral and agreed on the same matter (Table 5).

On whether victimization of the officials by University management was experienced, most (71.4%) of the officials agreed that it was true (mean response disagreed, 4.29). The Chapter officials were divided on their members failing to cooperate with them as officials. This was indicated by a mean response of 2.86 (neutral or division). Similarly, the officials were also divided about political interference being a challenge in execution of their activities (mean response, 2.71).

Table 5: General responses of the UASU officials on the challenges facing the UASU Egerton University Chapter

Variable	Response	N	%
Union recognition by the employer	Strongly disagreed	1	14.2
	Disagreed	1	14.3
	Neutral	1	14.3
	Agreed	2	28.6
	Strongly agreed	2	28.6
	Total	7	100.0
Employer sincerity in the implementation of CBAs	Strongly disagreed	1	14.2
	Disagreed	2	28.6
	Neutral	2	28.6
	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	1	14.3
	Total	7	100.0
Inadequate finances for its operations	Strongly disagreed	1	14.3
	Neutral	2	28.6
	Agreed	3	42.9
	Strongly agreed	1	14.2
	Total	7	100.0
Declining membership	Strongly disagreed	3	42.9
	Disagreed	1	14.3
	Neutral	2	28.6
	Agreed	1	14.2
	Total	7	100.0
Victimization of the UASU officials	Agreed	5	71.4
	Strongly disagreed	2	28.6
	Total	7	100.0
Lack of cooperation from members	Disagreed	3	42.8
	Neutral	2	28.6
	Agreed	2	28.6
	Total	7	100.0
Political interference	Disagreed	3	42.9
	Neutral	3	42.9
	Agreed	1	14.2
	Total	7	100.0
Social factors affecting the UASU	Strongly disagreed	1	14.2
	Disagreed	2	28.6
	Agreed	2	28.6
	Strongly agreed	2	28.6
	Total	7	100.0
Leadership problems facing the UASU	Strongly disagreed	5	71.4
	Agreed	1	14.3
	Strongly agreed	1	14.3
	Total	7	100.0

The Chapter officials were divided (mean response, 3.43) on whether the Union was recognized by the University management (Table 6). However, there was little variation in the responses from strongly agreed to strongly disagreed on this matter (Table 5). On whether the employer was sincere in the implementation of

collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), the mean response was 2.86, indicating divisions on the issue among the officials (Table 5). Consequently, the responses failed to clearly show if the employer was really sincere in the implementation of CBAs.

The mean response (3.43) on the inadequacy of finances for the operations of the activities of the UASU indicated neutrality on the claim among the UASU officials (Table 6). Cumulatively, 42.9% of the officials were neutral and strongly disagreed on the issue while 57.1% agreed and strongly agreed (Table 5). About the effect of social factors, the mean response of the officials was 3.29, indicating neutrally on the claim. Cumulatively, 42.8% of the officials disagreed and 57.2% agreed on the existence of social problems within the Chapter (Table 5).

Table 6. Mean responses of the UASU officials on the challenges facing the UASU Egerton University Chapter (n=7)

Parameter	Employer	UASU							
	Union recognition	implementation CBAs	Inadequate finances	Declining membership	Victimization of officials	Inadequate cooperation of members	Political interference	Social factors*	Leadership problems
Mean	3.43	2.86	3.43	2.14	4.29	2.86	2.71	3.29	2.00
SE	0.57	0.51	0.48	0.46	0.18	0.34	0.29	0.61	0.66
SD	1.51	1.35	1.27	1.22	0.49	0.90	0.76	1.60	1.73

CBAs = Collective Bargaining Agreements; SE = standard error of the mean; SD = standard deviation. *For instance, nepotism, tribalism and other forms of favouritism.

4. Discussions

The current study evaluated the contribution of the UASU to promotion of employee performance from the perspective of the UASU officials at Egerton University. It also examined the challenges faced by the UASU Chapter. Males were predominant among the officials, implying females did not take being UASU officials seriously. This agrees with the findings of Smith *et al.* (2004) who found gender inequality among flower farm unions in Kenya, South Africa and Zambia. In that study, there were more male than female shop stewards on all except two farms. The study in Kenya indicated that there were more men than women elected to committees because men made better leaders and better championed the workers' rights because they did not fear questioning.

In the present study, most of the UASU officials married, indicating that the married members were responsible not only for themselves but also for their families, a situation that would increase their propensity to be union members, especially when one had children or when being the only bread earner for the family (e.g., Popoola & Oluwole 2007). Besides, most of the officials were of middle age, suggesting that relatively young and older workers were not involved in the management of the activities of the UASU Chapter. Diverse relationships between age and workers' commitment to their careers or jobs have been reported. Popoola and Oluwole (2007) established that a significant negative relationship existed between age and career commitments of workers, i.e., younger workers were more committed to their careers than older ones. Similar observations were made by Ellemers *et al.* (1998) for Dutch workers. However, other reports indicate that older workers were more likely to be committed to their careers than younger employees in any organization (e.g., Adeleke 2003; Robert 2005).

In the current study, all officials had at least a masters degree. A high level of academic qualification for union officials has been observed to be necessary in improving employee commitment to their jobs (Popoola and Oluwole 2007). All the Chapter officials had served the Union for over six years. It is believed that more years of experience boosted one's skills, knowledge and performance. However, similar studies have found a significant negative relationship between job tenure and career commitment of workers (e.g., Popoola and Oluwole (2007), implying that the less experienced the workers, the stronger is their career commitment in the jobs held. This assertion is corroborated by the findings of Irving and Meyer (1994) that on-the-job experience early in one's life plays an important role in the development of effective commitment. However, no study is available on the correlation between experience and being an official of a trade union.

The Chapter officials agreed that employment terms and conditions, and wage rates of the employees had improved and, subsequently, the workers' morale and output had increased due to the services of the UASU. Olatunji (2004) found that an attractive salary package, participative management and good working conditions, besides regular promotion influenced workers to exhibit high career commitment in any organization. Conversely, low salary growth and irregular promotions were responsible for low career commitment and productivity (Okorie 1995). Freeman and Medoff (1984) observed that unions could have a positive impact on competitiveness by encouraging management to introduce more productive work practices. The increased output per individual member may be attributed to the increased morale and commitment as a consequence of increased wage rate, training, improved working practices, and improved employment terms and conditions. The findings relating to wage rate of the members of the UASU concurred with those of Pierce (1999), who found a union wage premium of 17.4% relative to non-unionized workers.

Despite the positive responses on the impact of the services of the UASU among members of the Chapter, it is possible that some challenges existed. Responses from the UASU Chapter officials failed to clearly indicate whether some of the challenges reported really existed or not. It is important to acknowledge that because the officials were leaders, none of them would be expected to criticize his/ her actions and accept that leadership problems existed within the Chapter. According to Smith *et al.* (2004), workers in Kenyan flower farms agreed that leadership problems existed in their union and argued that committee members were too fearful of management to represent workers competently, or that if any became too active, management promoted them in order to suppress their influence.

The present study found that membership to the UASU was not declining, which is contrary to the findings of Smith *et al.* (2004) who observed that trade unions in Kenya and South Africa experienced difficulty in recruiting members due to low wage levels, which made workers reluctant or unable to pay membership fees. That study found that some of the union members believed that management was opposed to unions and, therefore, membership could lead to loss of employment. Others felt that the benefits gained did not justify the fees paid. Aspects like recognition of the UASU by the employer, employer sincerity in implementation of CBAs, lack of finances, political interference and effects of social factors like tribalism and nepotism had a neutral mean response.

The officials agreed that there was victimization of officials by University management. Adebisi (2005) reported that one could not rule out political interference in union affairs because the composition of the leadership positions was often influenced by ethno-cultural and geo-political considerations.

It is important to note that with the new constitutional dispensation in Kenya, which established The Salaries and Remuneration Commission Act, 2012 (Article 230, Constitution of Kenya 2010), the role of the UASU may, subsequently, become limited to only a few welfare matters. The functions of the Commission are, *inter alia*, to inquire into and determine the salaries and remuneration to be paid out of public funds to State officers and other public officers, keep under review all matters relating to the salaries and remuneration of public officers, and determine the cycle of salaries and remuneration review upon which Parliament may allocate adequate funds for implementation (Article 11, The Salaries and Remuneration Commission Act, 2012). The Constitution provides for the nomination to the Commission of only one person by an umbrella body representing trade unions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings in the current study indicated that the activities of the UASU promoted employee performance in the University. Broadly, the UASU positively influenced employee wage rates, morale, terms and conditions of service, employee job commitment, individual output, and employee training and development. It also positively affected union performance and organizational layout/ working practices. Regarding challenges faced, it was evident that there were neither leadership problems nor declining membership within the Chapter. However, victimization of the officials and social factors were a challenge. Responses were neutral on political interference, recognition of the UASU by University management, employer sincerity on implementation of collective bargaining agreements and inadequacy of finances for the operation of the activities of the UASU. Generally, it is vital to engage the UASU in the activities of the University to enhance and sustain effective and quality service delivery in the University. However, the University management should ensure that the rights of the UASU officials and those of the employees were respected and protected as per existing labour laws to avoid undue victimization. There is also need to re-align the activities of the UASU to the new constitutional dispensation of Kenya.

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