

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM ABIA STATE CIVIL SERVICE

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Abstract: Public administration was among the several areas whose organizational effectiveness was severely impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic. With an emphasis on important topics including job productivity, budgetary restrictions, digital transformation, employee well-being, and government reaction tactics, this research investigates the effects of COVID-19 on the Abia State Civil Service. Data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with civil workers from several ministries using a qualitative research methodology. Contingency Theory serves as the theoretical framework and aids in explaining the difficulties and organizational reactions seen throughout the crisis. According to the findings, the pandemic caused irregular application of remote work regulations, decreased work productivity, and delays in file processing and service delivery. Financially, budget cuts and salary delays for many federal personnel had an impact on productivity and general morale. Resistance to IT adoption, especially among senior workers, and technology shortcomings were exposed by the forced shift to digital operations. The study also emphasizes the psychological toll that job uncertainty and a lack of government assistance have on workers, as seen by elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. Bureaucratic rigidity, poor crisis planning, and insufficient digital infrastructure hampered the overall response, even though certain ministries showed flexibility through digital solutions and hybrid work models.

Keywords: Financial limitations; Digital transformation; Employee well-being; Organizational performance; COVID-19

1 INTRODUCTION

Global economies and organizations faced an unprecedented challenge as a result of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak. Governments imposed rigorous confinement measures, such as travel bans, lockdowns, and requirements for remote work, which profoundly changed organizational performance and workplace dynamics [1]. These interruptions did not spare public sector organizations, such as the civil service, which had to adjust to new operational paradigms while continuing to provide services. During the epidemic, the Abia State Civil Service in Nigeria faced tremendous difficulties maintaining administrative effectiveness and productivity.

Organizational performance is widely described as the capacity of an organization to fulfill its goals and objectives efficiently and effectively [2]. Performance metrics in the public sector often include service delivery, personnel productivity, financial sustainability, and overall institutional effectiveness [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, caused to interruptions in these sectors because to reduced staff capacity, budget restrictions, and technology issues connected with distant operations [4]. In Abia State, the public service suffered delays in policy execution, lower income inflows, and problems in coordinating interdepartmental operations

Previous structural flaws in Nigeria's public sector, such as a lack of digital infrastructure, ineffective bureaucracy, and a lack of money, made the effect of COVID-19 on organizational performance worse [5]. While the economic slowdown brought on by the pandemic further taxed government resources, the shift to remote labor revealed deficiencies in digital literacy among governmental personnel [6]. To maintain continuity in public administration and governance, these issues necessitated strategic innovations and policy changes. With an emphasis on important organizational performance metrics including productivity, efficiency, financial sustainability, and employee engagement, this research aims to investigate how COVID-19 has affected the Abia State Civil Service's performance. The study will add to the larger conversation on crisis management and organizational resilience in the public sector by examining empirical data from the civil service. Additionally, it will offer policy suggestions for improving government institutions' flexibility and efficacy in the event of future crises

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Organizational Performance

The effectiveness and efficiency with which an organization accomplishes its goals is referred to as organizational performance. Financial performance, worker productivity, service delivery, and overall operational efficiency are frequently used to evaluate it (Richard et al., 2009). In the public sector, governance results, resource use, and service quality are frequently used to assess performance (Boyne, 2010). These performance indicators were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which called for the implementation of adaptive solutions for organizational resilience [8]

2.2 COVID-19's Impact on Organizations

Like all past world catastrophes, the COVID-19 epidemic affects every facet of existence, including corporate operations. Such occurrences produce shocks that impair corporate operations worldwide and, in the worst cases, result in company collapse [9]. Scholarly interest in determining the degree to which company performance has been influenced has grown as a result of business activity's impact on both national and international economies. To assist lessen the harmful consequences of this epidemic, all governments and academics should logically focus on developing appropriate and durable policy and strategic solutions. However, it is necessary to first assess the degree and different ways that business operations and performance have been impacted in order to establish such successful methods. Accordingly, researchers have discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on supply chains, the performance of the hotel sector, and the stocks of listed SMEs, family businesses, and listed organizations [10] [11]. Despite the important contributions made by these studies, research's primary function is to identify and combine trends, circumstances, and impacts in company operations in order to support efficient policymaking and decision-making. [12] started this pattern discovery process by reviewing pertinent material in a methodical manner. Despite providing new insights on the COVID-19 business-related study clusters, [13], analysis hardly delivers comprehensive and useful information on the extent, linkages, and gaps in the literature.

However, workforce productivity, financial stability, and operational efficiency were all impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions in a number of industries [14]. Organizations were compelled by the crisis to quickly adjust to new health and safety laws, remote labor, and digital transformation [15]. Civil services and other public sector organizations faced particular difficulties such lower budgetary allotments, inadequate technology, and ineffective bureaucracy [4].

The economic slowdown brought on by the pandemic, which resulted in a drop in government revenue and, as a result, budgetary restrictions for public institutions, is highlighted in a paper by [16]. Similarly, [17] stress that insufficient contingency planning and weak institutional frameworks made service delivery interruptions worse, particularly in emerging economies.

2.3 COVID-19 and the Nigerian Civil Service

The illness known as COVID-19 is sometimes called a coronavirus. In 2019, the disease is believed to have been caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). In 2019, it received its first formal recognition. Almost every element of human life has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most catastrophic worldwide health catastrophes in history [18], including the general public and public officials. The pandemic has had profound effects on the economy, politics, religion, and society in addition to posing a serious threat to public health [19]. The virus has had a significant effect on the performance of workers in Nigeria, who are in charge of providing citizens with necessary public services. In Nigeria, the public and government employees play a vital role in governance, and the efficient provision of public services depends on their performance. However, the COVID-19 epidemic has affected the workers service operations, causing to severe modifications in service delivery. In order to ensure adherence to social distancing measures intended to stop the virus's spread, the pandemic has forced the adoption of new work arrangements, including remote work.

However, poor digital infrastructure, insufficient training, and bureaucratic inertia caused the Nigerian civil service—including the Abia State Civil Service—to struggle with the shift to remote work [20]. Administrative efficiency significantly decreased, and many government personnel were ill-prepared for digital processes [21]. Budgetary restrictions also resulted in delays in the implementation of policies, projects, and wages [22] Although some states used flexible work arrangements, such as digitalized procedures and rotating office timings, the overall effect on service delivery was detrimental [23]. The epidemic made clear how urgently the public sector has to change, especially in the areas of employee welfare, digital transformation, and crisis management techniques.

2.4 Strategies for Organizational Resilience and Adaptation

Organizations used a variety of adaptation and resilience techniques to lessen the pandemic's harmful consequences. These included personnel reorganization, budgetary changes, remote work policies, and digital transformation [18]. Countries who had already made investments in digital public services and e-governance were better prepared to handle the disruptions brought on by COVID-19 in the public sector [20]. Similar initiatives were undertaken by the Abia State Civil Service, but were thwarted by issues such inadequate internet connectivity, a lack of training, and a lack of financing [15]. In order to increase resilience against future crises, there is increasing agreement that public sector organizations need to make investments in workforce training, long-term technology solutions, and financial sustainability [24].

2.5 Summary and Research Gap

The impact of COVID-19 on organizational performance across various sectors has been extensively studied in the literature, but few empirical studies specifically focus on the Nigerian civil service, especially at the state level [19]. Most studies highlight the difficulties but do not offer thorough insights into the adaptive strategies that worked or

didn't work [22]. This study attempts to close this gap by analyzing the specific impact of COVID-19 on the Abia State Civil Service, evaluating the difficulties encountered, and determining the efficacy of response measures.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Contingency Theory

The efficiency of an organization is determined by its capacity to adjust to changing circumstances, according to the Contingency Theory, which was created by Lawrence and Lorsch in 1967. This approach is especially pertinent to the COVID-19 pandemic, which compelled public service organizations to modify their work procedures, management techniques, and strategies in order to continue operating effectively in the face of interruptions [21]. The epidemic made remote work, digital service delivery, and flexible workforce management necessary for the Abia State Civil Service. However, a number of variables, including policy flexibility, leadership decision-making, and technical preparedness, affected how successful these solutions were. According to earlier studies, companies with more adaptability and emergency preparation typically fare better during crises [25].

3.2 Methodology

This study utilizes a phenomenological research design, which is ideal for investigating the experiences of public servants during the COVID-19 epidemic. Understanding people's thoughts, emotions, and responses to important events is the main goal of phenomenology [26]. Civil servants employed by Abia State's numerous ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) are among the target population. Purposive sampling is used in the study to choose individuals who have firsthand knowledge of how COVID-19 affects job performance and policy implementation, as qualitative research does not need huge sample numbers. Fifteen senior and mid-level officers from certain ministries participated in semi-structured interviews. To promote interactive conversations about COVID-19's impact on work routines, employee morale, and government initiatives, three focus groups with five members each were organized. The theme analysis method developed by [27], as used to examine data from interviews and focus group discussions.

3.3 Results

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) were used in the study to learn more about the effects of COVID-19 on the Abia State Civil Service. Based on recurrent themes in participant replies, the data are grouped into major topics.

3.3.1 Effect on service delivery and work productivity

Participants talked about how work-from-home regulations, rotating shifts, and a lack of infrastructure severely disrupted work processes, delayed approvals, and generally made things inefficient.

File processing took a few days prior to COVID-19, but with remote work and rotational schedules, approvals that usually took one week now take up to a month, (A senior officer from the Ministry of Finance observed).

According to a junior employee of the Ministry of Education,

We lacked explicit policies regarding who was expected to report for duty and at what time. On occasion, when we arrived at the office, nobody was there to sign paperwork. Everywhere was lonely and quiet and you will wait and then go back home

A lot of participants complained about the unclear work regulations during the outbreak. Due to limited access to official papers and inadequate internet connectivity, some federal personnel said that working from home made them feel unproductive. Because there were fewer employees, participants from vital service ministries (including Health and Emergency Services) felt overworked, which resulted in inefficiency and burnout.

3.3.2 Challenges with finance and budget

Government funds were pressured by the epidemic, which resulted in project budget cuts, lower allowances, and delayed salaries. According to a participant:

COVID-19 disrupted government revenue sources, forcing the state to prioritize health expenses over civil service payments," said a director in the Office of the Head of Service. Salary delays of up to three months resulted from this. Due to financial reallocations, certain training sessions and seminars had to be canceled, which made it more difficult for us to improve our abilities.

All three focus group participants attested to erratic wage payments, which compelled some to take out personal loans. For example, a junior employee attested:

When their salaries were delayed, many junior employees turned to friends and family for financial support. Some participants said that it was challenging to frequently report to work since their transportation allowances had been reduced.

3.3.3 Digital transformation and technological difficulties

Due to limited training and inadequate IT infrastructure, many federal personnel were unprepared for the move, even though COVID-19 hastened the implementation of digital technology. ICT official at the Ministry of Health indicated; Prior to COVID-19, the majority of our systems were still paper-based, according to an. The abrupt switch to digital platforms revealed several flaws. Many workers lacked even the most basic computer abilities. Some even found it difficult to participate in virtual meetings or use emails. According to the participants, training was uneven even though

some ministries had implemented Zoom and Google Forms. Physical documentation was preferred by certain officers in older age groups, who opposed the development of digital technology. We had to use our own phones and mobile data for online meetings, which was costly and annoying, according to a junior officer.

3.3.4 Issues with employee mental health and well-being

Civil servants experienced severe psychological suffering as a result of COVID-19 because of job insecurity, health hazards, and financial strain. One employee of the health ministry revealed: "On certain days, I arrived at work feeling nervous since coworkers had tested positive for COVID-19, but we lacked the appropriate safety gear. During the epidemic, the government lacked a formal framework for providing mental health support to its employees. Some participants experienced elevated blood pressure as a result of their financial difficulties, and others reported feeling more stressed and anxious. Some participants stated that they thought about leaving their positions but were unable to find other work. Since the government didn't implement any official counseling or employee support programs, many felt abandoned.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Work Productivity and Service Provision

The sudden shift to remote work revealed serious organizational readiness deficiencies, as seen by the observed delays in document processing and decreased operational efficiency. Participants emphasized that major workflow interruptions were caused by unclear instructions and insufficient digital infrastructure. Contingency Theory, which emphasizes that organizational efficiency depends on the capacity to adjust to external influences, is consistent with these data [28]. The results also support earlier research showing that when public sector organizations are compelled to adapt to quickly changing circumstances, they frequently encounter bureaucratic inertia and limited flexibility [29]. These problems were made worse by ineffective communication channels, which led to a greater dependence on private messaging applications like WhatsApp. This highlighted the necessity of organized digital communication platforms in government organizations.

4.2 Budgetary Issues and Financial Restraints

The study's findings on financial difficulties, such as budget cuts and salary delays, are representative of larger economic pressures brought on by the epidemic. Significant salary payment delays were noted by many respondents, which had an impact on both individual financial security and general morale and productivity. The Resource-Based View (RBV), which holds that an organization's ability to successfully manage external shocks is hampered by a lack of internal resources, especially financial capital, is supported by these findings [30]. The fact that money was diverted to emergency medical care while crucial operational requirements were neglected indicates that strategic financial planning and income source diversification are crucial for maintaining public service performance in times of crisis.

4.3 Technical Gaps and Digital Transformation

The survey found that many federal personnel were unprepared to manage the shift, even though there was a faster push towards digitization. Effective remote work was severely impeded by top officials' reluctance to digital adoption, a lack of IT infrastructure, and poor training. Given that companies must modify their internal procedures and resources to satisfy external demands, this conclusion supports contingency theory [29]. Furthermore, the difficulties are consistent with previous research showing that ingrained bureaucratic procedures and a lack of technological investment frequently obstruct the public sector's digital transformation [24]. The necessity for a unified approach to modernize public administration is further highlighted by the disparate use of digital technologies within ministries.

4.4 Issues with Employee Mental Health and Well-Being

A crucial component of the study is the significant psychological suffering that federal officials endure, which is typified by elevated stress, worry, and even a decline in their health. Many employees were forced to rely on unofficial networks for coping since there were no professional mental health support services. Although these networks were sometimes helpful, they did not address the systemic nature of the pressures involved. Job uncertainty and a lack of support have been associated to worse employee morale and productivity, which is consistent with research on workplace mental health during the pandemic [1]. In addition to impairing individual performance, the lack of official procedures for employee wellbeing also presents long-term threats to the efficacy and stability of the organization.

4.5 Strategies for Government Reaction and Adaptation

The answers from various ministries vary, with some embracing digital solutions and hybrid work models more successfully than others. This illustrates the difficulties of uneven policy execution as well as the possibility for flexibility. Operational discrepancies resulted from the general absence of a cohesive strategy, even though certain departments were able to establish rotating work schedules and incomplete digital monitoring systems. This discrepancy supports Institutional Theory, which holds that during times of rapid transition, organizations frequently find it difficult

to get beyond structural and regulatory obstacles [29] [30]. According to the findings, strengthening organizational resilience in the face of upcoming crises requires proactive leadership and a well-coordinated policy framework.

4.6 Policy and Practice Implications

- The study's overall conclusions highlight a number of important implications:
Digital Infrastructure Investment: To enhance interdepartmental communication and enable seamless shifts to remote work, a strong, government-wide digital platform is necessary.
- Strategic Financial Planning: The negative consequences of economic downturns can be lessened by ensuring financial resilience through emergency savings and a variety of revenue sources.
- Improved Employee assistance: Establishing official programs for employee assistance and mental health is essential to preserving staff stability in times of crisis.
- The implementation of a unified policy would lessen operational discrepancies by creating a coordinated crisis response strategy that harmonizes digital transformation and hybrid work models across all ministries.

5 CONCLUSION

The Abia State Civil Service has been severely impacted by COVID-19, which has had an influence on government reaction plans, staff well-being, technology adaptation, financial stability, and job productivity. The results of focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews show that uneven policy implementation, lack of readiness for remote work, and service delivery delays all substantially impacted organizational performance. Financial limits, such as budget reallocations and salary delays, also presented significant difficulties for public workers, while technological constraints and opposition to digital transformation revealed flaws in the architecture of the government.

Due to employment instability and a lack of formal support systems, the pandemic also made mental health problems worse, with many workers enduring stress, worry, and uncertainty. Some ministries battled with bureaucratic lethargy and inconsistent leadership, while others successfully responded through digital adoption and hybrid work models. Theoretically, contingency theory emphasizes how crucial organizational response flexibility is. Overall, the Abia State Civil Service showed considerable resilience, but its reaction to the pandemic was less successful due to a lack of digital infrastructure, integrated policies, and staff welfare initiatives.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following suggestions are put forth to increase the Abia State Civil Service's adaptability and effectiveness in upcoming emergencies:

- To improve government workers' capacity for productive remote work, invest in digital tools, software, and training initiatives.
- Create an emergency fund for public sector employees to avoid pay delays in times of economic downturn.
- Create well-organized regulations for remote work that include precise attendance guidelines, communication procedures, and systems for monitoring performance.
- Establish a system of mental health assistance for federal servants that includes wellness initiatives and counseling services.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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