

RESEARCH

Strategic employee safety at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka: desideratum for COVID-19 pandemic

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The study focused on strategic employee safety at the University of Nigeria, in response to coronavirus ailment 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Data for the study were drawn from direct observation, questionnaires, and secondary sources. The study's sampled population consisted of selected 147 respondents. The qualitative data obtained were analyzed using the frequency and percentages. The study revealed that the most common employee safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic was the provision of sanitizing hand rub dispensers and the display of posters promoting information on COVID-19 pandemic. The study recommended among others that academic and administrative staff should ensure their own safety by staying abreast of guidance from government and health agencies on how to reduce person-to-person contact because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, employee, Maslow's Needs Theory's, Nigeria, safety

1. Introduction

To safeguard the health and welfare of the workers during a potential pandemic of a new infectious illness like coronavirus ailment 2019 (COVID-19), strategic employee safety is absolutely essential. The respiratory ailment COVID-19, brought on by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), is described by the U.S. Department of Labor (1). From China, it has spread to numerous other nations, including Nigeria. The outbreak was started, according to the World Health Organization (2), in December 2019 in Wuhan, a city in China's Hubei region. With more than half of all verified cases of COVID-19 in China, Wuhan was particularly heavily struck. The current new corona virus illness 2019 (COVID-19) has been classified by WHO as a global pandemic as of January 30, 2020. The COVID-19 according to World Health Organization (2) has spread to more than 200 across the planet of the earth.

The first cases of COVID-19 in Nigeria were identified on February 27, 2020 in Lagos, when an Italian national who had traveled to the country was diagnosed. This Italian national had traveled from northern Italy 2 days earlier to arrive at Murtala Mohammed International Airport in Lagos. He then traveled from Lagos to Ogun State in western Nigeria, where he fell ill and was immediately quarantined and receiving treatment for mild COVID-19 symptoms in a hospital in Lagos. National Emergency Operations Centres (NEOC) decided to find his contacts after discovering the situation. According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (3), by Sunday, April 5, 2020, when this research was conducted, there were 232 confirmed cases in 14 states (Lagos 120, FCT 47, Osun 20, Oyo 9, Edo 2, Bauchi 6, Akwa-Ibom 5, Kaduna 5, Ogun 4, Enugu 2, Ekiti 1, Rivers 1, Banue 1, Ondo 1); 33 cases were discharged, 194 were receiving care, and there were five deaths from COVID-19 in Nigeria.

Both the Federal Government and State Government of Nigeria adopted aggressive actions that any responsive

government can take to reduce the danger of workers' exposure to SARS-CoV-2 in order to lessen the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the citizens. This response strategy prompted the National Universities Commission (NUC) to issue a directive ordering the closure of all colleges and universities nationwide starting on March 23, 2020 for 1 month. The Commission reportedly stated that it is part of the strategic efforts adopted to stop the virus's spread (4).

Accordingly, the management of the University of Nigeria complied with the Federal Government's order to close the university in order to maintain the required safe distance and to maintain proper hygiene, which included routine hand washing and the regular use of hand sanitizers. This always suggests that employee safety should come first. Employers should maintain a safe working environment where employees' safety comes first, whether they are academic or administrative staff. Therefore, maintaining worker safety is crucial for every tertiary institution's survival. Given the preceding, it should be clear that the University management is responsible for preventing health and safety risks that could result from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reduce the likelihood that any of its employees will come into contact with the virus. Finding out how management at the University of Nigeria has handled the COVID-19 pandemic danger on all of the university's campuses is necessary given the significance of employee safety at work.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, management is currently faced with significant issues related to employee safety. The major focus of intensive research work in recent times is to ascertain the level of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic across the globe and Nigeria in particular. The paramount concern of every University as a research institution is to know how best to implement its safety policies and accomplish its strategic intent in terms of its mission and vision.

Viewed from the emergence of the pathogen identified as coronavirus and both the modes of transmission and the pathogenicity, the social and economic impact of the disease has been a major concern to every living soul. For the University community, it has been a hard time, especially for employees who have been on safe distance compliance, coupled with the non-payment of February and March salaries of academic staff in Federal Universities. Besides the current uncertainties and anxieties occasioned by the monumental health crisis of COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has no doubt caused massive disruption of student learning programs and institutional operations. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an existential threat, potentially resulting in closure of other economic activities on campus.

Despite the existing outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria since February 27, 2020, there is very little solid

evidence on any response team to develop school-wide plans to urgently tackle the situation within the university community. Safety equipment has not been evidence to protect employees who are still working from the novel coronavirus. It is disappointing and disturbing that staff safety often seems to be neglected until a crisis occurs and people get sick or die (5). In order to identify appropriate solutions for achieving a secure and safe workplace, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 epidemic, this paper examines how employee safety is managed at the University of Nigeria. To this effect, the following research questions are raised to guide the study:

1. What is the safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the needs for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University community?

1.2. Objectives of the study

This study's main goal is to evaluate staff safety at the University of Nigeria. The investigation will further determine how the university administration has strategically addressed these issues in light of the current doubts and concerns caused by the massive health catastrophe of the COVID-19 epidemic. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Ascertain the need for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University community.

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic employee safety

In the literature of social science, the concept of strategy has drawn more and more attention. According to the foremost expert on strategy, Porter (6), strategy is about securing a competitive advantage by standing out from the competition. This includes providing customers with a distinctive value addition and having a clear, actionable vision of how to take a distinctive position within the institution, such as the University of Nigeria does within the university system. Rumelt (7) divided strategy into two categories. Some people confuse strategy with planning. In accordance with this viewpoint, data are acquired, sorted, and analyzed; forecasts are generated; senior managers

consider the planning department's work; and they choose the best course of action for the firm. This type of technique is top-down. Others consider strategy as being less organized and more focused on the management process. The establishment of a management system that will enable the business to respond to a situation that is essentially unknown, unpredictable, and not amenable to planning, according to the second perspective, is the key strategic issue. This analysis will take the later viewpoint into account. This approach emphasizes quick thinking and adaptation to assist the university administration function at its best in a quickly changing environment that is principally characterized by uncertainties and concerns brought on by the significant public health tragedy of the COVID-19 epidemic. In the instance of the University of Nigeria, strategic employee safety focuses on ensuring the welfare, health, and safety of those who are employed or working. The protection goes even farther to include family members, employers, clients, suppliers, nearby towns, and other members of the public (8). It is the responsibility of the University management to formulate strategies that enhance the chances of gaining and sustaining the war against COVID-19 within the domain. The strategic objectives of the management should be on how to establish vital support to employee safety. Therefore, strategic thinking in this direction to ensure employee safety is second to none in terms of agenda for action.

One of an organization's most important resources and most valuable assets is its workforce. According to Sequeira and Dhriti (9), the type and volume of work that employees complete directly affect an organization's productivity. Therefore, a must for any organization's growth and success is safeguarding the safety of its employees. Safety is the condition of a "stable state" of an organization or place doing what is supposed to be done (10). Safety is a normative concept that encompasses all types and sizes or kinds of organizations, locations, or functions. It complies with definitions of what is expected and appropriate in that scenario.

One of the legal responsibilities imposed on businesses is to provide a safe workplace for workers. Briefly stated, key legal instruments created to protect the health and safety of Nigerian workers are the Factories' Act of 2004 and the workers' compensation legislation from 1987. In addition to this, the Nigerian Institute of Safety Professionals and the Federal Ministry of Labor and Productivity both perform oversight. According to the literature, businesses should place less emphasis on equipment design and maintenance, but safety training procedures are the most important way to ensure staff safety (11). As it relates to the COVID-19 epidemic, safety measures should involve efforts to promote safety awareness and compliance. As a result, if safety policies and rules that direct employees at work are substantially followed, safety management will be successful (12). Only when employees internalize and put into practice safety rules

and regulations are safety measures successful. However, it might be challenging to quantify the direct effects of safety management practices on employee well-being, and it has been determined that employee safety procedures enhance psychological health of workers by moderating job satisfaction and quality of life (13).

Safety requirements are taken into account for both psychological and physical safety (14). According to research, employee safety ranks below job security, benefits, and remuneration as the fourth most crucial element in any public or private firm (15). Out of the top four needs, three were concerned with security or safety. Instability in one's personal equilibrium and stagnation result from not being able to satisfy these requirements in the order of importance. Employees who are not safe suffer from low motivation, unhappiness, and ultimately poor well-being (16).

2.2. COVID-19: Global review

Since coronaviruses are zoonotic, they typically spread from people to animals. The 2019 coronavirus illness (COVID-19), which has not before been discovered in humans, is a sickness brought on by a new strain of coronaviruses, according to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (3). According to <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/2019-ncov-factsheet.pdf>, some coronaviruses can spread from person to person, typically following close contact with an infected patient, such as in a home or medical facility.

While the majority of the initial transmission for this coronavirus illness (COVID-19) appeared to be zoonotic, the most frequent route of transmission at present is person-to-person. World Health Organization (2) said that as of April 5, 2020, when the study was done, there were 1,276,302 confirmed cases worldwide, 69,526 death cases, and 243,385 recovered cases. However, Europe had become the worst affected region, with Italy and Spain particularly hard hit.

2.3. Sources of employee safety threat to COVID-19 pandemic: an overview

The basic sources that every employee may be exposed to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, at work are described in this section.

1. Touching Contaminated Office Appliance

Most likely, person-to-person contact will be where the virus spreads. When infected individuals cough, sneeze, or talk, droplets of the coronavirus are produced. These droplets can fall into surrounding people's mouths or nostrils or be inhaled into their lungs (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>).

Droplets of contaminated fluid are expelled when a person with COVID-19 coughs or exhales. The majority of these drops fall on nearby office equipment like desks, tables, and phone booths. People can contact COVID-19 by touching infected surfaces or objects and then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth. If they stand less than one meter away from someone who has COVID-19, they can contact it by breathing in droplets that person has spit out or inhaled. To put it another way, COVID-19 spreads similar to the flu. Most COVID-19-affected people only have minor symptoms and recover. Some people, however, suffer from more severe illnesses and might need medical care. Major illness is at higher risk in those over 40 than in people under 40 due to age. Serious illnesses are also more likely to affect persons with compromised immune systems, diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease (2).

1. During Meetings and Events

In any public sector, there is an opportunity to get in touch with COVID-19 when planning meetings and activities. Meeting and event planners must consider the possible risk from COVID-19 because there is a chance that attendees could unintentionally introduce the COVID-19 virus to the meeting or event. Unknowingly, COVID-19 may have been exposed to others. Even though COVID-19 is a benign illness for the majority of people, it can get very bad for a few. Every fifth person who contracts COVID-19 requires hospital care (2).

2.4. Theoretical consideration

Although several theories are recommended, Maslow's Needs Theory is thought to be the most suited. Abraham Maslow predicted Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in 1943. Abraham Harold Maslow, according to Gordon (17), put forth a hypothesis outlining five hierarchical wants, including bodily, safety, love, esteem, and actualization, which may be used to explain how well a business and its personnel function. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states that one does not experience the second need until the first need's requirements have been met, the third need until the second need has been met, and so on. His notion may be found in the field of motivation, which according to him is a result of an unmet desire. In light of this, if unmet requirements are what drive motivation, management should be aware of which needs are most crucial for specific employees. Abraham Maslow created a theory in this regard where basic, low-level wants like safety and physiological demands must be met before higher-level needs like self-fulfillment are pursued. When a need in this hierarchy is largely met, it ceases to motivate, and the subsequent higher need fills the void.

The second section of this theory, which addresses the requirement for safety, is the section that applies to this study.

Bottom line: According to this need hypothesis, in order to function as social beings, humans must feel comfortable in their environment and be free from any threat of attack by aggressors at work and at home. All these provide evidence for Maslow's Needs Theory's applicability in understanding the role of employee safety at the University of Nigeria.

3. Methodology

This article is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through questionnaires and direct observation. Moreover, these primary instruments were administered to the academic and administrative staff of the University of Nigeria. Secondary data were drawn from text books, journal articles, government publications, especially from WHO and NCDC, and other documents sourced from the print media.

3.1. Brief history of the University of Nigeria

The Federal Government of Nigeria founded the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), in 1955. The first indigenous University in Nigeria is situated in Nsukka, Enugu State. Nigeria UNN is the first self-governing university in Nigeria and is modeled after the American educational system. The University, which has more than 20,000 students, is one of the few in Africa to provide astronomy research and courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (<https://www.thenhcf.org/partner-universities/university-of-nigeria-nsukka>).

3.2. Population of the study

The study population is 481 academic staff and 989 administrative staff, making a grand total of 1470 respondents in the University of Nigeria. The population is further illustrated in **Figure 1**.

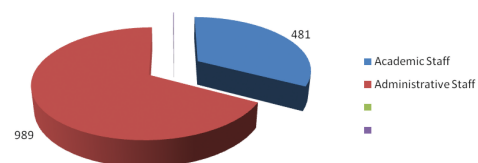


FIGURE 1 | Population of the Study. Authors compilation (2020).

3.3. Sample and sampling technique

The sample size for this study was determined using Nwana (18), where he stated that if the population is in a few

thousands, a 10% sample should be adopted. Therefore, since direct observation and questionnaire method is adopted for data collection, the sample size of 10% of the derived sample is opted for this study.

In this instance, $n = 10\% \times 1470$

$$= \frac{10 \times 1470}{100} = 147$$

Thus, 147 respondents were sampled for this study.

4. Results and discussion

The sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents showed that the respondents comprised 84 males and 63 females. Their age ranged from 21 to 51 years and above. 35 Ph.D degree holders, 53 Master's degree holders, 37 Bachelor's degree holders, and 22 others participated in the study. They had 5 to over 21 years of work experience. Men and women with sufficient work experience showed signs of maturity when their sociodemographic traits were closely examined. Their views on strategic employee safety at the University of Nigeria within this period of uncertainties and anxieties occasioned by the monumental health crisis of COVID-19 pandemic can be regarded as authoritative.

4.1. Research Question 1: Safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic

Results in **Table 1** show 13 respondents representing 8.9% of the entire sampled population, indicating that hand glove was deployed by the University management as safety equipment to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic, and 3 respondents representing 2.0%, indicating the provision of medical mask safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel of COVID-19 pandemic. 29 respondents representing 19.8% indicated the deployment of sanitizing hand rub dispensers. Meanwhile, 5 respondents representing 3.4% of the entire sampled population indicated the provision of facial protection for eyes, nose, and mouth as safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, 97 respondents representing 65.9% of the sampled population indicated the display of posters in promoting information on COVID-19 as the most common safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel of COVID-19 pandemic.

From the above observations, it can be deduced that the most common employee safety equipment deployed by

TABLE 1 | Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

S/No	Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Age (in years)	21–30	27	18.3
		31–40	51	34.7
		41–50	32	21.8
		51 and above	37	25.2
		Total	147	100 (%)
2.	Gender	Male	84	57.1
		Female	63	42.9
		Total	147	100 (%)
3.	Education Qualifications	Ph.D Degree	35	23.9
		Master's Degree	53	36.0
		Bachelor's Degree	37	25.2
		Others	22	14.9
		Total	147	100 (%)
4.	Years of Experience	5–10 years	21	14.2
		11–15 years	48	32.7
		16–20 years	45	30.7
		21 years and above	33	22.4
		Total	147	100 (%)

Authors Computation (2020).

the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic was the display of posters in promoting information on COVID-19. This was carried out by the University of Nigeria by display or pasting the bills in strategic places and office doors on campus. With the findings above, it is being noted that provision of sanitizing hand rub dispensers at the entrance of the University administrative block was another most common employee safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrates that all respondents were extremely aware of the significance of employee safety. The majority of responders specifically mentioned that the University of Nigeria encouraged workers to be safety-conscious. This shows a high level of awareness of the importance of employee safety among all the respondents. Specifically, the majority of the respondents noted that the University of Nigeria encouraged safety consciousness among the employees.

4.2. Research Question 2: What are the needs for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University community?

From **Table 2**, the various levels of needs for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University of Nigeria are identified. Update on occupational hazards and risks associated with COVID-19 was the

TABLE 2 | Summary of responses on safety equipment deployed by the University management to protect employees from the novel COVID-19 pandemic.

S/No	Statement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	Provision of hand gloves	13	8.9
2.	Provision of medical masks	3	2.0
3.	Provision of sanitizing hand rub dispensers	29	19.8
4.	Provision of facial protection for eyes, nose, and mouth	5	3.4
5.	Display of posters for promoting information on COVID-19	97	65.9
	Total	147	100%

Field Survey (2020).

TABLE 3 | Summary of responses on the needs for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University of Nigeria.

S/No	Statement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	To ensure safety at workplace	18	12.2
2.	To improve on safety policy issues	13	8.9
3.	For update on occupational hazards and risks associated with COVID-19	87	59.1
4.	To minimize occupational contact with the public and coworkers	21	14.3
5.	For self-actualization	8	5.5
	Total	147	100%

Field Survey (2020).

most highly employee safety information needed with 87 (59.1%); the next was the need for safety information on how to minimize occupational contact with the public and coworkers with 21 (14.3%). Also, **Table 3** shows that 18 respondents with 12.2% indicated the need for safety information to ensure safety at workplace. Furthermore, 13 (8.9%) respondents indicated that to improve on safety policy issue was the need for employee safety information. The least needs for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University of Nigeria were for self-actualization with 8 (5.5%) respondents. The findings imply that there was a need for current knowledge on workplace hazards and threats to employee safety against the COVID-19 pandemic inside the University of Nigeria as a result of the rise in COVID-19 cases that had been reported in the nation. All the responses mentioned some aspect of employee safety data, demonstrating that anyone at the University of Nigeria could contract COVID-19, regardless of the title or level of employment. All employees are susceptible to COVID-19, according to some respondents, but blue-collar

workers may be more so than white-collar workers or management staff.

4.3. Recommendations

On the basis of the study's findings, the following suggestions are made:

i. The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Ministry of Health and NCDC, should come up with policies to support the existence of isolation centers in each institution so that emergency cases are responded to with the urgency that they clearly deserve.

ii. The authors also recommend creation of safety committees by the University of Nigeria Governing Council on campus as an additional measure apart from safe distance, provision of sanitizing hand rub dispensers, and so on to curtail the spread of the virus.

iii. Academic and administrative staff should ensure their own safety by staying abreast of guidance from government and health agencies on how to reduce person-to-person contact because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Conclusion

The present article examined the strategic employee safety at the University of Nigeria in the face of the current uncertainties and anxieties occasioned by the monumental health crisis of COVID-19 pandemic. The study has revealed a high level of awareness of the importance of employee safety among the academic and administrative staff of various qualifications and years of experiences in the institution. However, the level of investment in the provision of facial protection for eyes, nose, and mouth, which are the most sensitive organs of the body prone to the COVID-19 pandemic, was inadequate.

The study concluded that the needs for employee safety information against the COVID-19 pandemic within the University of Nigeria contributed meaningfully to taking precautionary measures at the institution. This result indicated safety policy issues, safe distance compliance measures where necessary for effective job motivation, and optimum productivity, suggesting that its provision was the greatest aid in the prevention of COVID-19 pandemic confronting the planet of Earth and the University of Nigeria inclusive.

Declaration of interests

The authors affirm that they have no known financial or interpersonal conflicts that would have appeared to have an impact on the research described in this publication.

Author contributions

CU developed the initial draft of the manuscript, the introduction of the work and the research methodology. PE did the critical review as well as teased the overarching argument of the study, management and coordination responsibility of the research activity planning and execution. DN was equally helpful in the fieldwork and editing of the final draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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