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Evaluation of effect of person role fitness on mastery of soft skills among interns in Nakuru County Government, Kenya

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Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the effect of person role fitness on mastery of soft skills among interns in Nakuru County Government, Kenya. The curriculum that most college graduates are exposed to largely offer hard skills, but important soft skills that would make them well-prepared for the work environment are lacking. The study used a descriptive research design. The study's population consisted of 1300 interns stationed at the Nakuru County Government during the month of August. A stratified random selection technique was employed to choose a sample of 102 interns, and data was collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire. Statistical Package for Social Sciences was used to examine the data and obtain both descriptive and inferential statistics. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used as an inferential statistic to determine the direction and strength of linear associations. Simple and multiple regression analyses were employed to assess the relationship between the variables. The study indicated that person role fitness substantially affected soft skills proficiency in Nakuru County Government ($\beta = 1.139$, Sig. < 0.05). Thus, it was concluded that person role fitness is a significant factor of internship, which affects soft skills mastery among interns in the county. The study recommends that colleges operate in conjunction with the organisations or industries where the students are sent for their internship programs to ensure that the interns are well placed as per their professions in order to enhance soft skills mastery among the interns, as was evidenced by Nakuru County Government, Kenya.

Key words: Assessment criteria, competence, internship factors, person role fitness, soft skills mastery.



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INTRODUCTION

"Human resource is the most important asset of an organisation (Negruta, 2015). The competence of this resource in the workplace is partly dependent on training, with both hard and soft skills being critical." Hard skills are taught in a classroom setting, while internships play a crucial role in the mastery of soft skills. Internships are programs that engage students in tasks mainly by providing them with the necessary experience that enhances their education and mastering soft skills and hard skills in a professional area of study (Bukaliya, 2012).

According to Ismail (2018), internships are well-established in the U.S. and are becoming more common in the U.K. In the U.S., internships have become a popular way to bridge the gap between education and work. Person role fitness is set up by institutions and industries to enable soft skills mastery among interns. Internships in both the U.S. and the U.K. are seen as a powerful vehicle which enables students to master soft skills that can only be gleaned through on-the-job training. Technical skills alone are no longer adequate for graduates entering the job market (Moorthy et al., 2013).

Soft skills programs are usually not 'stand-alone' in Rwanda but instead are integrated with other kinds of learning and person role fitness tailored to the interns (Winthrop, 2016); in the context of formal education, the acquisition of academic skills (reading, writing, math and other subject areas) and technical-vocational skills (such as electrical engineering) should also enable the mastery of soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and teamwork. To achieve soft skills mastery, there is a need to have a person role fitness for the internship program. International Labor Organization (ILO) news (2019) in Dar es Salaam reported that the internship program provides a rare opportunity for institutions to actively shape the soft skills and knowledge of interns and enable them to secure jobs in the market.

According to Waiganjo and Waiganjo (2018), life skills are a variety of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that can help youth face the realities of life. The researchers noted that life

skills are vital given the dynamism of the contemporary world and the complex challenges that young people have to face. Life skills enable young people to be responsible and contribute positively to society, and employers want employees who have not only hard skills but also life skills.

According to Goleman (2011), soft skills mastery is the possession and use of non-technical skills. According to Ramlall and Ramlall (2014), soft skills consist of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, communication skills, and teamwork. Institutions of higher learning concentrate on teaching their students to master their respective areas of specialisation only and are not concerned with the mastery of important soft skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, personal communication, writing and speaking skills. The learners only specialise in areas like engineering, accounting or medicine, but they fail to master soft skills (Arat, 2014).

The curriculum that most college graduates are exposed to largely offer hard skills, but important soft skills that would make them well-prepared for the work environment are lacking. The deficiency of these soft skills among the interns creates problems in their future at the workplace since today's work environment requires highly developed soft skills due to the flattening of the organisational structure. Employers are concerned with the level and relevance of a broad set of soft skills amongst entry-level workers, and there is an increasing demand for new college graduates to have a mastery of soft skills in order for them to be ready to enter the work environment.

An internship is often the first interaction with a work environment for a student and may be the best opportunity for soft skill mastery. Literature supports that soft skills should not be overlooked and should accompany hard skills (Agarwal et al., 2018). This study seeks to investigate the mastery of teamwork, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and communication skills determined by the person role fitness of an intern. Nakuru County Government values soft skills mastery when recruiting new graduates, and

human resource managers are keen to test these soft skills during interviews. In addition, this institution is unique in the sense that it offers many opportunities to interns not only to acquire workplace functional experience but also to learn and master soft skills for a minimum period of three months.

The studies that have been done in Nakuru County and other counties in Kenya largely focus on other attributes. For example, a study by Waiganjo and Waiganjo (2018) examined the relevance of life skills education in preparing Kenyan youth for national development. A study conducted by Yanawati (2017) examined the need for implementing soft skills workshops that could be instrumental in developing and improving soft skills. Mayaka and King (2002) investigated the soft skills required by Kenya's tour-operating sector and the extent to which present training is adequate. None of these studies addressed the concerns of the present study; therefore, this study seeks to close this gap by evaluating a person's role fitness on mastery of soft skills among the interns, evidenced by the Nakuru County Government.

If interns perform well on an employment interview, their chances of employment offer increase, hence positively impacting social change. This study could be a basis for future studies and would help institutions help their students master soft skills and make them ready for future workplace experiences. It would also help educators to reform their curriculum to better ensure employability for their graduates. Moreover, the study opened an avenue for further research in this field to implement training programs effectively to attain the most desired soft skills among the graduates. The social change anticipated from having well-equipped college graduates with soft skills would be more successful professionals with better opportunities to have upward mobility and more fulfilling professions that will benefit their families and their organisations (Meeks, 2017).

The study evaluated selected internship factors on mastery of soft skills among interns, evidenced by Nakuru County Government. The county receives

an average of 1300 interns per intake, who are then distributed to the 11 Sub-counties. The study was carried out between June and October 2019. The target group was interns at Nakuru County Government who had stayed for at least two months in the internship. The researcher chose Nakuru County Government since its headquarters is in Nakuru town and also because it receives a significantly large number of interns. The study was delimited to a set of five variables. These include assessment criteria, competency, person role fitness, institutional support and soft skills mastery. The first four were the independent variables, while soft skills mastery was the dependent variable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories are created to explain, predict, and comprehend phenomena and, in several cases, to question and extend current knowledge within the limitations of crucial confining assumptions (Ngulube et al., 2015). The theoretical framework is the structure that holds or supports a research study's theory. The theoretical framework introduces and specifies the theory that clarifies why the research problem being studied exists (de Lima, 2017).

John Dewey laid significant groundwork for the theory in his book, *'Experience and Education'* (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980). Dreyfus and Dreyfus stressed the importance of experience in education; he noted that there is an intimate and necessary relation between experience and education. According to his study, experience is always a dynamic two-way process involving both trying and undergoing. He referred to this process as a transaction taking place between the individual and what, at the time, constitutes the environment. Doing is the purposeful engagement of the individual with the environment. In Dreyfus's words, doing is an attempt made to have an impact on the world. 'Undergoing', on the other hand, refers to the consequences of the experience for us.

Students engaged in internships are adapting to the work environment as a learning place versus a classroom. Students move through the experiential learning cycle or similar processes as they

participate in internships, reflect on the experience throughout the program, and measure how the experience enhances soft skills mastery. Students are pushed to consider their everyday internship experiences and overcome internal and external challenges they encounter in the real working environment. However, according to Kolb, effective learning only occurs when a learner can execute all four stages of the model.

The empirical studies that have been conducted in the past five years with respect to person role fitness were reviewed. These studies are examined in light of soft skills mastery among interns.

According to Bukaliya (2012), personal role fitness is the relevance of the internship program to the work. The work given to a student is not limited to specific tasks or assignments. It can cover anything as long as it provides opportunities for students to master some of the soft skills that are needed in the workplace (Hasbullah, 2002). However, according to Mgaya (2014), while on field attachment, each intern is given a faculty supervisor who has to monitor the intern at the place where he or she has been sent for practical experience. These visits are mainly meant to ensure that students are placed in work that is related to the area of their professions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to establish the effect of person role fitness on soft skills mastery, this study administered 102 questionnaires to interns from Nakuru County Government. After data entry, validation and cleaning, 100 questionnaires were found complete, representing a 98 per cent response rate. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a 50 per cent response rate is adequate, 60 per cent good and above 70 per cent rated very well. A 98 per cent response rate was hence considered adequate for the analysis.

To establish the influence of personal role fitness on soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government, this study asked five Likert-type questions to 100 interns to assess their perceptions of personal role fitness. The study established that the majority, 94 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed) of the interns, agreed that the

tasks performed were in line with their profession, with 4 per cent being neutral and only 2 per cent disagreeing with the statement. The majority, 95 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed), also had the ability to develop specialised technical skills for a specific job function, and only 5 per cent were neutral. Also, it was found that 87 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed) also had the ability to develop realistic ideas about the work environment, 11 per cent were neutral, one per cent being in disagreed and also 1 per cent strongly disagreed with the statement.

The study also found that interns who had the ability to seek and accept an intern work assignment accounted for 96 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed), with only 4 per cent being neutral and none disagreed with the statement. Those who could change professionally as a result of their internship program/practical training involvement were 89 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed), with 6 per cent being neutral with the statement, 3 per cent disagreed, and only 2 per cent strongly felt that they did not have the ability to change professionally as a result of their internship program/practical training involvement. According to the findings, it is clear that giving interns tasks that are in line with their profession enhanced soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government. The study concurred with a survey study undertaken by Cheng et al. (2009) at an Australian University in 2007, which found that students' ability to master soft skills in order to successfully obtain job offers is significantly and positively associated with students undertaking relevant practical experience.

Inferential statistics in the form of Pearson's product-moment correlation and simple and multiple linear regression analysis were used to test the association between person role fitness and mastery of soft skills. All tests with a p-value of < 0.05 were evaluated as statistically significant.

Correlation analysis assumes that a linear relationship between the dependent and the independent variable exists, and a correlation analysis was done to assess whether this assumption holds. Likert items measuring the

construct, personal role fitness, and soft skills mastery were scored on a Likert scale by aggregating the values for each item. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to compute the direction and strength of the linear associations since the Likert scales were continuous.

This study found that there was a significant ($r=0.290$, $p=0.003$) linear relationship between personal role fitness and soft skills mastery after joining the internship program. The findings concurred with those of Pop and Barkhuizen (2013). Institutional support was also found to be significantly ($r=0.238$, $p=0.017$) correlated with soft skills mastery after joining the internship program. These findings were in agreement with those of Kamunzyu and Ndunge (2011). However, although the direction of the relationship was positive, the correlation was small.

Regression Analysis.

A linear regression analysis was adopted to assess the extent to which a person's role fitness affected soft skill mastery after joining the internship program.

The regression was of the following form:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_i * X_i \quad \text{Where } i=1, 2, 3, 4,$$

Where X_i is a person role fitness. The regression was conducted, and the study tested the following hypothesis:

This study was guided by the following hypothesis which stated that:

H₀₁: There is no statistically significant effect of person role fitness on soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government.

This study established that a 13.6 per cent variation in soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government was explained by personal role fitness. The model was (Sig. <0.05) from the null model and thus a good fit of the data. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. Hence, the findings were in agreement with those of Pop and Barkhuizen (2013). This study also tested whether the influence of personal role fitness on soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government was moderated by control variables:

gender, internship duration, education level and age. This study established that adding the controls to the model increased the coefficient of variation by 0.045. However, this increment was insignificant (Sig. F Change >0.05); thus, the controls did not significantly affect how personal role fitness influenced soft skills mastery in Nakuru County Government. This study found that Personal Role Fitness significantly ($\beta=1.139$, Sig. <0.05) affected soft skills mastery in Nakuru County Government. The null hypothesis was thus rejected, and the study concluded that there is a statistically significant effect of personal role fitness of the internship on soft skills mastery in Nakuru County Government. A unit change in Personal Role Fitness significantly (Sig. <0.05) resulted in a 1.139 increment in soft skills mastery.

The study established that the majority, 94 per cent of the interns, agreed that the tasks performed were in line with their profession, with 4 per cent being neutral and only 2 per cent disagreeing with the statement. The majority, 95 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed), also had the ability to develop specialised technical skills for a specific job function, and only 5 per cent were neutral. Also, it was found that 87 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed) also had the ability to develop realistic ideas about the work environment, and 11 per cent were neutral, one per cent were in disagreed and also 1 per cent strongly disagreed with the statement. The study also found out that interns who had the ability to seek and accept an intern work assignment accounted for 96 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed), with only 4 per cent being neutral, and none disagreed with the statement. Those who could change professionally as a result of their internship program/practical training involvement were 89 per cent (agreed and strongly agreed), with 6 per cent being neutral with the statement, 3 per cent disagreed, and only 2 per cent strongly felt that they did not have the ability to change professionally as a result of their internship program/practical training involvement. According to the findings, it is clear that giving interns tasks that are in line with their profession enhanced soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government. The study further found out that personal role fitness significantly ($B=1.139$, Sig.

<0.05) affected soft skills mastery in Nakuru County Government. This study established that a 13.6 per cent variation in soft skills mastery among interns in Nakuru County Government was explained by personal role fitness.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Based on the results of the study, it was concluded that a unit change in personal role fitness significantly (Sig. <0.05) resulted in a 1.139 increment in soft skills mastery. It was concluded that the county placed its employees/interns as per their area of specialisation, hence enabling them to master soft skills. Thus, person role fitness was a

significant factor in an internship, which affected mastery of soft skills among interns, as evidenced by the Nakuru County Government.

Recommendation: The study recommends that college institutions should work in collaboration with the organisations or industries where the students are sent for their internship programs to ensure that the interns are well placed as per their professions (person role fitness) in order to improve soft skills mastery among the interns as it was found in Nakuru County Government, Kenya. The researcher, therefore, suggests further research on the effect of soft skills mastery on employee performance.

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