

WORK HYBRIDIZATION: SIGNIFICANCE FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING WITHIN AFRICAN WORK SYSTEMS

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Abstract

The challenge of poor social wellbeing, impedes the healthy development of individuals and groups within organisations. This paper addressed this concern through its focus on work hybridization, assessing its significance for social wellbeing within African work systems. The paper is designed as a theoretical paper, advancing a literature-based perspective on the imperatives of work hybridization in enabling workers the flexibility and relative autonomy required for them to invest not only in the organisation, but also in themselves and their relationship with family and others. The cognitive dissonance theory was adopted as the theoretical lens and foundation for the paper; emphasizing the implications of dissonance in the individual's reality and their central or underpinning values. This tenet was applied in understanding the extent to which foreign work systems, imposed on the African, impacts and affects their social behaviour and wellbeing. It was concluded that work hybridization, advances structures support flexibility features that align with the underlying communal needs and values of the African worker, thus contributing to their social needs and that way, enhancing the workers sense of placement and wellbeing.

Keywords: Social wellbeing, work hybridization, cognitive dissonance, African work systems, flexible work, communal values

INTRODUCTION

Current work systems within most African countries, are considered as borrowed and are as such foreign to the African context, significantly contrasting with inherent African values and beliefs (Brewster & Wood, 2007). Just like the governance structures imposed during the colonial era, these work systems, fail to consider core African concerns reflected in traditions, superstitions, communality, respect for elders, family connectedness and group support. In his book, the African Industrial Man, Ahiauzu (1989), described the African as one whose identity is tied to his community and the peculiarities of his ethnic group and culture. This means the worker or individual is first, African, before anything else. This position, is echoed in the studies of Horwitz (2008) who observed that the lived experiences, interpretations of the social world and narratives of the African, all differ substantially from those of other continents or context; particularly when compared on the basis of factors such as culture, social values and belief systems.

Thus, the social wellbeing of the African worker is substantially hinged on their experience of meaningful work; especially, such that encapsulates their underlying beliefs about work and furnishes their communal values. However, some African scholars (Oludayo & Omonijo, 2020; Dada, 2023) note that prevailing work designs, particularly that of the white collar (nine to five) jobs have over decades, increasingly, stripped the individual of his social placement and negatively hampered his communal as well as social development. Dada (2023) observed that there is a growing disenchantment with the white-collar job, especially amongst the millennials and the centennials. This follows the noted mechanization of workers; a process reflected in the routine, monotonous and soulless nature of most responsibilities or functions within organisations today. Faloye and Owoeye (2019) reported that there is a growing population of African workers who are currently

experiencing cognitive disassociation; having to deal with workplace realities that contrast with their underlying sense of being and expectations.

Recent studies (Ajayi, 2020; Igbinedion & Usoro, 2022), nonetheless, point to the emerging and highly dynamic role of technology systems in business operations and social relations in the 21st century. Such has not only enabled innovative strides and development in business services, but has also facilitated a more flexible approach to work. Studies (Adedeji & Akinyemi, 2021; Awala, 2024) indicate an accelerated drive in technology evolution resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This follows a more favourable disposition toward remote and hybrid work; given the noted flexibility, efficiency and competitiveness of these approaches. However, extant studies appear fixated with organisational level benefits with scant attention paid to the individual level concerns of social wellbeing, especially such linked to workers identity and the nature of their work systems. This paper expounds on the particular concern of work hybridization and its significance as well as implications for social wellbeing within African work systems. The paper is justified on the basis of its particular focus on the extent to which work hybridization occasions conditions that address the inherent communal and social values of the African worker.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The cognitive dissonance theory was proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957 (Harmon-Jones, 2017; Zentall, 2016). The theory identifies the effect of conflicting ideologies and beliefs on the behaviour and wellbeing of the individual. The theory serves as a lens in understanding the extent to which related discomfort from conflicting beliefs or expectations, can lead to actions adopted in line with reinforcing existing or observed conditions or realities. Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2011) argued that people bring along with them to the workplace, distinct assumptions about life, work and relationships. Most of these assumptions are shaped by their various culture and ethnic beliefs, while others emerge as a result of the lived experiences and encounters of the individuals. Harmon-Jones *et al.* (2015) opined that while the contrasts in beliefs may trigger deviance and also negatively impact on the performance of some individuals, others actively justify their realignment of behaviour and beliefs, adjusting through a redefinition of self and placement in their context.

The cognitive dissonance theory applies to this study in that it clarifies on how the experience of cognitive dissonance stemming from poor alignment of beliefs and values, of the African worker within related alien work systems, could hamper the social wellbeing of the individual (Kitayama *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, considerations of work hybridization for this paper, draws on the flexibility of these systems and the extent to which they support or allow for the communal and social development of the worker; especially given the workers ability to balance work with other social events and activities. The cognitive dissonance theory, is therefore considered essential as it offers a premise for understanding and predicting behaviour within structured settings as well as the extent to which modifications to such settings could contribute or improve the meaningfulness, purposefulness and self respect of the individual, thus enhancing their social wellbeing.

Work Hybridization

The hybridization of work, involves the remodelling and reframing of functions and responsibilities at the organisation, to allow for more flexibility through support for remote and on-the-go functionality (Abdulsalam & Lawal, 2020). It is the process whereby functions are modified through related restructuring or technology integration, to enable a more adaptable feature or attribute, in line with concerns such as distance, convenience and responsiveness (Akinwale *et al.*, 2022). Hybrid work is heavily reliant on technology systems; emphasizing stable networks, consistent communication, online storage systems and servers that facilitate effective file transfer, accessibility and security. Apart from the benefits of efficiency and convenience, work hybridization has been shown to positively impact on the organisations access to the global talent pool (Ahmed & Musa, 2021). Organisations that have gone hybrid, are considered more responsive. Decision-making and

functionality are such that are not limited to any geographical location or workplace, but actions are such that can be initiated given the agreed upon or necessary correspondence channels and platform (Enang, 2022).

From research (Oyeyemi, 2022; Okoye & Adebayo, 2012; Ajibade, 2019), one could argue that the advantages or benefits of work hybridization, is such that extends to all three units of analysis; that is the individual, group and organisation. At the organisational level, the focus is premised on the extent to which hybrid systems enhance the cost-effectiveness of the organisations functions and operations; in the sense that it lowers the cost of expenses such as rent, energy, transportation and others. It also enhances the organisations level of agility and capacity for prompt response to the emerging changes and realities of the environment (Eze *et al.*, 2021). At the group or functional level, team or group members are offered increased exposure, learning and skill development opportunities, especially since teams tend to more diverse owing to the global talent pool of the organisation. This is as studies (Adedeji & Akinyemi, 2021; Okoye & Adebayo, 2022) identify hybridization as necessitating dynamic teaming and a fluid adaptation to the changes in the environment.

Social Wellbeing

This paper however, is hinged on the individual level benefits of hybridization, especially, that relating to social wellbeing. Shahzadi (2021) described social wellbeing as the extent to which the individual is able to engage in, sustain and contribute meaningfully and in a healthy manner, to relationships and connections with others. Social wellbeing draws substantially on how individuals perceive themselves and their interpretation of their roles and value within any social system. Studies (Faloye & Owoeye, 2019) identify poor social wellbeing as a posing a significant barrier to the effectiveness of individuals within and outside the context of the workplace; particularly, when they are unable to fit in or find social placement within availing social circles. Within the organisation, concerns of poor social wellbeing, extend to the individual's inability to build task-based relationships with co-workers; such that require consistent communication and workplace cordiality or healthy interpersonal relations. Similarly, Banu and Sundharavadivel (2019) posited that poor social wellbeing, often expressed as a lack of trust, inferiority complex and the inability to connect with others and integrate within the work system, can be frustrating for team members, impacting negatively on coherence and cohesion in the workplace.

Kitayama et al, (2014) argued that Africans, are from a general perspective, communal by nature. This characteristic is evident and clearly expressed in their values for extended family, clan or tribal sentiments, festivals and superstitions, as well as shared responsibilities and collaboration with regard to activities such as farming, community development and welfare. These values are reinforced through traditions and practices that highlight the significance of these elements to the individual as well as group, to their sense of right and wrong, and perception of self, purpose and placement in their world. It is as a result of such, their cultures and traditions remain as potent, overarchingly imposing on group members, and a central point for reference for guidance, identification and justification of behaviour as well (Kansky & Diener, 2017). Unfortunately, there has been a growing disassociation and disconnect between the African and the values inherent to his psych, stemming from the nature of most nine to five work systems (Green, 2010; Dada, 2023). These systems have been described as soulless, isolating and with workers increasingly experiencing burnout due to their lack of social networks and their inability to engage in any meaningful social activity.

Work Hybridization and Social Wellbeing

Flexibility work systems are such that create room for recovery and for reflection (Webster & Wood, 2005). That is to say, where there is flexibility, there is support for innovation, learning, empowerment and most importantly, the freedom of identity and self-expression. Hybrid work systems emphasize on the task and work output, a pattern that deviates from traditional nine-to-five systems that focus on tasks and the physicality of organisational members (Adeleye *et al.*, 2021). Understandably, while traditional work systems through such physicality, ensure compliance

and the tangibility or evidence of functionality and operations, hybrid work systems on the other hand, anchor on worker's empowerment and freedom to be creative even in their approach to work and role performance (Ahmed & Musa, 2021). Thus, workers from the hybrid point of view are responsible for creating their own context for optimality, even if this means choosing to work from outside the designated office space. This way, workers are able to choose their context and apply themselves in ways that agree or are in harmony with their values and beliefs (Awala, 2024).

Such freedom and flexibility in terms of choice and approach to work, demonstrates a form of autonomy with regards addressing organisational tasks or responsibilities, while at the same time, engaging in social actions or frameworks that enrich and fuel the individual's sense of being, and meaning. Awala (2024) noted that with work hybridization, individuals are able to engage in activities that remind and reinforce their placement with their social circles, families and communities, rather than lose themselves to highly mechanised work systems that emphasize a clocking in and clocking out practice, that in reality, is failing in its humane features and policies. Through their ability to address their social and economic concerns, the African worker is able to maintain relative balance between self and the organisation, and between their beliefs and the expectations of the organisation. Observations from previous research (Awala, 2024; Oyeyemi, 2022; Adejare *et al.*, 2024) further point to the opportunities of creative work, facilitated by work hybridization, and the extent to which individuals, especially the African workers, are able to maintain significant social and family ties, even while meeting and effectively advancing organisational goals.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the role of work hybridization in the outcome of social wellbeing, with emphasis on African work systems. The review builds on the assumptions of the cognitive dissonance theory. Key insights offered are such that tie the social wellbeing challenges of most African workers to the disconnect they feel or experience within existing African work systems, which in the context of this paper are considered as alien or foreign to the African worker given their imported qualities and Westernized designs. The African worker by such features, unable to find meaning and purpose, given the nature, and highly structured nature of these work systems. Following its review on the dynamic and flexible nature of hybrid work systems, this paper affirms to the usefulness of such, in facilitating the necessary empowerment, freedom and support, for workers to not only maintain healthy social networks and family ties, factors considered integral to the African, but also effectively address the performance expectations and objectives of the organisation; thus, enriching the workers perception of self and placement, and as such enhancing their social wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, anchor on the position of previous studies on research that identify work hybridization as integral in enriching work experience and that way, contributing to the social wellbeing of workers, especially Africans. The recommendations are as follows:

- i. Organisations should build on structuring work systems that are tailored in line with incorporating the peculiar concerns of its context. Work systems, can be patterned to support staff work-life considerations, through the enabling of role flexibility, and scheduling; such that enhance the workers capacity to balance their professional as well as personal roles, and that way, enhancing the workers social wellbeing.
- ii. Organisations, can leverage on technology systems in developing hybrid work systems that emphasize a focus on the quality of output. Such can build on establishing effective communication systems and cost-effective forms of collaboration; such that allow for work input and functionality from varied locations convenient and undeterred by distance or geographical locations. This also contributes to the workers autonomy, and that way, enhances their social wellbeing.

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