

# 13

---

## **Problem Solving Competencies Required By Business Education Graduates for Effective Performance in Office Occupations**

---

By

C. A. ODUMA

*Department of Business Education,  
Ebonyi State University,  
Abakaliki.*

**And**

C. M. ILE

*Department of Vocational Education,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka.*

### **Abstract**

*This study was aimed at finding out the problem-solving competencies required by employers of labour of business education graduates for effective performance in office occupations with particular reference to tertiary institutions in Anambra state, Nigeria. The population for the study was 140 principal officers of seven tertiary institutions in the state. The entire population was studied. A structured questionnaire validated by five experts was used for data collection. One research question was tested using mean scores and standard deviation. The study revealed among others that business education graduates should be able to think in new ways and be open to completely different ways of viewing situations. It was recommended that the business education programme administrator should device means of assisting their students to develop problem-solving skills while in school.*

Employee's functions and activities in organizations are often beset with problems that require both decisions and actions. The quality of decisions made by employees in this regard depends on their initiatives, innovativeness and creativity. Problem-solving competence therefore, is employees' ability to be able to discover original and or new ideas that could lead to feasible alternative course of action. Problem-solving competence among employees is such a pressing organizational concern that employers of labour expect to see in prospective applicants. Norberth

(2000) noted that problem solving ability will enable and facilitate employee creativity and learning in organizations.

Organizational learning is one of the processes through which employers seek to improve employees' ability to understand and manage the organization and its task environment so that they can make decisions that continuously ensure organizational effectiveness (Jones and George, 2003). The above implies that decision-making in an organization requires that an employees possess considerable level of problem solving competence. A problems according to the university of Michigan Board of Regents (2006) is an obstacle, impediments, difficulty or challenge. It can be any situation that invites resolution. Problems are often source of perplexity, distress or vexation. They result in unpleasant and inappropriate work behaviours among workers. Such work behaviours could be lack of cooperation, failure to follows instructions, insubordination among others which result from feelings of not being listened to belief that due rights have been violated; feelings of unfair treatment and intimidation. All solution to a given problem requires decisions leading to alternative course or courses of action. Norberth (2000) noted that problem-solving competence enables employees to develop sophisticated ways of thinking. Problem-solving competence enables the employees to be creative and innovative. It spurs critical thinking geared towards solving problems. In this instance, employees will resort to putting up new behaviours and thoughts to generate solutions on how to solve or handle the problem of the moment. If employees lack this essential competence, it will be difficult or impossible for them to handle their jobs and problems either in their individual experiences or in workgroup experiences.

One of the most important obligations of an employee is to place the full extent of his /her competence at the disposal of the employer, and to perform his or her functions satisfactorily as set by employers (Devaro, 2005). Employee effective job performance defines her ability to accurately discharge her duties to specifications within the limited time frame and with minimum resources that permit positive results (Jones and George, 2003). It further described employee's ability to appropriately utilize his competence and experience in executing or carrying out his regular functions or other related functions as may be assigned to him by his superior. Employee effective job performance in an organization depends on his possession of requisite competence to perform (Jones and George, 2003).

Devaro (2005) noted that in determining employee effective job performance in an organization, performance standard and expectations must be clearly established, understood by employees and communicated by their immediate superiors. These standards and expectations may be established through letters of appointment, job profiles, inductions, standing instructions as well as routine performance requirements

of the job. Devaro further stressed that discussion of employee effective performance in organizations will be incomplete if mention is not made of employee competence. Competence is the pivot of every effective performance. For many years, employee competencies have played very significant roles in organizational performance. It has equally created significant impact on the improvement of the capabilities required for employee expansive work experiences.

Today, very many organizations try to specify minimum level of competence required for effective performance for some jobs or cluster of jobs. This is usually incorporated into position description, interview guides, recruitment criteria, employee assessment process and in fact, employee development and training opportunities. The relationship between employee competence and performance is clear. A competent employee is able to discharge all functions assigned to him that are within his level and in line with standard of performance established for such functions. As employees increase their proficiency or competency level, their performance output would generally be expected to improve (Devaro, 2005). Organizations whose employees have high competence level are such that would be expected to have superior performance. However, this is not always the case. Employees may possess the required knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours but may be performing at a lower level than expected due to various factors such as personal problems.

### **Statement of Problem**

The performance and discharge of office functions require the requisite performance competencies. Employees in organizational offices have continued to encounter problems of mistrust, favouritism, unfriendly disposition, humiliation victimization and frustration in the daily discharge of their routine office functions. Thus, both organizations and their employees have continued to encounter varied problems from time to time in the discharge of their functions. Many employees in organizations have suffered frustration and stress due to some perennial they have encountered and which they could not find solution for. Also many organizations have equally been stifled to a halt or extinction due to some problems they encountered and which they were unable to solve. In fact, problems have continued to be a common experience employees as well as among organizations. The challenging tasks therefore, for employees and organizations have continued to be how to proffer lasting solutions to problems frustrating their effective performance. In view of this, the focus of this piece is: What are the problem solving competencies required by employers of business education graduates for effective performance in office occupation.

The specific purpose of this study is to identify the problem solving competencies required by employers of business education graduates for effective performance in office occupations.

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study will be of immense relevance to business education students as well as business education graduate employees in business organizations. It will also help to widen the audience knowledge of problem solving competencies that could be applied in other life endeavors. To business education graduate employees, the findings of this study will enable them to realize and assess their problem solving competencies so as to improve or re-direct their competencies more appropriately in this regard. To the lecturers, the findings of the study will not only serve as good reference materials but will also assist them to focus their instructions appropriately in assisting the students to develop the requisite problem solving competencies. To the general public, the findings will serve as a good source material in extending the knowledge of the audience in problem solving competencies.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by one research question. What are the problems solving competencies required by employers of business education graduates for effective performance in office occupations.

### **Scope of the Study**

This study was basically on ascertaining the problem solving competencies required by employers of business education graduates in their performance of office duties and was carried out in tertiary institutions in Anambra State Nigeria using 140 principal officers of seven tertiary institutions in the state.

### **Method**

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. It involves a onetime observation of independent and non manipulative variables (Asika, 1991). In this type of research, data are usually in their natural setting without interfering with their variables (Uzoagulu, 1998). Thus, a descriptive survey was best suited for this study because it enabled the researcher to gather information from the identified population and analyze same as they exist in their natural settings. The population comprised 140 principal officers of seven tertiary institutions in Anambra State, Nigeria. No sample was taken.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers after a careful determination of the focus of this study. The questionnaire contained 14 items to aimed at gathering information on problem solving competencies and structured on a five point scale of most highly required, highly required, required, slightly required and not required. The instrument was face validated by five experts in the field of business education. The aim here was to ensure the suitability of the items of the instrument for the purpose of the study. The internal

*Problem Solving Competencies Required By Business Education Graduates for Effective Performance in Office Occupations– C. A. Oduma and C. M. Ile*

consistence and reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach Alpha reliability test which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.73. A total of 125 out of the 140 copies of the instrument distributed were retrieved and used for the purpose of data analysis. The mean and the standard deviation were used to answer the research question. In doing this, a cut-off point of 2.5 was used as a baseline score for acceptance or rejection of each of the items. Thus, any item with a mean score of 2.5 and above was accepted and considered as one of the problem solving competencies required of business education graduates for effective job performance in office occupations. Items rating below 2.5 were discarded and were not accepted as one of the competencies required of business education graduates for effective job performance. The standard deviation was used to check the dispersion of each of the means from the grand mean.

**Results**

**Mean Ratings of Respondents on Problem Solving Competencies**

S/N	ITEMS	N	X	SD	DECISION
1.	Ability to be innovative	125	3.13	0.92	Accepted
2.	Possession of varied wealth of experience in office occupation	125	3.48	0.52	Accepted
3.	Ability to take critical decisions	125	3.07	0.68	Accepted
4.	Ability to be critical in thinking	125	3.46	0.56	Accepted
5.	Possession of high sense of judgment	125	3.47	0.67	Accepted
6.	Possession of negotiating ability	125	3.34	0.76	Accepted
7.	Ability to demonstrate high level of courage in task situation	125	3.07	0.61	Accepted
8.	Ability to be objective at all times	125	3.35	0.70	Accepted
9.	Possession of mental activity and intelligence	125	3.45	0.65	Accepted
10.	Ability to analyze situation	125	3.22	0.60	Accepted
11.	Ability to distinguish between cause and effect.	125	3.43	0.65	Accepted
12.	Ability to discover alternative approaches	125	3.18	0.63	Accepted
13.	Ability to brainstorm	125	3.46	0.56	Accepted
14.	Possession of high level of memory	125	3.48	0.52	Accepted

Results of data analysis in the table above indicates that the problem solving competencies required by employers of business education graduates for effective job performance in organizations include: the ability to be innovative, possession of varied wealth of experience in office occupations, ability to be critical in thinking, possession of high sense of judgment, possession of negotiating ability, ability to be objective at all times, possession of mental acuity or intelligence, ability to distinguish between cause and effect, and the ability to brainstorm. Each of these items yielded mean responses above 2.5 used in this study as a bench mark for acceptance or rejection of any item.

The above implies that employers of labour desire business education graduates to possess problem solving competencies not only as a pre-requisite for gainful

### *The Intuition*

---

employment but to enable them achieve higher performance level in their jobs. Brown and Green (1993) noted that to be able to solve problems emanating from work or office, high school graduates should be able to possess problem solving competencies. They should be innovative and creative; they should possess the ability for critical thinking. They should be objective at all times, and possess the ability to brainstorm.

In line with this, Garreth and George (2003) reported that one of the challenges facing organizations today borders on how to secure and engage employees who possess the creative ability for problem solving. Garrth, and Gearge further noted that employees seeking for initial employment in organizations should possess the ability to distinguish between cause and effect; they should possess mental acuity or intelligence. Above all, they should possess high sense of judgment and good negotiating ability. The opinions of Brown and Green (1993) as well as Garreth and George (2003) as highlighted above are all in agreement with the findings of this study.

The implication of the above findings is that business education graduates should be able to think in new ways and be open to completely different ways of viewing situations. Problem solving competencies therefore, involve the generation of new ideas and the subsequent use of such ideas for solving problems. Problem solving competencies like creativity and innovation involves new ideas applied to conceptualizing and improving processes or ways of doing things. Objectivity and sense of judgment help develop alternative views of problems as well as seek novel ways of dealing with issues. All these demand the display of wealth of experience in all tasks or problem situations. To be able to solve problems, business education graduates should be able to think critically, analyze situations, discover alternative approaches to situations as well as possess high sense of judgment and negotiating ability. Employers therefore, desire business education graduates to possess the competence to negotiate and resolve conflicts.

Okafor (2005) noted that most organizations today are engulfed in employee disagreement, crises, and disharmony. Management as well as employees need to possess and display high level of competence in problem solving in order to maintain peace and/or restore organizational harmony. Above all, the possession of mental evaluation and judgment places employees at high premium in discharging and solving organizational problems. In line with the findings of this study, business education graduates therefore, need to possess for critical thinking. They should as well possess reasonable levels of mental acuity, intelligence, as well as innovative minds or thoughts. Thus, problems solving competence demands that prospective business education graduates should be objective and more than average intelligence coupled with mental quickness and acuity.

## **Conclusion**

The discharge of office functions is a very tasking one. Office employees require wide spectrum of experiences in order to effectively tackle the responsibilities. As problems continue to persist as well as to challenge the performance of organizations, employees, especially business education graduate employees, should adequately groomed to be able to handle the challenges in organizational offices. Problem solving competences therefore appear indispensable in this challenge. The possession of the requisite intelligence and critical thinking remains the fulcrum of the needed problem solving competences required in this regard. Business education graduates therefore, need to be adequately instructed and equipped to function effectively in the discharge of varied organizational office problems requiring initial thinking and wide spectrum of experience.

## **Recommendation**

Sequel to the findings of this study, it is recommended that;

- (i) Institutions of higher learning and business education programme administrators should devise ways of assisting their students to develop problem-solving competencies. This could be done by instituting programmes that will stimulate students' thoughts and ability to proffer solutions to varying problems of the work place.
- (ii) Some collaborative linkage should be established between the employing organizations and the schools to ensure that the right calibre of graduates are prepared for the labour force. The employing organizations should furnish the institutions with the basic requirements for employment. These requirements will then be made part of the programme content handed down to the students.

## **References**

- Backmann, J.F. & Guthke, J. (1995). Complex problem-solving intelligence and learning ability. In P.A. Frenth & F. Funke (Eds). *Complex problem solving, The European perspective* N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 177-200.
- Brown, C. & Green, D. (1992). Expectations of employers of high school leavers in Hong Kong. *Journal of Vocational education and training* 50(1) 97-111
- Devaro, S. (2005). Business graduate competencies; Employers view on importance and performance. *Asian Pacific Journal of Cooperative education* 4 (2) 16-22.
- Gareth, R.J. & George, J.M. (2003). *Issues in contemporary management*. New York; McGraw Hill, Co. Inc.

Jones, G.R. & George J.M. (2001). *Contemporary management Boston*: McGraw Hill.

Norberth, N. (2000). *Globalizing Business, Education, Culture through the internet*.  
Retrieved from [www.hrsq.cal/cashed](http://www.hrsq.cal/cashed) 2009-08-16.

Okafor, O. (2005). The Road to Competency development in vocational technical education. *Journal of Technical Teacher education*.