

Employee Soft Skills and Competitiveness of Commercial Banks in Rivers State

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Abstract

Research Purpose: In the rapidly evolving banking sector, this study explores the relationship between employee soft skills and the competitiveness of commercial banks in Rivers State. Understanding this relationship is crucial for banks aiming to enhance their strategic planning and adapt to new technologies.

Methodology: The study utilised an exploratory survey research design, focusing on 17 commercial banks in Rivers State. Data was analysed using mean, standard deviation, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to assess the reliability and relationships between variables.

Findings: The analysis revealed significant relationships: critical thinking correlates with new technology adoption, communication skills enhance workforce experience, and social intelligence improves strategic planning in commercial banks.

Conclusion: Employee soft skills, including critical thinking, communication, and social intelligence, are essential for improving the competitiveness of commercial banks. These skills enable quick adaptation to technological advancements and effective strategic planning.

Recommendations: Banks should regularly organise soft skills training, particularly in critical thinking, to enhance competitiveness. Emphasising these skills will facilitate swift adaptation to new technologies and strengthen strategic planning capabilities.

Keywords: *Employee soft skills, Commercial banks, Competitiveness, Critical thinking, Strategic planning.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

A business environment adorned with healthy competition grows at a pace faster than anticipated. Thus, it becomes pertinent to find organisations competing healthily amongst themselves. According to Wilfred *et al.* (2014), competitiveness refers to its ability to create more economic value than other competing firms. On the other hand, enterprise competitiveness refers to its ability to design (Yosuke & Shibata, 2013), produce and/or market products superior to those offered by competitors, considering the price and non-price

product qualities (Sadegh *et al*, 2015). Operationally, competitiveness is the ability of an organisation to design, produce and/or market products superior to those offered by competitors, considering the price and non-price qualities. Organisational competitiveness happens through the instrumentality of competitive processes, which are those processes which help identify the importance and current performance of core processes such as strategic management processes, human resources processes, operations management processes and technology management processes. However, organisations such as Commercial Banks that are termed to be competing favourably tend to perform outstandingly in areas such as new technology, experienced workforce and strategic planning, amongst others.

In the concept of this work, new technology is defined as any set of productive techniques which offers a significant improvement over an existing technology that has been invoked for a long time. New technology refers to any invention, discovery, improvement, or innovation, that was not available to the acquiring agency on the effective date of the contract, whether or not patentable, including, but not limited to, new processes, emerging technology, machines, and improvements to, or new applications of, existing processes, machines, manufactures and software (Salvador, 2020). Lau (2021) posited that in getting employees to speedily adopt new technology, organisations can communicate the benefits, provide adequate training, use guided learning, and ask employees for input. Experienced workforce refers to a segment of the workforce that has specialised know-how, training, and skill to carry out more complex, physical, or mental tasks than routine job functions (Hayes, 2021). As defined by the researcher, experienced workforce refers to a set of employees who possess certain skills usually attained through training and experience. The type of training varies and a skilled worker does not have to be highly educated or possess much job experience. On the last measure of competitiveness in this work (strategic planning), this study defines it as the process of determining a company's long term goals and then identifying the best approach for achieving those goals. In the View of Darbi (2012), strategic planning is a process through which managers formulate and implement strategies geared to optimising strategic goal achievement, given available environmental and internal conditions.

Studies and experience have shown that improving the skills of employees through various viable mechanisms gives diverse firm-oriented results such as organisational productivity, organisational performance, organisational resilience, etc. This implies that if management of Commercial Banks in Port Harcourt can engage their employees in soft skills such as critical thinking, communication and social intelligence, they are likely going to improve on competitiveness, amongst other variables. Operationally, this study adopts the definition of Aldulaimi (2018) to define soft skills as an individual's personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social courtesy that enable an employee to be good and compatible with fellowship. The fellowship here in the definition depicts teamwork. Soft skills are required in interpersonal relationships and in work environments and are essential for the success of organisations

(AbuJbara *et al.*, 2018). The soft skills acquired by an employee are most times not gotten through any formal education, and can be applied in diverse areas of life. The assertion of Weber *et al.* (2011) supported this, as they stated that soft skills are interpersonal and behavioural skills which are not specific to any job function and are usually not acquired through formal education.

Statement of Problem

There appears to be a decline in the way banks (especially commercial banks) are competing amongst themselves. Obviously, the absence of vibrant and healthy competition in an economy through the various sectors will only give rise to diverse negative outcomes. This makes it important for organisations, both locally and internationally to engage in activities that stir up healthy competition for productivity and growth. The organisation is said to be competitive over its rivals, if they are dynamic, able to respond to any changes with versatility, flexible (Houshang & Babakhanian, 2015), innovative and able to create economic value than its competitors (Wilfred *et al.*, 2014). Researcher's experience and observation suggest that Commercial Banks in Rivers State do not care so much about trending technologies that are creating better experiences in the workplace, as lots of them are littered with poorly performing ATM machines, Apps, and other machines, especially those they use indoors. Expertise is not also commonly found amongst employees like sometime in the past. Both the banks and their workplace seem not to care much about this appalling situation. This present condition could be as a result of the fact that Commercial Banks in this region have for a long time not considered equipping their employees with all necessary soft skills.

Another issue that has triggered this study is the seeming dearth of empirical studies bothering on the relationship between employee soft skills and competitiveness. To buttress this, Awawdeh and Alkshali (2022) investigated the impact of soft skills on organisational innovation in Levant Food Products Company (AlDurra). Taiye and Edwinah (2021) investigated the relationship between workforce diversity and organisational competitiveness of SMEs in Rivers state, Nigeria and revealed that the dimensions of workforce diversity (professional diversity and age diversity) is significantly and positively correlated with the measures of organisational competitiveness (product differentiation and innovativeness). In another study, Abdallah, (2020) investigated the relationship between soft skills and organisational creativity at the company Telecom Egypt in regions of Suez, South Sinai, and the Red Sea. Similarly, Falola *et al.* (2018) *examined* the effectiveness of training and development on employees' performance and organisation competitive advantage in the Nigerian banking industry.

However, none of the above studies was bent on finding the relationship between employee soft skills and competitiveness of Commercial Banks in Rivers State. This implies that this aspect of research effort is seriously begging for consideration. There is therefore a need to find empirical evidence on how the dimensions of employee soft skills such as critical thinking, communication and social intelligence interact with competitiveness measuring on

new technology, experienced workforce and strategic planning of Commercial Banks in Rivers State. This is the knowledge gap that needs to be closed.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to determine the relationship between employee soft skills and competitiveness of Commercial Banks in Rivers State. The objectives of the study included to:

- i. determine the extent to which critical thinking correlates with new technology in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.
- ii. determine the extent to which communication correlates with experienced workforce in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.
- iii. investigate the extent to which social intelligence correlates with strategic planning in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated for further verification in the course of the study:

H₀₁: Critical thinking does not have any relationship with new technology in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

H₀₂: Communication does not have any relationship with experienced workforce in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

H₀₃: Social intelligence does not have any relationship with strategic planning in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptual Review

Concept of Employee Soft Skills

Soft skills and employee soft skills have been defined and explained by diverse authorities. However, it is necessary to first of all understand what soft skills imply before going into divulging what employee soft skills imply. Soft skills refer to a set of characteristics and skills possessed by the official, such as the skill of working with a team, creative thinking, time management ability, and communication skill (Al-Jaraydah & Al-Aloui, 2018). Gregory (2015) defined soft skills as the experience enjoyed by human resources as a result of their participation in training and development programs, and it is the second component of human capital, which plays an important role in dealing with the changes and developments that the organisation faces at work. Reddy (2013) sees that life skills and the skills necessary to get a job, are those aspects related to tact in speaking, good and distinguished appearance, and possession of the special qualities that distinguish the job seeker among his peers. Gibb (2014) stated that soft skills improve the quality of human capital and thus enhance the

productivity of the individual, developing the effects of soft skills facilitates performance, increases mastery experience, and engages people in work-related behaviours. Soft skills are the personality traits, behaviour and attitudes that increase professionals' interactions, career prospects and job performances. According to Robles (2012), the best feature of soft skills is that the use of these skills is not limited to a specific profession. Soft skills are personal and broadly applicable.

Soft skills are required for information professionals in their daily work, dealing with clients and colleagues effectively (Junrat *et al.*, 2014). Information specialists in large organisations develop these skills to some extent through practical experience. Soft skills are an individual's personal qualities, habits, attitudes, and social courtesy that enable an employee to be good and compatible with fellowship (Aldulaimi, 2018). Abdullah (2013) sees it as a set of personal characteristics related to the field of communication with others in a comfortable work environment in which the individual can deal with cooperation and love, and the ability to express oneself, in addition to the skills of brainstorming in smooth and attractive ways. Soft skills are a term related to personality, positive traits and competencies that enhance a person's relationships, job performance, and give market value. Skills include one's ability to listen well, communicate effectively, have a positive approach, deal with conflict, take responsibility, and show respect. Building trust, working well with others, managing time effectively, accepting criticism, working under pressure, being kind to others and showing good character (Vijayalalshmi, 2016).

Having unravelled what is implied by soft skills, now unto employee soft skills. As defined by Nathan (2022), employee soft skills are qualities that enable a worker to work both independently and as part of a team, blending unique personalities and working styles to find the best possible outcomes and solutions. Unlike hard skills, which refer to specific technical competencies, soft skills cannot be definitively measured and instead are exemplified through attitude, behaviour, self-expression, and motivation. Although not quantifiable, soft skills are an essential resource that can vastly increase efficiency, team-building, and innovation in the workplace.

Dimensions of Employee Soft Skills Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has been defined in many ways by many researchers working on the subject and has continued to develop by adding different perspectives and information from various fields such as psychology and philosophy since its first introduction (Turan *et al.*, 2019). Many researchers agree that the first definitions of critical thinking were made by John Dewey (Alkhatib, 2019; Ennis, 2018; Hitchcock, 2017; Fisher, 2011). In his work, Dewey called critical thinking as reflective thinking and described it as an active, persistent and careful evaluation of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. (Dewey, 1910).

Commonly referred to as ‘troubleshooting,’ critical thinking refers to discerning, anticipating, and resolving problems (Nathan, 2022). Critical thinking shows employers that employees take the initiative to resolve problems rather than waiting for colleagues to come up with a solution. Since being an effective problem-solver boosts efficiency in the workplace, hiring managers often screen candidates for an ability to balance independent and collaborative work.

To be strong critical thinkers, employees need level-headedness and determination. Critical thinkers are often effective decision-makers, as they can prioritise tasks, evaluate complex situations, and weigh potential outcomes to proposed solutions. Since addressing problems or conflict can lead to unexpected situations, and new challenges can arise even as former ones are resolved, hiring managers can look for consistent problem-solving as a sign of well-developed critical thinking skills.

Moore saw critical thinking as part of effective thinking and decision-making and also stated that ideas and possibilities created by creative thinking should be tested and evaluated by critical thinking (Moore, 1967). Critical thinking is the ability and disposition to engage in reflective scepticism. Royalty stated that the acceptability of this definition stems from the distinction between having critical thinking skills and being able to apply them (Royalty, 2016). However, Matthews and Lally argued that critical thinking is not a phenomenon on its own and cannot be taught as an independent subject. According to them, critical thinking is a concept specific to a field or subject (Matthews & Lally, 2010).

Facione (2012) listed the characteristics of the critical thinking individual in his report of the American Philosophical Society's study of critical thinking as: i) inquisitive; ii) well-informed; iii) trustful of reason; iv) open-minded; v) flexible; vi) fair-minded in evaluation; vii) honest in facing personal biases; viii) willing to reconsider. Paul and Elder stated that a well-educated critical thinker would be able to formulate clearly and accurately by raising important questions and problems, collect and evaluating the necessary information and use abstract ideas to interpret them effectively, reach well thought-out results and solutions by examining them according to relevant criteria and standards and communicate effectively with other people to find solutions to complex problems (Paul & Elder, 2013).

Communication

Communication here actually refers to communication skill as required by an employee. Successful collaboration is strongly related to good communication skills. Communication skills include actively listening to colleagues and willing engagement in conflict resolution to mitigate the effects of miscommunications as well as keeping projects and organisational initiatives on track (Henry, 2019).

Communication is a way to accomplish the work of the organisation, and that communication must include conveying and understanding meanings and any idea whatever the skill of

listening, understanding and speaking clearly so that the speaker's ideas are communicated correctly (Awawdeh *et al.*, 2022). Active communication is one of the most important soft skills of leaders, which includes active listening and feedback (Levaseur, 2013). Communication skills include oral skills, in addition to written skills. Cole (2017) asserts that a leader who fails to communicate with employees will reflect on their trust and loyalty, which leads to poor performance. Shahid and Asiabinti (2011) identify a set of skills such as speaking, writing, listening and responding as types of communication skills.

The issue of communication is necessary for productive exchange between individuals, departments, and companies, particularly when sharing new ideas, inherent in thinking and responding to concerns, and listening to feedback (Nathan, 2022). Without clear communication, workplaces cannot operate effectively, since the added confusion caused by misinformation or misunderstanding often prolongs tasks unnecessarily and strains professional relationships. Especially since remote collaboration has become increasingly common, employees with strong communication skills are more highly valued than ever in the workplace.

While there are several types of communication, communication skills can be broadly categorised as either written or verbal. Well-versed in online correspondence, employees with strong written communication skills understand how to craft formal emails and follow proper messaging etiquette on professional platforms like Slack, Asana, or Microsoft Teams. On the other hand, verbal communication includes meetings, presentations, and networking. It's important to note that, whether you work domestically or internationally, coworkers and clientele may speak a variety of languages, and putting a little effort into learning the language of your collaborators can go a long way in strengthening professional relationships.

Communication is important at all levels of the organisation (Ramsoomair *et al.*, 2014). The ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and non-verbally is crucial for effective leadership (DuBrin, 2013). Poor communication skills can lead to misunderstanding and conflicts. This skill helps individuals know when, how and what to communicate. Through good communication skills, managers can create an environment within his or her team that encourages creativity and innovation.

Social Intelligence

Social intelligence refers to how aware people are of their interactions with others (Gabriel, 2021). In the workplace, well-honed social intelligence helps individuals avoid conflict, manage expectations and communicate effectively. Improving your social intelligence skills can contribute to a positive and productive work environment. Social intelligence is the ability to connect effectively with other individuals. This kind of intelligence means you are aware of others' thoughts and feelings even if they may not explicitly describe them to you. Some important traits that you might recognize in socially intelligent people include effective listening and communication, consideration for the impression they make on others and

conscious efforts to avoid arguing. According to Thompson (2021), the following are the constituents of social intelligence:

- i. Self-awareness: Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's own abilities, thoughts and feelings. Being mindful of who you are and how you respond to things are examples of self-awareness.
- i. Self-management: Self-management is one step beyond self-awareness, as it refers to how you apply your self-awareness to address any challenging situations. You might think of self-management as your internal decision-making process.
- ii. Social awareness: Social awareness is how you recognize social cues, body language and subtext when communicating with others.
- iii. Relationship management: Relationship management is how you apply your social awareness. This can include avoiding confrontation, developing empathy, understanding how your motivation might differ from others' and identifying the role you play in your social network.

In the operations of this study, social intelligence refers to a person's ability to get along with others and understand them in a way that it becomes easy to- work almost seamlessly with them. In the words of Manasi (2019), social intelligence considers both situational awareness and meaningful interaction. A socially intelligent person is able to work well with others and understand the dynamics within a group. Also, they are able to take into consideration how circumstances and environmental factors impact on people at an individual and team level. Social intelligence comprises multiple communication-based skills, including:

- i. Verbal and nonverbal fluency: The use of verbal conversation and body language are the primary forms of social intelligence. These help other people understand your intentions.
- ii. Knowledge of social rules: Social rules are the basic understanding of interactions in a group based on social status. Understanding social rules can lead to more positive interactions by considering the age, experience and position of your peers.
- iii. Active listening: Listening to your peers may allow you to connect with them more easily by learning about their perspectives. It may facilitate better conflict resolution by helping you understand a peer's emotions, allowing you to take that information and create a positive outcome.

Understanding emotions: Having strong social intelligence can allow you to better empathise with team members. Empathy can lead to communication that takes people's attributes and sensibilities into consideration, which makes your conversations more authentic.

Concept of Competitiveness

The concept of competitiveness in literature has been described as a multidimensional and relative concept (Boonthawan, 2012), that changes with context and time. It embraces

different approaches, from classical theories of mercantilism, which introduced the notion of trade rivalry between nations, to absolute advantages of notions, the theories of competitive and comparative advantages and up to neoclassical critiques of international competitiveness of countries (Razvan & Moisoiu, 2015). It constitutes a major economic objective in the current context of globalisation, rapid technical change and frequently invoked by policy makers worldwide (Salvador *et al.*, 2015). The competitiveness defines economic strength of an entity with respect to its competitor and it has the country, industrial and enterprise perspectives (Sadegh *et al.*, 2015). There is no agreed definition of national competitiveness (Chiang *et al.*, 2017). However, the WEF, 2013 refers to national competitiveness as a set of institutions, policies and factors that determines the level of productivity of a country (Schwab, 2013). Chiang *et al.* (2017) defined national competitiveness as a measure of relative ability of a nation to create and maintain an environment in which enterprises can compete so that the level of prosperity can be improved.

According to Wilfred *et al.* (2014), competitiveness refers to its ability to create more economic value than other competing firms. On the other hand, enterprise competitiveness refers to its ability to design (Yosuke & Shibata, 2013), produce and/or market products superior to those offered by competitors, considering the price and non-price product qualities (Sadegh *et al.*, 2015). Organisational competitiveness refers to continuous presence in markets, profit making and the ability to adapt production to demand (Diaz-chao *et al.*, 2013). The organisation is said to be competitive over its rivals, if they are dynamic, able to respond to any changes with versatility, flexible (Houshang & Babakhanian, 2015), innovative and able to create economic value than its competitors (Wilfred *et al.*, 2014). The organisation that seeks to build competitive advantage has to well manage its core processes and resources -human, operations, technology and financial (Sadegh *et al.*, 2015) and strive for low cost leadership. The competitiveness measurement remains paramount. The 12 pillars covering basic requirements, efficiency enhancers, innovation and sophistication are global competitiveness indices have been used to measure competitiveness among factor driven, efficiency and innovation driven economies respectively (Schwab, 2013). The policy makers, academia and business leaders focus on microeconomic and macroeconomic factors as key indicators of competitiveness (Salvador *et al.*, 2015).

The industrial competitiveness is assessed based on a number of indicators, mainly total productivity, Innovation, market share, profitability (Chiang *et al.*, 2017), finance and investments, ability to export, business environment and entrepreneurship, public administration and sustainability (Razvan & Moisoiu, 2015), product quality, price, growth rate, and the enterprises' cost leadership ability and overall ability to turn input into output in the most efficient and economic way (Wilfred *et al.*, 2014).

Competitiveness is the capability of a profit or non-profit organisation to produce goods and services that are of higher quality and perhaps quantity than those of its rivals in the regional, national, or global level (D'Cruz, 2017). Organisations feel a great sense of belonging when

they compete favourably at whatever level that satisfies them for now. The reason is because factors such as market share, net profit, and brand reputation amongst others, are taken into consideration before an organisation is termed to be competing favourably. An organisation that is on the same level or has a higher market share, net profit, brand reputation than its counterparts within a time period and a geographical entity is said to be a favourable competitor (Smith, 2017).

Measures of Competitiveness

New Technology

Obviously, digital transformation is here to stay; remote and hybrid working is now the norm. This has accelerated the growth of collaborative technologies like cloud computing, AI, and augmented reality (AR). New technology can improve all aspects of a business' operations, from scaling the business to increasing employee efficiency (Lau, 2021). But in 2020, only around 50% of businesses were adopting emerging technologies like cloud computing and SaaS marketing platforms, according to Statista. And fewer than 30% were adopting other emerging technologies. One reason for this could be worker resistance. There are many reasons workers resist new technology, including:

- i. Resenting perceived interference from management.
- ii. Lack of confidence around technology.
- iii. Failing to see a use for it.
- iv. Feeling excluded from the decision-making process.
- V. Feeling threatened and unappreciated.
- vi. Lack of communication from management.
- vii. Failing to see the benefits. ¹

Defeating employee resistance to getting new tech into the workplace can seem impossible. However, with the right strategies, organisations can help their employees not only adapt to new technology but also thrive with it, as this will also help the business to thrive. Notwithstanding, Lau (2021) outlines eight strategies organisations can use to get their employees to speedily adopt new technology. They include:

- i. Communicate the benefits; Transparency is vital when bringing in tech that affects how employees do their job, even if that tech will help them. Open dialog is the best way to promote transparency and ease the transition from old to new. Consider hosting a video meeting to communicate the benefits of the new technology and encourage questions and feedback so you can deal with any issues that may arise. After the meeting, provide a place where employees can continue to ask questions and where you can provide updates. Create a group on the instant

messaging software you use in-house and send regular email updates to keep employees in the loop,

- ii. Provide adequate training: Marketers should nurture leads; employers should nurture employees. Yet there's a big difference between what employers see as adequate training and what employees think. According to an IBM and Josh Bersin study, 74% of employers think they are helping employees learn new skills, while just 38% of employees agree. But companies that outperform their rivals make skills growth a key part of performance management. So, providing adequate training not only helps your employees but also helps you.

Use guided learning: Do not sit employees down and talk to them for two hours. Hold workshops that combine training with doing. For example, instructors could give employees bite-sized chunks of information. Then employees could try it out for themselves

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning means planning for strategies and implementing them to achieve organisational goals (Thompson et al., 2010). It starts by asking oneself simple questions like "What are we doing?" Should we continue to do it or change our product line or the way of working? What is the impact of social, political, technological and other environmental factors on our operations? Are we prepared to accept these changes etc.?

Strategic planning helps in knowing what we are and where we want to go so that environmental threats and opportunities can be exploited, given the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. Strategic planning is "a thorough self-examination regarding the goals and means of their accomplishment so that the enterprise is given both direction and cohesion."

In the view of Darbi (2012), strategic planning is a process through which managers formulate and implement strategies geared to optimising strategic goal achievement, given available environmental and internal conditions. Strategic planning is formalisation of planning where plans are made for long periods of time for effective and efficient attainment of organisational goals. Strategic planning is based on extensive environmental scanning. It is a projection into environmental threats and opportunities and an effort to match them with the organisation's strengths and weaknesses.

Planning is something we do in advance of taking action; that is, it is anticipatory decision making. It is a process of deciding what to do and how to do it before action is required. Strategic planning can be defined as a managerial process of developing and maintaining a viable fit between an organisation's objectives, skills and resources and its changing environment (Calderpride.org., 2012). The company's strategic plan is the starting point for planning. It serves as a guide to the development of sound sub-plans to accomplish the organisational objectives. The aim of strategic planning is to help a company select and organise its businesses in a way that would keep the company healthy in spite of unexpected

changes in the environment. It purports to shape or reshape the company's businesses and products so that they yield target profits and growth.

This study defines strategic planning as the process of determining a company's long-term goals and then identifying the best approach for achieving those goals. Strategic planning is an organisation's process of defining its strategy or direction and making decisions on allocating its resources to pursue this strategy, including its capital and people (Padala & Suryanarayana, 2010). Strategic planning is a process to determine or re-assess the vision, mission and goals of an organisation and then map out objective (measurable) ways to accomplish the identified goals. One of the functions of strategic planning is to inspire people in the organisation to work towards the creation of a new state of affairs. The vision is a means of describing this desired future, but it works best to inspire and motivate if it is vivid — in other words, a vision should be a "picture" of the future. The visioning process is usually the very first step in the strategic planning process.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on Diffusion of Innovation Theory by Roger in 1962.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Diffusion of Innovation Theory was propounded to explain how people accept new technologies and innovative skills set as cited in Amadi-George (2018). The theory assumes that:

- i. In a social system, there will always be a disparity in the level and time at which individuals within a given social system adopt new ideas, techniques, and technology.
- ii. Individuals and arms of institutions that adopt innovations early will naturally out-perform late adopters and the laggards (Rogers cited in Amadi-George, 2018).

The implication of this theory is that as some Commercial Banks find the need to equip their employees with soft skills such as critical thinking, communication and social intelligence, there will obviously be a discrepancy on the mode of adoption - some will quickly adopt while others will be reluctant about it. The reluctant ones want to first of all see how it benefits the early adopters before they make the decision whether to toll the same line or not. The fact is that management of Commercial Banks that fail to provide their employees with these soft skills early enough are likely going to experience untold difficulties, slow operations, high level inefficiency, and negative stress arising majorly from guests' complaints (Odu, 2018) while those who embrace and adopt these enhancement techniques on time enjoy speed, efficiency and high level effectiveness. This means that there will be a significant gap in the competitiveness of early and late adopters.

Empirical Review

Awawdeh and Alkshali (2022) investigated the impact of soft skills on organisational innovation in Levant Food Products Company (AlDurra). The study was conducted on a sample of 106 employees of this company. The necessary data were collected from them

through a questionnaire developed for this purpose. The study used the quantitative descriptive method. The study relied on five dimensions to measure soft skills (the independent variable), which are: communication, time management, leadership, teamwork and decision-making. With regard to organisational innovation (the dependent variable), it was measured through four dimensions: introduction of new products, improving existing product, innovating new process and improving existing processes. The study used a set of statistical methods, the most important of which is the multiple linear regression. The study concluded that there are high levels of the dimensions of both variables, and that there is a significant impact of soft skills on organisational innovation, and the most influential dimensions of soft skills on organisational innovation are: leadership, decision making and teamwork.

Taiye & Edwinah (2021) investigated the relationship between workforce diversity and organisational competitiveness of SMEs in Rivers state, Nigeria. The cross sectional survey was carried out in the study. A total of eight hundred and forty- seven (847) managers and supervisors of SMEs served as the population of the study. However, a sample of two hundred and sixty-five respondents was drawn from the population. The systematic sampling technique was used in the study in order to avoid bias in selection of the sample cases. Questionnaires were used in collecting data from respondents and the copies of the questionnaire were personally administered to the respondents. The retrieved data was analysed using spearman rank order correlation coefficient. The outcome of the analysis revealed that the dimensions of workforce diversity (professional diversity and age diversity) is significantly and positively correlated with the measures of organisational competitiveness (product differentiation and innovativeness). It was thus concluded that workforce diversity is thus essential in enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs which could thus help boost the organisation's position in the industry. Therefore, the study recommended that the owners and managers of the small and medium enterprises should ensure that employees of diverse professions are employed in the organisation in order to enhance the competitiveness of the organisation.

Abdallah, (2020) investigated the relationship between soft skills and organisational creativity at the company Telecom Egypt in regions of Suez, South Sinai, and the Red Sea. To achieve research objectives, three basic hypotheses were formulated, and tested using primary data collected through the questionnaire, consisting of 251 questionnaires. Structural equation modelling and path analysis were performed to analyse the survey data and to test study hypotheses. The study found a strong positive relationship and significant effect of the soft skills dimensions of (communication, working in a team, individual innovation; self management, critical thinking, problem-solving on organisational creativity, and the relative importance of the soft skills dimensions varies in their impact on organisational creativity, ranking as follow: critical thinking, self-management, problem -solving, communication, working in a team, individual innovation.

Falola *et al.* (2018) examined the effectiveness of training and development on employees' performance and organisation competitive advantage in the Nigerian banking industry. Descriptive research method was adopted for this study using two hundred and twenty three valid questionnaires which were completed by selected banks in Lagos State, South-West Nigeria using simple random sampling technique. The data collected were carefully analysed using descriptive statistics to represent the raw data in a meaningful manner. The results show that a strong relationship exists between training and development, employees' performance and competitive advantage. Summary of the findings indicates that there is a strong relationship between the tested dependent variable and independent construct. However, bank management should not relent in their quest to train their staff to develop new ideas that will keep improving and retaining employee performance.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design employed in the study was the exploratory survey research design. This research design was deemed suitable and most appropriate for the study because of reasons such as: (i) the study was conducted in the Commercial Banks at the same time; (ii) it involved the test of hypotheses which is exploratory in nature.

Research Population

The population of the study consisted of twenty-two (22) Commercial Banks operating in Rivers State, Nigeria. Arranged alphabetically, the twenty-two (22) Commercial Banks currently operating in Rivers State, Nigeria are listed overleaf:

Population Table

S/N Commercial Banks and their Head Offices in Rivers State.

1. Access Bank. No. 329A Olu Obasanja, Port Harcourt
8. CitiBank. No. 1 Trans- Amadi, Port Harcourt.
2. Eco Bank. No. 329A Olu Obasanja, Port Harcourt
5. Fidelity Bank. No. 22/24 Old Aba Road, Port Harcourt.
3. First Bank. No. 22/24 Old Aba Road, Port Harcourt.
4. First City Monument Bank. No. 22/24 Old Aba Road, Port Harcourt.
18. Globus Bank. Plot 467 Trans-Amadi, Industrial Layout, Port Harcourt.
6. Guaranty Trust Bank. No. 22/24 Old Aba Road, Port Harcourt.
7. Heritage Bank. No. 22/23 Old Aba Road, Artillery, Port Harcourt.
17. Jaiz Bank. No. 186 Aba Road, Port Harcourt.
- 9 Keystone Bank. No. 51. Aba Road Port Harcourt.

10. Polaris Bank. Agip Junction /Ikwerre Road, Port Harcourt.
11. Stanbic IBTC No. 58 Olu Obasanjo Road, Port Harcourt
16. Standard Chartered Bank. Plot 7 Trans-Amadi, Industrial Layout, Port Harcourt.

12. Sterling Bank. No. 142 Woji Road, GRA 2, Port Harcourt
20. Suntrust Bank. No. 16 Trans-Amadi, Nkpogu, Port Harcourt. , '
21. Titan Trust Bank. No. 5 Olu Obasanjo Road, Port Harcourt.
15. Union Bank Plot 468, Trans-Amadi, Port Harcourt.
13. United Bank for Africa No. 14B Azikiwe Road, Port Harcourt.
14. Unity Bank No. 28A Aba Road, Port Harcourt
19. Wema Bank. No. 66 Olu Obasanjo Way, Port Harcourt.
22. Zenith Bank. No. 40 Aba Road, Port Harcourt.

Source: CBN, 2023.

Instrumentation and Measurement

Structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument for the collection of primary data. The instrument was titled “Employee Soft Skills and Competitiveness Questionnaire Index (ESSCQI). The design of the questionnaire was a four (4) point rating scale format with the following response options: Very Great Extent (4), Great Extent (3), Moderate Extent (2), and Low Extent (1).

Validity of Instrument

To establish the validity of the instrument, copies of the questionnaire were submitted to the project supervisor and two other experts in the Management Department. Their comments and adjustments were used to validate the final copy of the instrument that was administered.

Reliability of Instrument

Test-retest method was used to ascertain the reliability of the instrument. This involved distributing the questionnaire twice to 30 managers in the Selected Commercial Banks in Rivers State. The two sets of scores obtained were correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) which yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.75. This indicates an acceptable level of reliability, the researcher was able to retrieve 60 copies of the distributed questionnaires.

Method of Data Analysis

Mean and standard deviation were used to analyse the research questions while the test of hypotheses was done using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The formula is stated below:

$$r = \frac{n\sum xy - \sum x \sum y}{\sqrt{[n\sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2] [n\sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}}$$

Where;

n = number of pairs of data

x = independent variable

y = dependent variable

$\sum xy$ = sum of the products of independent and dependent variable

$\sum x$ = sum of independent variable

$\sum y$ = sum of dependent variable

Σ = Summation

Test of Hypotheses

Ho1. Critical thinking does not have any relationship with new technology in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

Table 1: Relationship between Critical Thinking and New Technology

S/N	X	Y	XY	X ²	Y ²
1.	13	12	156	169	144
2.	9	9	81	81	81
3.	5	6	30	25	36
4.	3	3	9	9	9
5.	12	12	144	144	144
6.	9	8	72	81	64
7.	6	6	36	36	36
8.	3	4	12	9	16
9.	11	12	132	121	144
10.	9	9	81	81	81
11.	6	7	42	36	49
12.	3	3	9	9	9

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13.	11	12	132	121	144
14.	8	8	64	64	64
15.	7	6	42	49	36
16.	4		16	16	16
	$\Sigma x =$				
	119	$\Sigma y = 121$	$\Sigma XY = 1058$	$\Sigma X^2 = 1051$	$\Sigma Y^2 = 1073$

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

$$r = \frac{n \sum xy - \sum x \sum y}{\sqrt{[n \sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2] [n \sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}} = \frac{16 \times 1058 - 119 \times 121}{(16 \times 1051 - 119^2)(16 \times 1073 - 121^2)}$$

$$r = \frac{16928 - 14399}{\sqrt{(16816 - 14161)(17168 - 14641)}} = \frac{2529}{\sqrt{(2655)(2527)}}$$

$$\frac{2529}{\sqrt{709185}} = \frac{2529}{\sqrt{2590.2094}}$$

$\therefore Y = 0.976$ (approx.)

Table 4.5 above shows r value of 0.976, Since the calculated r value of 0.976 is greater than the critical r value of 0.441, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between critical thinking and new technology of Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

H0₂: Communication does not have any relationship with experienced workforce in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

Table 2: Relationship between Communication and Experienced Workforce

S/N	X	Y	XY	X ²	Y ²
1.	12	13	156	144	169
2.	9	8	72	81	64
3.	6	6	36	36	36
4.	3	3	9	9	9

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5.	13	13	169	169	169
6.	8	8	68	64	64
7.	6	7	42	36	49
8.	2	3	6 i	4	9
9.	12	12	144	144	144
10.	9	8	72	81	64
11.	5	6	30	25	36
12.	4	4	16	16	16
13.	13	13	169	169	169
14.	7	8	56	49	64
15.	6	6	36	36	36
16.	3	4	12	9	16
		$\Sigma Y =$	$\Sigma XY =$	$\Sigma X^2 =$	
	$\Sigma X = 117$	122	1093	1072	$\Sigma XY^2 = 1114$

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

$$r = \frac{n \sum xy - \sum x \sum y}{\sqrt{[n \sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2] [n \sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}} = \frac{16 \times 1093 - 118 \times 122}{\sqrt{(16 \times 1072 - 118^2)(16 \times 1114 - 122^2)}}$$

$$r = \frac{17488 - 14399}{\sqrt{(7152 - 13924)(17824 - 14882)}} = \frac{3089}{\sqrt{(3228)(2942)}}$$

$$= \frac{3089}{\sqrt{9496776}} = \frac{3089}{\sqrt{3081.684}}$$

∴ Y = 1.002 (approx.)

Table 4.6 shows r value of 1.002. Since the calculated r value of 1.002 is greater than the critical r value of 0.441, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between communication and the experienced workforce of Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

H0₃: Social intelligence does not have any relationship with strategic planning in Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

Table 3: Relationship between Social Intelligence and Strategic Planning

S/N	X	Y	XY	X ²	Y ²
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EMPLOYEE SOFT SKILLS AND COMPETITIVENESS OF COMMERCIAL BANKS IN RIVERS STATE

1	12	12	144	144	144
2	8	9	72	64	81
3	6	6	36	36	36
4.	3	4	12	9	16
5	12	13	156	144	144
6	8	8	64	64	64
7	6	5	30	36	25
8	4	4	16	16	16
9	13	13	169	169	169
10	7	8	56	49	64
11	6	7	42	36	49
12	3	3	9	9	9
13	12	13	156	144	169
14	9	8	72	81	64
15	5	6	30	25	36
16	3	4	12	9	16
ZX=			ix ² =		
117		7,Y= 123	JTXY= 1076	1035	7Y ² = 1102

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

$$r = \frac{n\sum xy - \sum x \sum y}{\sqrt{[n\sum X^2 - (\sum X)^2][n\sum Y^2 - (\sum Y)^2]}} = \frac{16 \times 1076 - 117 \times 123}{(16 \times 1035 - 117^2)(16 \times 1102 - 123^2)}$$

$$r = \frac{17216 - 14391}{\sqrt{(6560 - 13689)(17632 - 15129)}} = \frac{2825}{\sqrt{(2871)(2503)}}$$

$$= \frac{2825}{\sqrt{2871(2503)}} = \frac{2825}{\sqrt{7186113}}$$

∴ Y= 1.054 (approx.)

Table 4.7 shows r value of 1.054. Since the calculated r value of 1.054 is greater than the critical r value of 0.441, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant

relationship between social intelligence and strategic planning of Commercial Banks in Rivers State.

4.0 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of data, the following findings were made:

1. There is a significant relationship between critical thinking and new technology of Commercial Banks in Rivers State.
2. There is a significant relationship between communication and experienced workforce of Commercial Banks in Rivers State.
3. There is a significant relationship between social intelligence and strategic planning of Commercial Banks in Rivers State'

Conclusions

The findings from the study have actually suggested that there is a need for commercial banks and other organisations to inculcate critical thinking, communication skill and social intelligence in employees, as this will not just boost their competitiveness but also performance and productivity. Training an army of workforce who are skillful in these soft skills and more will place an organisation on a fast wheel of competitiveness, both locally and globally.

Therefore, the study concludes that employee soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, and social intelligence are viable instruments through which organisations such as commercial banks and others can utilise to promote their competitive ability. It becomes duty-bound on organisations to have their employees equipped with these skills for better organisational competitiveness, amongst others.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Management should periodically organise soft skills training that will also accommodate critical thinking, in order to enhance competitiveness especially in terms of quick adaptation to new technology.
2. Employee communication skills in commercial banks should be checked properly before employment, and as well as do further training on- same matter after employment.
3. Social intelligence should be taught in commercial banks and sister organisations to help their strategic planning and other indices of competitiveness.
4. Commercial banks and sister organisations should carry out yearly training on soft skills that will help promote their competitiveness, performance and productivity.

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