

Influence of Staff Development Capabilities on Competitive Advantage Among Level 5 Public Hospitals in Kenya

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Abstract

Healthcare industry in Kenya is going through many challenges including reduced funding, shortage of staff, technological innovations and changing customer expectations which puts pressure on public hospitals to attain competitive advantage. The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of staff development capabilities on the competitive advantage of Level 5 Public Hospitals in Kenya. The study was anchored on the dynamic capabilities theory. Positivism philosophy and a descriptive correlational research design were applied in the study where a structured questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data. The study focused on 33 Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya and the study population comprised 495 CEOs, departmental heads and administrative heads of all the Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. Stratified random sampling was used to pick a sample of 222 respondents. The study's data analyses involved descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and inferential analysis (simple linear regression analysis). The study results revealed that staff development capabilities had a statistically significant and positive influence on the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya ($\beta = 0.744$, $p < 0.05$). The study concluded that the vital staff development capabilities were strategic training initiatives, recruitment of highly skilled personnel, healthy work-life balance and ongoing employee training. Based on the conclusion of the study, it is recommended that the top management of level 5 public hospitals revamp staff development and training initiatives to equip their employees with distinct competencies and skills to deal with today's healthcare challenges.

Key Words: *Competitive Advantage, Kenya, Level 5 Public Hospitals, Staff Development Capabilities.*

Introduction

Organizations experience an increased amount of unanticipated external environmental changes that persist unabatedly in the face of globalization (Yuan & Ferreira, 2022). This condition of uncertainty puts enormous strain on plans by organizations and poses operational difficulties. If the effects of unpredictability are not addressed, they might make the company less competitive (Rahmantya *et al.*, 2019). Although the causes of the unexpected environmental changes are well understood, there is much disagreement over how to handle the increased volatility (Aloulou, 2018). Competitive advantage is a noteworthy result of an organization's ability to overcome obstacles brought by environmental changes and rivalry in the market including limited financing, skilled workforce shortages, technology disruption and cutthroat competition (Herrero *et al.*, 2018). However, several authors claim that what brings competitive advantage remains a subject of debate and is a difficult riddle for many organizational leaders to solve (Kamukama & Sulait, 2017).

This study adopted the internal perspective view that hypothesizes internal dynamic capabilities as the source of competitive advantage. This perspective was chosen as it is advocated by the dynamic capabilities theory (Teece *et al.*, 1997). One of the main internal factors is human resources and the study sought to understand the role of staff development capabilities on the competitive advantage of healthcare organizations. According to Le (2020), staff development capabilities complement workers' skills in the activities undertaken and additionally motivate employees as they offer self-confidence to employees in the duties undertaken. The essential premise is that by recruiting highly qualified staff, providing competitive remuneration, having effective employee relations, and engaging in the training and development of employees, organizations may develop and maintain a competitive advantage. This is because a trained, well-developed and remunerated workforce can recognize and grasp opportunities and then realign the organizational resources and their skills to match the changing environment (Njoku *et al.*, 2020).

The public health facilities in Kenya are categorized into Levels 1 to 6. The Level 5 hospitals act as the county's referral hospitals for the sub-county hospitals and as an intermediary between the national referral hospital and the sub-county. Moreover, they act as regional centers for the provision of specialized care including intensive care, life support, and specialist consultations (Ministry of Health, 2020). Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya are the key primary and secondary healthcare facilities in the counties. However, the competitiveness and capacity to deliver quality care for the Level 5 hospitals are jeopardized by the challenges faced in the public healthcare ecosystem including staff shortage, and underfunding that has led to poor quality care and poorly staffed facilities (Mbau *et al.*, 2020). There are other challenges faced by Level 5 hospitals that include poor infrastructure, corruption, and a lack of efficient processes and personnel to carry out vital tasks (Kenya Healthcare Federation, 2022). However, Mbangua *et al.* (2021) underscore that poor human resource management in Level 5 hospitals is the main challenge that has resulted in these facilities losing skilled staff to other local and international healthcare facilities.

Statement of the Problem

Level 5 Public hospitals in Kenya face difficulties with ineffective processes, and inadequate personnel, as well as healthcare financing challenges and factors that directly impede their competitiveness and sustainability. This has resulted in them losing 7 per cent of their

employees to other local and international healthcare institutions. Besides, 52 per cent of the population prefers private facilities, and faith-based organizations for their health needs (Kenya

Healthcare Federation, 2022). This research, therefore, aimed to address the knowledge gap of the inability of Level 5 hospitals in Kenya to provide quality and affordable healthcare to compete with local private and international hospitals. Singh *et al.* (2020) indicate that there is still a lack of consensus on how hospitals can gain and sustain a competitive advantage. Additionally, because of the increased volatility in the healthcare industry, there is a dearth of research on the sources of competitive advantage (Yuan & Ferreira, 2022). Besides, extant empirical studies such as Thekkekara (2020) was conducted in hospitals in India, Villeruša *et al.* (2019) in Latvian hospitals and Yuan and Ferreira (2022) were undertaken in China thus leaving contextual gaps on the situation in Kenya. This study sought to find out the influence of staff development capabilities on Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to assess the influence of staff development capabilities on competitive advantage among Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya.

Literature Review

This section provides the theoretical, empirical and conceptual framework that guided the study.

Theoretical Literature

This study was anchored on the dynamic capabilities (DC) theory by Teece *et al.* (1997) which indicates that an organization should have the capacity to integrate, develop, and reconfigure external and internal competencies to quickly adapt to gain a competitive advantage. The premise of the DC theory is that ill-prepared organizations to adapt their capabilities to their dynamic and competitive environment would inevitably fail (Mishra, 2017). Staff development capabilities such as recruitment of highly qualified staff, strategic training of employees, competitive remuneration, employee relations, and performance management enable an organization to build a talent pool of experienced and skilled employees (Pereira *et al.*, 2019). These competent employees can enable the firm to quickly and effectively realign its unique resources and competencies to take advantage of opportunities and meet market demands. By training employees, the organization builds competencies and skills in the employees that other organizations cannot match. The firm instills a culture of dynamism which empowers the organization to be dynamic in the face of a dynamic environment and cutthroat competition (Saranga *et al.*, 2018).

Empirical Literature

At Jordanian universities, Alfawaire and Atan (2021) wanted to conduct an empirical study to determine the effect of strategic human resource management (SHRM) on sustainable competitive advantage (SCA). The findings of the study indicated that there is a significant positive relationship between the SHRM and SCA. Other studies with similar findings include Hans (2021), and Kehoe *et al.* (2020) who determined that developing the human resources of the firm provides the firm with a competitive advantage. Another study on SMEs in Vietnam, by Le (2020), investigated how staff development and marketing capability relate to product innovation and competitive advantage in Hanoi. Data was analyzed using regression analysis and descriptive statistics. The findings from the research indicated that personnel development directly affected competitive advantages through product innovation and market capability ($\beta = 0.512$, $p < 0.05$).

Thekkekara (2020) investigated the role played by availability, recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff on the competitive advantage of hospitals in India. The study findings

determined that mission hospitals have a long history of operating with a focus on community health, despite variations in their services and physical facilities throughout India. The study

further determined that most of the hospitals had achieved sustainability in the quest of competitive advantages by luring professionals, and ensuring that they are well remunerated. In another study in the healthcare industry in Latvia by Villeruša *et al.* (2019), the recruitment of skilled employees in all departments was found to be vital for gaining a competitive advantage. Another study in China by Yuan and Ferreira (2022) sought to determine the influence of strategic training of employees on the competitive advantage of maternal and child healthcare (MCH) facilities. The results emphasized people as the primary resource of competitive advantages for MCH facilities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guided the study is provided in Figure 1 which demonstrates the hypothesized relationship between staff development capabilities and competitive advantage.

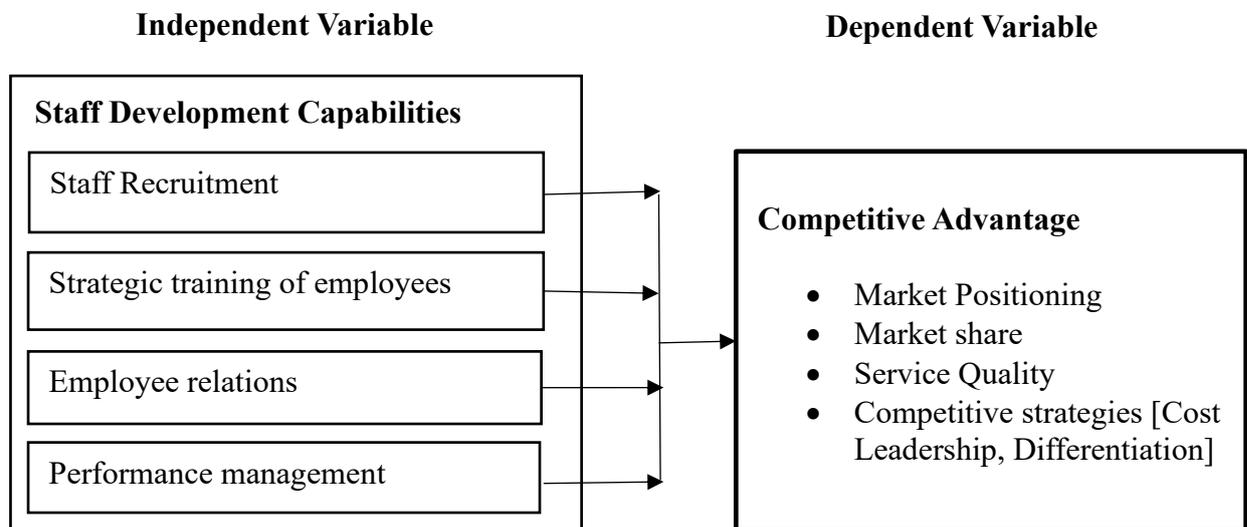


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Staff development capabilities provide an organization with the ability to detect, comprehend, and adapt to the changing environment. These are the practices of creating specialized staff training, development, and reward programs that are directly in line with corporate goals (Khan *et al.*, 2018). To create a talent pool of skills and competencies, firms need to recruit highly qualified staff and engage in strategic training of employees, competitive remuneration, employee relations, and performance management (Kehoe *et al.*, 2020).

Competitive advantage was the dependent variable in the study. Porter and Teinsberg (2008) pointed out that in non-profit organizations like hospitals, competitive advantage is indicated by effectiveness in managing costs to patients, high-quality care, provider experience, and learning, and patient outcomes indicated by the hospital's capacity to meet patients' emotional, social, and physical needs. These competitive advantage metrics were used in this research since the setting was Kenya's level 5 public hospitals. Based on this conceptual framework, the following null hypothesis was tested:

H₀: Staff development capabilities have no statistically significant influence on the competitive advantage of level 5 public hospitals in Kenya.

Research Methodology

This study used the positivism research philosophy since it sought to test a hypothesis that was generated from the dynamic capabilities theory. Descriptive correlational research design is applied to discover and document connections or causality and illustrate how variables are in the study. The population for this study was 495 senior staff members from Kenya's 33 Level 5 public hospitals as of June 2022 (KMPDC, 2022). The study used proportional stratified sampling to select a sample of 222 which included 6.6per cent CEOs, 66.7per cent heads of departments, and 26.7per cent administrative heads. The study collected data using a structured questionnaire which was pretested before the data collection. The study adhered to ethical standards that included informed consent, data protection and secrecy, justice, non-maleficence and beneficence, conflict of interest, and integrity. Data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.0, whereby both descriptive (means, and standard deviations) and inferential statistical analyses (correlations and regression analysis) were used. The hypothesis was tested using simple linear regression analysis.

Study Results and Discussion

Demographic and General Information

The research obtained a total of 210 responses from the 222 that were provided with the questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 94.6per cent. The findings on gender revealed that 50.5per cent of the participants were male whereas 49.5per cent were female. On the education level attained by the respondents, 45.2per cent of the respondents had a college level of education, 31per cent had an undergraduate level of education and 23.8per cent had postgraduate education. Regarding the years of service in the hospitals, 41per cent of the study participants indicated that they had served in the hospitals for a period of 1 to 5 years while 9per cent had served in the hospitals for 11 to 15 years. The findings demonstrated that 67.6per cent of hospitals had been in operation for over 10 years while only 9per cent of the hospitals had been in operation for 1 to 3 years.

Descriptive Analysis of Competitive Advantage

The dependent variable was a competitive advantage, which was measured using four constructs which were market share, quality of service, cost leadership, and differentiation. Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with statements about the competitive advantage of their respective Level 5 public hospitals. Their responses were analyzed using means (M) and standard deviations (SD). The findings are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Competitive Advantage

Statements on competitive advantage	Mean	SD
This hospital's consultation fees are the lowest compared to other similar hospitals in the region	3.88	1.060
This hospital has lower specialized service charges compared to other similar hospitals in the region	3.96	.909
This hospital has the lowest bed charges compared to other similar hospitals in the region	4.13	.949
The pharmacy in this hospital provides prescription medicine at the lowest costs compared to other facilities in the region	4.10	.983
Cost of surgery in this hospital is the lowest compared to other similar hospitals in the region	3.90	.993

Patients and their relatives who visit this hospital rate the quality of care highly	3.90	.964
Health services in this hospital are safe	3.90	1.051
Health services in this hospital are people-centred	3.84	.994
This hospital offers the best quality healthcare services compared to other similar hospitals in the region	3.74	1.133
This hospital experiences very few adverse events from healthcare services	4.09	.903
Our hospital is the most preferred healthcare service provider in the region	3.91	1.015
The hospital offered w wide variety of healthcare services to serve the whole population	3.99	.878
<u>This hospital is perceived as a competent healthcare facility by the public</u>	<u>4.07</u>	<u>.938</u>
This hospital attracts patients from various parts of the region and even the country	3.83	1.132
Physicians in this hospital have the capacity to provide the various services that patients require	3.73	1.160
This hospital provides quality of services which is above other hospitals in the region	3.96	1.004
This hospital has a higher level of patient satisfaction compared to other hospitals	3.98	1.000
This hospital is a centre of excellence around particular disease categories	3.91	1.032
This hospital has a mix of numerous services that it offers	4.03	1.009
This hospital provides a variety of long-term or chronic care services	3.90	1.163
Average	3.94	1.014

The research results, as shown in Table 1 indicate that the study participants exhibited agreement with all the statements provided relating to competitive advantage in market share, quality of service, cost leadership and differentiation. This is shown by the average mean score of 3.94 which indicated that on average, the respondents felt that the Level 5 public hospitals had a competitive advantage. However, the high standard deviation of 1.014 indicates that there was a high dispersion of the responses away from the mean.

Descriptive Analysis of Staff Development Capabilities

Staff development capabilities were measured using four constructs which were recruitment of highly qualified staff, strategic training of employees, employee relations and performance management. Respondents were requested to express their level of agreement, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with the statements on staff development capabilities of their respective Level 5 public hospitals. Their responses were analysed by means (M) and standard deviations (SD) and the study results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Staff Development Capabilities

Statements on Staff Development Capabilities	Mean	SD
Our hospital recruits highly skilled employees	4.47	.672
This hospital considers high academic qualifications when recruiting employees	4.11	.876
This hospital gives priority for new employees with above average professional qualifications	4.08	.877
Our hospital recruits employees who fits into the hospital culture	3.94	1.294
This hospital adheres to the laid down regulations and policies on recruitment and selection	4.16	.876

This hospital adopts various training methods to fit the learning styles of different employees	3.93	1.092
This hospital has an effective employee training plan	3.82	1.096
This hospital designs various training programs to fit the need of various employees	3.97	1.067
This hospital conducts a training needs assessment before conducting any training	3.58	1.389
This hospital seeks feedback from employees after every training	3.89	1.068
This hospital has a healthy work-life balance for employees	3.97	1.058
When conflicts arise between employees, the hospital management manages it effectively	3.81	1.316
The hospital has effective policies for resolving disputes between managers and employees	3.87	1.152
The hospital has conducive working conditions	3.86	1.147
	4.14	.946
This hospital has procedures for gathering and addressing employee feedback	3.95	.972
This hospital involves employees in setting performance goals		
The hospital has effective measures of performance that are accepted by all employees	3.73	1.143
In this hospital, employees are regularly informed on their performance	3.94	1.094
The hospital recognizes and celebrates performance achievements of employees and teams publicly	3.75	1.241
Attaining performance goals is rewarded in this hospital	3.90	1.096
Average	3.95	1.074

The research results provided in Table 4.7 portray that the study participants agreed with the statements provided on staff development capabilities. The average mean score was 3.95 which shows that the respondents opined that their level 5 public hospitals had staff development capabilities that entailed recruitment of highly qualified staff, strategic training of employees, employee relations and effective performance management. The average standard deviation was however high (Average SD = 1.074), indicating that the individual responses were highly dispersed away from the mean. This is an indication that the level 5 public hospitals had varied levels of staff development capabilities.

Inferential Analysis

The purpose of this study was to assess the influence of staff development capabilities on the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. To achieve the stated purpose, the research hypothesis was tested by the use of simple linear regression analysis. The regression findings presented in Table 3 provide the model summary, which includes the correlation coefficient (R) and the R-squared value.

Table 3

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.744	.553	.551	.46056

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Staff development capabilities
- b. Dependent Variable: Competitive advantage

The findings indicate that staff development capabilities have a strong positive relationship with a competitive advantage of Level 5 Public Hospitals in Kenya ($r = 0.744$). The results of the study further provide evidence that staff development capabilities explain 55.3per cent of the variation in the competitive advantage of Level 5 Public Hospitals in Kenya (r -squared = 0.553).

The fitness of the model was tested using the analysis of variance (ANOVA) test and the

findings are provided in Table 4. The study results demonstrate that the f-value was statistically significant, hence showing that the model was significant ($F = 257.192$, $p < 0.05$). The results indicate that the regression model is a good fit for the data.

Table 4
ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	54.554	1	54.554	257.192	.000
	Residual	44.120	208	.212		
	Total	98.674	209			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Staff development capabilities

b. Dependent Variable: Competitive advantage

The regression coefficients were derived to assess the influence of staff development capabilities on the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. The coefficients were used to evaluate both the magnitude and direction of the effect. The study results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.136	.178		6.400	.000
	Staff development capabilities	.710	.044	.744	16.037	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive advantage

From the results in Table 4, the regression model is:

$$\text{Competitive advantage} = 1.136 + 0.744 (\text{Staff development capabilities})$$

The results in Table 4 and the regression model indicate staff development capabilities had a statistically significant and positive influence on the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya ($\beta = 0.744$, $p < 0.05$). The results indicate that changing staff development capabilities by one level would lead to a corresponding change of 0.744 in competitive advantage. The results of this study led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, which stated that staff development capabilities do not significantly influence competitive advantage among Level 5 Public Hospitals in Kenya.

Discussion of Results

The study results determined that staff development capabilities had a statistically significant and positive influence on the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. These findings supported the dynamic capabilities theory by Teece *et al.* (1997) which describes an organization's capacity to integrate, develop, and reconfigure internal resources, and competencies to quickly adapt to competitive and dynamic environments for a competitive advantage. Other authors such as Mikalef *et al.* (2019) argued that developing dynamic capabilities in employees is crucial to enable an organization to remain competitive. Other authors with similar findings include Adiguzel (2021) who found that hospital managers see the reconfiguration and reintegration of employee competencies as a means to enable their healthcare organizations to thrive in the future.

The study findings demonstrate that there exists a strong and positive correlation between staff development capabilities and the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. The findings support the view of Pereira *et al.* (2019) that staff development capabilities such as recruitment of highly qualified staff, strategic training of employees, competitive remuneration, employee relations, and performance management enable an organization to build a talent pool of experienced and skilled employees that enable it to attain competitiveness. The findings from this study also concurred with the findings in Jordanian universities by Alfawaire and Atan (2021) that staff development practices in the realm of strategic human resource management had a significant effect on sustainable competitive advantage.

Conclusions and Recommendation

The study findings led to the conclusion that staff development capabilities were instrumental in the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. The vital staff development capabilities included strategic training initiatives, recruitment of highly skilled personnel, fostering positive employee relations, and implementing effective performance management strategies. The study further concluded that the level 5 hospitals had established protocols within hospitals for the collection and resolution of employee feedback and prioritized the recruitment of employees with strong academic credentials.

The study concluded that staff development capabilities have a statistically significant influence on the competitive advantage of Level 5 public hospitals in Kenya. Therefore, it is recommended that the top management of level 5 public hospitals design and implement policies that ensure that their hospitals recruit highly skilled employees who fit into the hospital culture. Additionally, the study recommends that the Ministry of Health should empower Level 5 public hospitals to revamp and update staff development and training initiatives to equip their employees with distinct competencies and skills to deal with today's healthcare challenges.

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