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Recruitment and Selection in the Nigerian Public Service: Nature, Challenges and Way Forward

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Author's contribution

This whole work was carried out by the author IY.

Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To identify the irregularities of recruitment and selection exercise in the Nigerian Public Service being the government's tool for increasing the workforce and filling in the vacant positions of those who left the service.

Study Design: This paper adopts a qualitative research strategy using comprehensive document review.

Place and Duration of Study: The study was conducted within the context of Nigeria Public Service from July to November, 2013.

Findings: It was identified that sentiment and other primordial issues like ethnicity, nepotism and favoritism are given more consideration in terms of employment than merit. This adversely led to labour turnover and increased costs of governance. The major challenges identified are constant political interference which manifested out of the desire of the politicians to get their relatives in the service; recruitment purely based on skills rather than good attitude and the principle of federal character that further compounded the problem in the form of ethnic balancing.

Conclusion: In order to refurbish sanity in the exercise, the Nigerian Public Service should lay more emphasis on meritocracy irrespective of applicant's background and/or affiliation and the issue of political obstruction should be brought to a halt. Candidates to be considered for recruitment should have good and moral attitude in addition to skills and recruiters be accorded the desired independence and freedom as this will enable them to use appropriate methods of conducting the exercise in order to get it right.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The services rendered by governments the world over are being provided through a group of individuals known as the public servants under an umbrella of a system called the public service. In Nigeria, public servants comprises of senior and junior staff, as well as executive and administrative cadres who are largely distinguished based on their educational qualifications, training, skills, ranks and the duties they discharge. The public Service on the other hand refers to “the totality of the administrative structures within which the work of government is carried out” [1]. It covers agencies at the Federal levels like the Federal Civil Service, Legislatures and the Judiciary including their agencies and parastatals. The term usually denotes a wider scope of governmental agencies than the civil service. In addition it encompasses the civil service in the strict sense of the ministries and department of the central government and the field administration; it also covers local governments, the military, the police and other security agencies. The concept also covers advisory governmental bodies and the public enterprises. Public Service is a dynamic structure of government which operates based on rules that are reviewed every five years in Nigeria so as to keep in tune with changing times, to serve the current needs of society and to provide for the future requirements of the people.

One of the principles of a public service is “Permanence”. The Public service is often defined as a permanent body of officials that carryout government decisions. It is permanent and its life is not tied to the life of any particular government. From this principle, it is pertinent to note that persons are employed into the service at one time and in some other time such persons do exit the service due to one reason or the other either retirement, transfer, withdrawal from service etc. This is why government from to time do recruit and offer appointments to prospective candidates to fill in the vacant positions with a view to keep the government’s work going. This again, signifies the importance of recruitment as a government tool for increasing the workforce by hiring candidates with the right qualification, attitude and enthusiasm to demonstrate commitment on the job.

The Nigerianization of the civil service was coated with the perpetuated problems of sectionalism; nepotism and tribalism which according to scholars such as [2] could be traced from the rationalization and popular purges which gave birth to competitions among ethnicities in the country who want to favor their ethnic clans. These issues ever since then became very critical and never left the Nigerian public service.

This paper focuses on the nature of recruitment and selection in the Nigerian public service, as well as the contributory factors to the inadequacies of the exercise. Going further, the paper will offer some suggestions on how to tackle the dilemma.

1.1 Methodology

As highlighted in the abstract, this paper used Comprehensive document review as its map of action. This method was chosen because it is flexible and very open. The researcher was availed with some valuable documents and reports from the civil service commission i.e. [3]; more so, reports from the media, the newspapers i.e. [4] and blogs on the internet such as [5,6] were also used. These documents were critically studied and upon which the argument of this paper were articulated.

2. THE CONCEPT OF RECRUITMENT

The term recruitment simply means, "Securing the right people for particular jobs, and it may take the form of advertising for large groups of employees or tracking out a lightly skilled individual for specific work" [7]. This in essence means that not any person with paper qualification is eligible for recruitment into the service. A choice has to be made on who is the right candidate for the post; a person with maturity, high sense of belonging, skills and good moral attitude. This is very much paramount due to the fact that it is through this process that the government or an organization can achieve its sets of goals and objectives. However, even when those that are eligible are attracted and they applied; care should be taken and select only those that have the zeal and enthusiasm to make contributions to the organization [8].

According to [9,10], "Recruitment is a process of attracting individuals on a timely basis, in sufficient numbers and with appropriate qualifications, developing their interest in an organization and encouraging them to apply for jobs within it." This is a clear indication that the exercise is not conducted all year round but at a designated time when the need arise. The need arises as a result of vacant position created by those who left the service as a result of either retirement, withdrawal from the service or other reasons. During this process, efforts are made to inform the applicants fully about the selection criteria of the required competencies that will lead to effective performance, as well as career opportunities the organization can provide the employee. Clear knowledge of the job help the potential employees to put in their best when employed because it is only when you know what you are going to do that you can understand not only how to do it but how to do it best.

[11,12], indicates that "the process of recruitment has two important purposes. Firstly, recruitment should focus on both attraction and retention of the interest of applicants suitable for a given job. Secondly, it should create a positive image of the organization in the eyes of people who come in contact with it". The first purpose implies that recruiters should emphasize on retaining the qualified candidates and this can be done by first giving them the job and then motivate them. This is very much necessary because the issue of just employing the right candidate without proper motivation can lead to brain drain and as such the overall aim of recruitment is defeated. Apart from this the organization, department or ministry in question that is recruiting the candidates should try as much as possible to portray its good image by demonstrating high sense of fairness at the very time of selecting candidates. The candidates should be given equal, fair and even treatment irrespective of ethnic background, religious differences and other sentimental issues. This will definitely give the candidates a feeling that they make the right choice and will try as much as possible to put in their best in achieving the stated aims, goals and objectives. One of the reasons that most employees fail on the job is the fact that they are not fairly treated. Openness, fairness and equity should therefore serve as one of the guiding criteria for recruiting candidates.

Recruitment and selection of personnel into the service is often conducted through series of stages known as the *resourcing cycle*. The resourcing cycle begins with the identification of a vacancy and ends when the successful candidate is performing the job to an acceptable standard.

The first step in the recruitment process is to decide that there is a vacancy to be filled. This can be done systematically using some strategic approach. If, for example, there is a vacancy as a result of exit of an employee from the service, his immediate subordinate may

be appointed to fill in the gap. It is only when there is nobody from within the organization to fill in the vacant position that another person may be sought from the outside.

2.1 Attracting Candidates

After making sure that a vacancy to be filled exists, the next stage in the cycle is the attraction of candidates, this is a very important stage as one of the main purposes of a recruitment method is to produce an appropriate and reasonable number of suitably qualified candidates within reasonable cost constraints [13] noted that: "There is no ideal number of applications and no intrinsic value in attracting a high volume of candidates. Neither is there a single best way to recruit applicants". This means that the nature of how the exercise is to be conducted depends on the nature of the organization in question. It is indeed the responsibility of the chosen medium to ensure that there is sufficient number of qualified candidates from which to make a selection. The choice of the method will however be informed by the availability of candidates – whether they are in shortage or in surplus.

2.2 Sources / Methods of Recruitment

There are basically two main sources of recruitment open to an organization: Internal and External sources. An organization is said to have embarked on internal recruitment when the vacant positions are filled with present employees. This is usually done by promoting people to fill the vacant higher positions. For example where a director resigned, a deputy director can be promoted to fill the position instead of employing a new director. This is a good example of an internal recruitment.

On the other hand, external recruiting is a situation where the organization cannot meet its human resource needs from within, it decides to recruit people from outside. The methods used in external recruiting include; advertizing, employment bureaus, state employment agencies and university campuses among others. Recruitment requires a sound human resource planning system that includes personnel inventories, forecast of the supply and demand of human resource, action plans and control and evaluation procedures [14].

Before an organization embarks on recruitment exercise, it must be sure of its areas of need, and the number of people required, and the skill or the educational qualification required for performing the job. In addition [15] insist that "the applicants should be given a Realistic Job Preview (RJP)". Thus making the applicant knows what the job he is applying for entails. The reason for this is that sometimes people apply and are employed without actually knowing the real nature of the job they were recruited to do. In some cases, the new employee may be frustrated with the job or may find out that he does not have what it takes to perform well on his duties.

3. SELECTION

After attracting candidates through recruitment process, the next step is to select from this pool those that will be employed. Selection therefore, is the process of choosing from the pool of applicants, those to be hired by the organization based on the specified organizational requirements. This stage in the recruitment circle is very crucial as it is through this that the employers made decisions on who is the most appropriate candidate to be employed of all the job applicants that has the relevant qualifications [16]. It is in this

stage that the recruiters are very much careful not to select candidates that will be a burden in the workforce.

According to [17], "The key point of selection is how to make fair and relevant assessment, which indicates strengths and weaknesses of applicant". A lot of candidates may apply for a particular position, candidates even though in most cases with same qualification but with different background, different experiences, different affiliations and different attitudes or characters. However, even if all of them are qualified to be offered the job, not all of them are going to get it as such the most suitable candidate is the one to be selected. If this is done, it is an indication that the organization is powerful and has strength. Strength in this sense connotes the ability to do the right thing. This is where most recruiters in the Nigerian bureaucracy are found wanting. Instead of going on the right direction by appointing only those that deserve to be employed, the reverse is the case.

This point is further highlighted by [13] where they assert that: "recruitment and selection process is based on action between "applicant and job", which is dependent on stating a need by an organization, using the most appropriate recruitment and selection techniques and on "reviewing, evaluating and modifying the recruitment and selection system in the light of experience".

Despite the fact that both activities are directed towards obtaining suitably qualified employees, in which recruitment activities lay the groundwork for the selection process by providing the pool of applicants from whom the selectors may choose [18]. Differentiate the two terms while establishing a clear link between them in the following way: "Recruitment is the process of generating a pool of capable people to apply for employment to an organization. Selection is the process by which managers and others use specific instruments to choose from a pool of applicants a person or persons more likely to succeed in the job(s), given management goals and legal requirements." This is a clear barking of the views of [8] who emphasized on recruiting only those that will show commitment and contribute to the organizations progress.

In setting out a similar distinction, [19] suggest that: "although the two functions are closely connected, each requires a separate range of skills and expertise and may in practice be fulfilled by different staff members". Perhaps there are certain protocols and processes involved. even though the functions are carried out almost simultaneously i.e. within the same context at the same time, the process involved is conducted bit by bit i.e. in stages handled by an expert in each stage. First of all a written application has to be submitted which must be screened and then be forwarded to the next stage for sorting and filtering and finally selection of the right candidate.

3.1 Validity of Selection Methods

It is a mere fact that almost all organizational decision-makers wish to ensure that they adopt recruitment and selection methods that are effective. Making judgments on an individual's personal characteristics and suitability for future employment is inherently problematic as some people are wolf in sheep's skin. Mere looking at an individual face or a scrutiny of some of his behaviors may not portray his true colour or exact image in the inside and as such a critical search and test of behavior of an applicant is very necessary so as to avoid wrongful choice. Again it is now realized that many 'normal' selection methods contain significant flaws. Utmost care should therefore be taken to avoid that.

Validity, along with fairness, should be the guiding criteria of a selection method for any organization with the zeal of achieving high performance. It is however important to obtain sophisticated data on validity in all its forms [13]. Suggest that: "validity measures should be treated with caution because they can be affected by the performance indicators used, and by the way the tools were applied". They indicate nonetheless both variability between measures and some overall degree of uncertainty when predicting future work performance during the selection process. Validity should therefore be the prime factor in choosing selection tools; apart from that other factors such as cost and applicability may as well be relevant. It therefore, follows that any organization aiming for high performance must adopt valid measures. Again, one should recognize that recruitment and selection is contingent upon other factors such as the work itself.

3.2 The Selection Process

The selection process involves a number of stages as outlined below.

3.2.1 Preliminary interview

This is usually the applicant's first contact with the organization. For the organization, it represents the first stage of the selection process. It is usually at this stage that those who are not qualified are weeded out. If the number of the applicants is on the high side, the preliminary interview helps to bring it to a manageable size. It is now those who pass this stage that are allowed to face other rigorous tests.

3.3 Application Blanks

An application blank is the form given to job applicants from which information about their qualifications, experience and any other information that are related to an applicant's ability to perform well on the job is gotten. In summary, the application blanks request for information that is job-related. Through the application blanks, the interviewer gets some specific information about the applicant which will be useful in the main employment interview. This helps to test the applicant's reliability and accuracy of facts.

3.4 Tests

Tests are seen as the most objective method of judging applicants provided they are well exposed to the same test under the same condition. Tests are increasingly becoming an integral part of the selection process because of its obvious advantages. There are different types of tests and the one chosen by an organization depends on what that organization is engaged in and the type of personnel it wants to employ.

3.4.1 Types of recruitment tests

Throughout the recruitment process there are a number of ways that an applicant can be tested by a prospective employer. Such tests allow the employer to identify and recognize the applicant's potentials and also help to identify and develop those specific skills to match job requirements. Some of the tests in recruitment and selection process are explained below.

3.4.2 Ability and aptitude tests

Ability and aptitude tests measure specific skill sets and the resultant score gives an indication of existing ability or potential to learn skills required for the job. They evaluate a particular ability such as numerical, verbal, diagrammatic etc. Often the tests are multiple-choice and administered under exam conditions. Practicing tests will help to increase applicant's familiarity with them and can be found on the Internet. These tests get more difficult towards the end, so it is important not to rush them, but to think carefully and to go back to those you cannot answer.

3.4.3 Psychometric and personality tests

Psychometric and Personality tests assess individual's preferences in behavior, attitude and values through responses to questions or statements. These tests are un-timed and have multiple answers with each of the questions relating to different aspects of applicant's personality, such as team-working ability, leadership preferences. The tests must be answered honestly as they are trying to fit job applicants into a job role and if an applicant tries to guess what the employer wants, he may find himself in a job that does not suit him! For any of these tests the key is to remain positive! Job offering is not solely based on these tests - they are only used as one part of the recruitment process.

3.5 Interview

An interview is a formal exchange of facts, impression and view points between a prospective employer and a prospective employee with a view to their mutual selection or parting [20]. Interviews vary greatly in their content, but are often used to assess such things as interpersonal skills, communication skills, and teamwork skills, and can be used to assess job knowledge. Well-designed interviews typically use a standard set of questions to evaluate knowledge, skills, abilities, and other qualities required for the job. Employers generally conduct interviews face-to-face. Though interviews are quite popular in the selection process, its validity is increasingly being questioned. By validity we mean the extent to which the interview can suitably predict the right candidate(s) for the job from the pool of candidates. The reasons for doubt over the validity of the interviews is that it has been found out that most times the biases of the interviewers do affect their sense of judgment.

It is in order to reduce the impact of personal biases and improve validity of the interview, that the structured method is often advocated. A structured interview is one where the questions are prepared before hand and all the candidates are asked the same questions. Using a structured interview method also increases reliability. Reliability in interview is the degree of agreement between the interviewers on the performance of the candidates. In a situation where the interviewers arrive at the same conclusions about the candidates, then the reliability is high. On the other hand if they come to different conclusions, the reliability is low. Interviews are used in the selection process for two main reasons. The first is to assess the candidate's motivation for the job. The second is to assess how well he or she would fit into the immediate work group [20].

To have any value, interviews should be conducted or supervised by trained individuals, be structured to follow agreed set of questions mirroring the person specification or job profile, and allow candidates the opportunity to ask questions. The interview is more than a selection device. It is a mechanism that is capable of communicating information about the

job and the organization to the candidate, with the aim of giving a realistic job preview, providing information about the process and thus can minimize the risk of job offers being rejected. Organizations seeking high performance in their selection processes should therefore give considerable attention to maximizing the uses of the interview and ideally combine the method with other psychometric measures where appropriate.

4. NATURE OF APPOINTMENT IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

According to the provisions of [3], authority for recruitment into the public service is vested on the Public Service Commission. Appointments are made either:

- (a) By letter written by the Director of the Public Service Commission or
- (b) By formal agreement between the officer and the government or its appointed agents.

4.1 Types of Appointment

Direct appointment to the public service may be made in any of the following categories:

- (a) As trainee or pupil
- (b) On probation in a pensionable post
- (c) On non-pensionable contract to a non-pensionable post or against a pensionable post and
- (d) On temporary basis.

4.2 Eligibility for Appointment

Prospective employees of the public service are expected to satisfy the following conditions:

- (i) Be over sixteen (16) years of age.
- (ii) Possess such minimum qualification as are specified from time to time,
- (iii) Be certified by a government medical officer as sound in health and medically fit for the government service and
- (iv) Possess a testimonial of good conduct from his last employer or if not previously employed, from the last school or college he attended, (Civil Service Rules).
However, every applicant for employment by government must state:
 - (i) Whether he has been convicted of criminal offence
 - (ii) All employment he has engaged in and if he has left employment, why he did so; or if he is still in any employment, whether he is under any obligation to remain in it and
 - (iii) Whether he is free from pecuniary embarrassment.

4.3 Conditions of Appointment

4.3.1 Daily-rated staff

Heads of Departments are authorized to engage, without formality daily-rated staff in accordance with authorized rate of pay.

4.3.2 Officers on probation

Officers on probation are required to serve for two years before being confirmed in the service. During the period of probation an employee is required to pass the prescribed examination appropriate to his appointment.

The white paper on the 1988 civil service reforms was enacted as Decree No. 43 of 1988. The decree made provisions for the sharing of the powers of appointment, promotion and discipline between the Federal Civil Service Commission and Ministries/Parastatals. The decree limited the powers of the commission to:

- (i) Appointment of officers on GL 07-10 only
- (ii) Participating as an observer in the Personnel Management Board of Ministries.
- (iii) Performing appellate functions on petitions by officers against the decision of ministries and that of the personnel management board.
- (iv) Provision of uniform guidelines on appointment, promotion and discipline.

Powers of appointment, promotion and discipline of other officers were transferred to the Ministries and Extra-Ministerial Departments. The Ayida review panel recommended that the power of the commission be restored but with modifications. The Panel recommended that the power of the Civil Service Commission over recruitment, promotion and discipline should be as follows:

- (i) Recruitment Officers on GL 07-17
- (ii) Promotion Officers on GL 14-17
- (iii) Discipline Officers on GL 14-17

It is recommended that the commission should handle transfers and secondments in the civil service for officers on GL 07 and above.

4.4 Contract Appointment

A contract appointment is a temporary appointment which does not provide for the payment of a pension. The duration of a contract appointment is limited to the period specified in the contract itself. The appointment may be terminated by the government at any time in accordance with the terms specified in the contract agreement.

4.5 Recruitment Institutions

As earlier mentioned, recruitment into the Federal Civil Service is vested on the Federal Civil Service Commission which consists of a chairman and not less than nine (9) other members. The federal Public Service Commission has no responsibility for the following appointments:

- (a) A judge of the supreme court of Nigeria
- (b) Any officer in the Nigerian Police Force
- (c) Principal representatives of the Republic overseas, such as Ambassadors and High Commissioners
- (d) Justice of the Peace and
- (e) Permanent Secretaries.

Every state civil service has its own Service Commission which performs functions similar to Federal Public Service Commission.

5. CHALLENGES OF RECRUITMENT IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

In the first instance the issue of meritocracy is very much lacking. This manifested as a result of consistent interference of political office holders in the issue of recruitment. Whenever there is recruitment taking place, politicians do interfere and make sure that their candidates scaled through irrespective of whether they are qualified or not. This eventually leads to recruiting staff that are in most cases incompetent. It is however, a well known fact that for any organization to achieve its objectives it must have people with proven competence. It was on the realization of the need for competence in organizations that made Max Weber the greatest exponent of bureaucracy to state that candidates for positions in organizations must be selected on the basis of technical qualifications. However, in the case of Nigeria, recruitment and selection are based purely on sentimental reasons. The principle of federal character has also compounded the problem, since it has legalized nepotism and segregation in employment in the form of ethnic balancing. The principle of federal character is a principle saddled with the responsibility of given equal opportunity to all the six geo-political zones in terms of employment into the federal civil service. But the problem is that some of the zones are backward in terms of paper qualification and as such their vacancies cannot be properly filled fully. Again, regarding this issue, since all the geo-political zones have representation in the commission, in most cases those representatives intrude candidates from their respective zones irrespective of their unqualification, this is where the issue of ethnicity and favoritism comes in and this has a serious drawback as the outcome of those employed through this means will not yield any fruitful result. Incompetency of staff in Nigeria has resulted to gross inefficiency. It is therefore not surprising that staff of the Nigerian Public Service have not been able to over the years deliver.

There is also the issue of recruitment purely based on skills rather than positive attitude. Recruitment in Nigeria is mostly based on the skills and technical know-how of the person to be employed without giving due considerations to the attitudes and character that the applicant possess. It is good to note here, that employees with improper or negative attitude in most cases do not strive hard towards the realization of the organizational goals. Their personal interest is superior to that of the organization. This has a strong and negative effect as it leads to workplace tension and also lowers productivity.

6. WAY FORWARD

Agencies responsible for recruitment in Nigeria should try as much as possible to ensure that no unlawful discrimination occurs in the recruitment and selection process on the grounds of sex, race and religion or belief. In other words all Nigerians seeking for employment should be given equal opportunity irrespective of their background. Issues of nepotism, ethnicity and tribalism should be completely wipe out. Equality of opportunity is an integral part of the recruitment and selection process and to this end employers should make sure that only the right candidates are recruited i.e. recruitment should be base on merit.

Hiring employees should not be based only on the skills of the applicants; positive attitude should also be considered as well. The right attitude not only benefits the employee, but also maintains workplace morale and improves overall performance that benefits both the employee and the organization as a whole. The reason for hiring employees based on good

attitude, rather than sound skills, is that having the right skill set may get the applicant hired, but having the wrong attitude will ultimately result in the employee failing in the position. As such high level of skills and technical know-how coupled with sound attitude should be considered for employment.

Employers should also be cautious in choosing selection methods in order to maintain credibility among applicants as well, of course, as assessing the predictive value of the methods. The parameters considered before employment or recruiting candidates should be sound, not bias and up to date. This should be given great emphasis so as to avoid breeding bad eggs into organizations.

Decisions made in the course of recruitment and selection process should be perceived as essentially fair and admissible to all parties, including people who have been rejected. This can be done by using appropriate methods as mentioned earlier on and also being fair in the process. Applicants are concerned with both procedural justice – that is, how far they felt that selection methods were related to a job and the extent to which procedures were explained to them – and distributive justice, where their concern shifts to how equitably they felt they were treated and whether the outcome of selection was perceived to be fair [21].

Constant interference in the issue of recruitment by political office holders and other top government functionaries should be minimized or completely stopped in order to ensure formidable recruitment that will lead to good governance in organizations and also ensures effective formulation and execution of government policies geared towards the betterment of the living condition of the populace. The agencies responsible for recruitment should be left alone to do their job as they are people with proven integrity who are appointed based on merit and technical know-how.

Recruiters in the Nigerian Public Service need to keep abreast of changes in the labour market to ensure that their recruitment efforts are not wasted or directed at too small a pool of labour. This in essence means that governments must know its exact workforce and also when there is the need to add to the existing workforce. Skill shortages may occur unexpectedly and recruitment and training processes need to be kept flexible.

It is however, a good idea for any organization to plan its labour force requirements, matching available supply against forecast demand. A skills audit of existing staff will increase knowledge of the skills the organization has available and those which are lacking, and thus help pinpoint areas for future development. More so, despite the fact that Federal character and quota system was adopted in order to balance the development gap between the geo-political zones the country, in practice it is yet to produce any unrelenting effort to fix any of the structural problems that prompted the existence of the gap, instead it further widens it. This paper would want argue here that the policy should be revisited and merit be accorded greater emphasis than region.

7. CONCLUSION

Recruitment and selection are the instruments used by the Nigerian public service to ensure its continuity in the sense that those who exit the service by either retiring or withdrawal are being replaced instantly and this makes the public service work on-going i.e. a continuous process. It is however, through the system of recruitment and selection that competent and qualified personnel are being sort and offered job. This to a greater extent helps in maintaining sanity as well as the much needed development in the government work.

Though the recruitment system is characterized by a number of irregularities which are mostly sentimental, it is believed that a lot can be achieved if the recruiters maintain the status quo by making sure that merit is considered as number one priority followed by impartiality, fairness and equality. Finally, it is hoped that employment agencies in the Nigerian Public Service will try as much as possible to put the suggestions offered into trial which are believed to be the solution to the identified problems.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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