



GOAL SETTING AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF SOUTHWEST UNIVERSITIES' REGISTRY WORKERS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of goal setting on employees' performance of southwest universities' registry workers in Nigeria. Despite the perception that the universities in southwest Nigeria are at the fore of university education in Nigeria, there seems to be a steady decline in the performance of the universities. This has necessitated the study of the contribution of the registry workers in particular, who are the component of workforce in the university system, to the success of the core of university education, the performance of the registry workers in line with the increased need for more efficient processing time of key registry service delivery, and the overall need to improve the general performance of universities is drawn. A review of extant literature on goal setting and employee performance has been conducted. The study therefore recommends that universities as a way of improving employee performance must set clear, specific, measurable, attainable, and time-bound goals that are mutually set and incorporates effective feedback mechanism will serve as medium for enhancing the performance of its registry workers.

Keywords: Goal setting, Employee performance, Process, Time efficiency

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A major concern of managers of public and private enterprises is the performance of their employees; this is because employees' performance plays an essential role in the success of any organization. This is the reason why managers are always strategizing on ways to improve employees' performance in their bid to improve the overall organizational performance (Inuwa, 2016; Ogbewere & Dunmade, 2014; Teo & Low, 2016; Tayebe, Mohammadreza, Foroozan & Javad, 2017). Several studies on employee performance have addressed ways of improving employee performance such as through workplace diversity (Ugwa & Okonkwo, 2015), work engagement (Hanaysha, 2015), performance management (Mbore & Cheruiyot, 2017) and so on. Tayebe, *et. al.*, (2017) identified some ways of improving employee performance using such tools as Management by Objectives, narrative method, graphic rating scale form, ranking method, 360-degree evaluation, results-based system, critical incident method, essay method,

work standards method and so forth. However, these approach to improving employee performance addresses specific aspects or of employee performance. In view of this, Ishizaka and Pereira study (cited in Tayebe, *et. al.*, 2017), submits that when improving employee performance within an organization, there are some key aspects to be considered which includes position, organizational, personal, and task and target. Studies on goal setting (Ogbeiwi, 2018; Tech & Low, 2016; Yurtkoru, Bozkurt, Bektas, Ahmed & Kola, 2017) have shown that goal setting can be used to improve employee performance at individual and organizational levels (Maheshwari & Vohra, 2018). Employee performance is essentially outcomes realized and accomplishments made at work, and it indicates the financial or non-financial outcome of the employee (Anitha, 2014; Inuwa, 2016). Pradhan and Jena (2017), identified non-financial key indicators of employee performance some of these indicators are task performance, behavior towards customers, individual task proficiency, organizational task proficiency, and team member task adaptivity. Sugianingrat, *et. al.* (2019), added that customer satisfaction is one of the benchmarks of employee performance appraisal. Ogbulafor's study (cited in Inuwa, 2016) suggested that the deteriorating level of employee performance in Nigerian tertiary institutions is fast becoming a serious threat to survival of universities in Nigeria which needs to be urgently addressed. Therefore, this seminar paper will evaluate and critique researches on goal setting and their effect on employees' performance of University Registry workers in Southwest Nigeria.

The peculiar nature of University registry workers' task involves service delivery through the performance of routine tasks carried out to provide essential service all year round, has the tendency to create boredom as a result of repeated tasks, hence the need for management to inject an effective source of motivation to help improve the performance of registry workers over time. The quantity, quality as well as the time consumed in performing the unique services by registry workers has been an issue of concern over the years. This is because the registry is the life wire of the university system, such that the performance level of the registry employees is easily felt and has a far reaching effect on both the internal and external public of that institution. A distinction between private and public schools, though an important line of discuss, is not the goal of this research work. However, a general view of the nature and services of Universities' registry workers performance in relations to reaching goals set by the institutions forms the core of this study.

Numerous experimental research findings (Asmus, Karl, Mohnen & Reinhart 2015; Ogbeiwi, 2018; Tech & Low, 2016;) show that goal setting strongly influences human behaviors and in turn leads to changes in performance thus goals make it possible for a forward movement in a pre-determined direction by workers within an organization or institution. Recent studies on goal setting and employees' performance have covered employee in Hi-Tech Information Technology setting (Teo & Low, 2016; Tondello, Premasukh & Nacke, 2018), industrial production setting (Asmus, *et. al.*, 2015), Little research work however covers the impact of goal setting on university registry workers performance in Nigeria, this necessitated the study and makes its contribution to the body of knowledge significant. The question that bothers the mind is could decline in employee performance be attributed to the nature of goal setting process in the universities in Southwest Nigeria? Against this back drop, this seminar paper will address the issue of goal setting and workers performance of University Registry workers in Southwest Nigeria. Therefore this study aims to gain insight into the relationship between goal setting and the quality of employee service delivery, to support the universities to improve their performance by means of setting better goals.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Several literatures were considered to make a more robust understanding of the concepts and empirical works reviewed in this study.

2.1 Prior Studies on Goal Setting

Goal-setting is a very popular concept in work planning and assessment, and it is useful as a fundamental component of organizational management in general (Ogbeiwi, 2018; Tech & Low, 2016). Several authors (Draft, 2016; Locke & Latham, 2006; Obasan & Sotunde, 2011; Ogbeiwi, 2018; Openstax, 2019; Sides & Cuevas, 2020; Williams, 2016) have attempted defining the concept of goal setting. These authors see goal setting as a process by which goals are achieved, a process of identifying specific accomplishment to be made in a specific area with measurable outcomes, such as actions and timelines for achievement. Further, goal setting is defined as a formal program of setting numerical or quantitative performance goals for individuals, groups and organizations, and all formal goal setting programs share the common objectives of increasing employee motivation and performance. Based on the confines of this study, goal setting is seen as the process of planning and setting parameters for the accomplishment of clear, rational and challenging outcome statements that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time bound to the overall mission or objectives of organizations, groups or individuals.

More recently Ogbeiwi, (2018) submitted that various types of goals are differentiated respectively according to their different properties of measurement, goal-setting approach, cognition, localization, target, clarity, and also according to their purpose. Hence, several goal types as provided by various authors including general goals which are futuristic, long term, broad aims of the entire organization, or specific sub-organization and individual short term goals. Other types of goals such as outcome goals, performance goals and process goals were also presented (Kingston & Hardy, 1997; Tondello, *et. al.*, 2018). Further types of goals include mastery goals, which helps focus on the learning and mastering of skills in order to complete the tasks at hand has also been identified (Zainudin, Lee & Tang, 2014; Sommet & Elliot, 2017), while performance approach goal on the other hand is a goal where someone tries to do better than his or her peers. Lastly, Latham, Seijts & Slocum, (2016) discussed three types of goals which are behavioral, performance, and learning goals. In line with the types of goals are the levels of goal operation in an organization, this is referred to as goal hierarchy. Unsworth, Adriasola, Johnston-Billings, Dmitrieva & Hodkiewicz, (2011) established that goals exist in a hierarchical order, with higher-order, more abstract, long-term goals sitting at the top of the hierarchy and more concrete day-to-day task goals sitting at the lower end.

Goal setting attributes discussed by several authors include content and intensity (Latham & Locke 1991; Locke, *et. al.*, 1981; Ogbeiwi, 2018). The content of a goal pertains to the objects or results which are being sought, hence, goal content is the specific quantifiable performance result to be achieved (Ogbeiwi, 2018). Goal intensity on the other hand pertains to the process of setting the goal or the process of determining how to reach it. It is measured by such factors as the scope of the cognitive process, the degree of effort required the importance of the goal, the context in which it is set, and so on.

The benefits of goal setting have been highlighted by various researchers (Draft, 2016; Goerg, 2015; TeamFME, 2013) who agree that goal setting help define the purpose for which organizations are established; as such it leads to increased productivity, ensures clarity in decision making, provides motivation, activate planning, grows organizations, encourage thought, has an energizing and a persistence effect on those for whom the goals are set, and helps to control the future direction or activities of an organization. From the aforementioned, some of

the advantages of goal setting are that it provides a reference point against which workers can measure their satisfaction by dividing outcomes into gains, when the goal is attained, and losses, when output falls below the goal (George, 2015). Further, goal setting helps in the development of strategies that supports performance to the required goal level, (Lunenborg, 2011; George, 2015; Draft, 2016). Despite these advantages, however, the limitation in the goal setting process still comes to light; this is mostly from the implementation process of set goals. Too difficult or complex goals can result in reduced cooperation among workers, increased risk taking, and may encourage unethical behavior such as cheating and misreporting in order to be seen as meeting up with the goal (George, 2015; Latham, 2006). Similarly, lowered output quality can also be the result of much emphasis on quantity which is a more measurable aspect of work (Opensax, 2019). Equally, very difficult and complex goals stimulate riskier behavior, to help address this limitation, the skills of those for which goals are set should be taken into account when setting goals. This calls for caution to be exercised in the application of goals, as too high emphasis on quantity which is a more measureable aspect of goal setting could lead to low quality and vice-versa (Opensax, 2019).

The principles of goal setting as highlighted by TeamFME (2013) can be discussed using the acronym 4C F, this stands for Clarity, Challenge, Complexity and Commitment and Feedback, this idea is also supported by various authors (Latham, 2004; Williams, 2016). Goal clarity implies that goals should not be ambiguous; rather it should be easily understood and should not have double meaning. The principle of goal challenge is discussed as goal difficulty (Learning, 2018; Williams, 2016) it is the extent to which a goal is hard or challenging to accomplish, care should however be taken to prevent setting too difficult goals that may result in sharp practices in an attempt to accomplish it. Complexity principle evokes the need to devote time and mental effort to understanding complex tasks and mastering skills in order to achieve such goals, using higher level skills and strategies to accomplish complex tasks that have different interconnected parts (Heslin, Carson & VandeWalle, 2009; Locke & Latham, 2002; TeamFME, 2013). Commitment on the other hand, addresses the extent to which people consciously understand and agree to goals (Opensax, 2019; Reemts, Hirsch & Nitzl, 2016; Williams, 2016) this is affected by the attached importance of the goal and self-efficacy of the individual (Learning, 2018). Lastly, feedback is the degree to which a person learns how effective he or she is at work (Learning, 2018; TeamFME, 2013; Williams, 2016) irrespective of the source of feedback which could be from supervisors, peers, subordinates, customers or from the job, a careful understanding of its impact which could be positive or negative, increases the effectiveness of goal setting.

The acronym SMART has been used to describe the basic features of goal setting, such that goals should be specific, measureable, attainable, relevant and time bound (TeamFME, 2013; George, 2015; Hoek, Groeneveld & Kuipers, 2018). Goal specificity implies that a well-defined goal should be in a unit form of measure that can be easily and clearly related with such as value, quantity of output, and weight, colour, size, and so on for quality, as opposed to a simple do your best rule. Measurable refers to the ability to observe progress so that an individual or observer knows how close goal attainment is. A goal should be attainable, which means that an individual has a realistic chance of achieving the goal. In addition, a goal need to be relevant, that means it should be meaningful and worth achieving for the individual or the organization, while timed goals implies that there should be some time limit or timeframe for reaching or completing the goal. Further studies on goal setting reveals that goal setting has four outcomes (Obasan & Sotunde, 2011) which include choice, effort, persistence and cognition.

Considering how goal setting affects individuals, organizations and even governance, it is not shocking the amount of consideration in the research world it has received. However, caution should be taken when applying goal setting principles so as to ensure desired outcomes of effect, choice persistence and condition are achieved. Specific, measurable, attainable and time bound goals make it possible to know when set goals have been attained. From the above discussions, goal setting can be defined as a process of setting clear and measurable performance standards that guide an individual or organization in achieving a given set of objectives. Setting clear, challenging but attainable goals require due consideration of the skills of the employee as well as timely feedback to avoid possible deviation from set goals. Management and employee involvement in goal setting is key to possible goal commitment and attainment.

2.2 Employee Performance

Performance is a multicomponent concept (Pradhan & Jena, 2017). It is the degree of achievability of predetermined objectives (Halim & Sefer, 2013) and it incorporates the resulting outcomes of the performed actions of employees based on their expertise and skills (Dahkoul, 2018). Employee performance on the other hand is multidimensional construct (Sendawula, Kimuli, Bananuka & Muganga, 2018) that is defined as individual's work achievement after required effort has been exerted on the job which is associated through getting a meaningful work, engaged profile, and compassionate colleagues or employers around (Pradhan & Jena, 2017). In addition, Sendawula, et. al., (2018) submits that employee performance is the ability of an employee to achieve a specified task measured against predetermined standards of accuracy, completeness, cost, and speed. The importance of employee performance to the success of an organization cannot be over emphasized. Several authors have identified the benefits of employee performance some of which include that it is a source of gaining competitive advantage and source of strategic advantage (Anastasios & Prodormos, 2019; Dahkoul, 2018), a means of attaining organizational success (Dahkoul, 2018; Pradhan & Jena, 2017; Sendawula, et. al., 2018; Tayebe, et. al., 2017), however, an important condition for employee performance is management support (Anastasios & Prodormos, 2019).

Some of the dimensions of employee performance as highlighted by Pradhan and Jena (2017) include task performance, adaptability performance and contextual performance. The performance-driven objective should be aligned with the organizational policies and goals to achieve strategic and a people-centric perspective rather than event-driven (Pradhan & Jena, 2017). When this is the case, it becomes easier to measure employee performance against overall organizational goals. Hence in assessing the factors that enhance employee performance Anastasios and Prodormos (2019) identified job related factors and employee related factors. The job related factors include organizational fairness, job control and environment, while the employee related factors were adaptability, skill level and intrinsic motivation. However, Sendawula, et. al., (2018) perceived the link between goals and employee performance, this link is supported by Halim and Sefer (2013) study on measurement of employee performance.

Pradhan and Jena (2017) stress the need to determine employee performance beyond financial measures. In this regard, achievement and success were assessed to be major employee performance indicators (Hepngetich & Bula, 2017) and could be measured in terms of efficiency and teamwork, while employee engagement is the primary determinant variable of employee performance. Mbore and Cheruiyot (2017) conceived that employee performance measurement includes effective monitoring, providing timely feedback and reviews of the employees work and

performance according to the predetermined goals, and providing solutions to the problems faced. The appraisal of employees' performance has been seen to be one of the most emotionally charged activities in business life (Anastasios & Prodormos, 2019).

2.3 Goal Setting and Employee Performance

The Social Cognitive and the Goal Setting theories form the basis of this study. The social cognitive theory is based upon the behavioral approach to human action (Stajkovic & Luthan, 2002). It emphasizes both learning and cognition as sources of individual differences in personality. This theory of reciprocal causation identifies different sources of influence some of these influences include behavior, cognition, and environmental factors. The theory holds that some influences may be stronger than others and each influence may occur at different times (Bandura, 1989; Stajkovic & Luthan, 2002). Applying this theory to employee performance Stajkovic & Luthan (2002) submits that much of employees' knowledge and behaviors are generated from the organizational environment in which they operate. The assumption of the social cognitive theory is that values and behavior patterns arise from varied sources of influence and are encouraged by institutional backing. Because social agencies possess substantial rewarding and punishing power, jointly enforced sanctions can produce quick and extensive societal changes. The social systems' theory alone however, is inadequate to explain why there is often significant variation in values and behavior patterns, even within the same subcultures (Sajkovic & Luthan, 2002).

The goal setting theory however, forms the underpinning theory of this discuss on goal setting and employee performance. The goal setting theory was propounded by Edwin Locke, 1968, and has promoted a wide and varied set of studies on production to operational organization settings (Asmus, *et. al.*, 2015; Inuwa, 2016; Schmidt, 2019). The growth of the service industry and the need for improved performance in the form of quality service delivery and with emphasis on improved or reduced time taken to perform given task or assignments portrays the need for goal setting at all levels of organizational activities. The basic assumption of the goal setting theory is that goals serve as regulators of human actions, and that specific challenging goals produce better performance than 'do your best goals' or 'no goal' conditions (Kingston & Hardy, 1997; Ogbeiw, 2018). In addition, if individuals or teams within an organization, find that their current performance is not achieving desired goals, they typically become motivated to increase effort or change their strategy similarly Yurtkoru, *et. al.*, (2017) added that the basic premise of the theory is that a predetermined goal could serve as performance inducer, this reveals an inductive relationship between goal setting and improved production or employee performance (Locke & Latham, 2006). Several studies agree that goal setting theory predicts, explains, and influences employee's job performance (Asmus, *et. al.*, 2015; Ogbewere & Dunmade, 2014; Yurtkoru, *et. al.*, 2017). Hence a direct link between employee performance and the goal attainment of an organization has been established (Dahkoul, 2018).

The process of setting goals gives some kind of emotional urgency that is capable of provoking energy and attention of employees (Locke & Latham, 2006). This is most applicable when adopting the contemporary goal setting process of setting mutually agreed-upon goals between employee and management, and using those goals to evaluate employee performance (Anunarrafiq, Rai & Yessi, 2015; Robbins, *et. al.*, 2018). This allows for managers involvement as well as employees involvement in the process of goal setting such that managers appreciate

the difficulty involved in achieving the set goals, while the employees are motivated to achieve the set goals since they were instrumental in setting them.

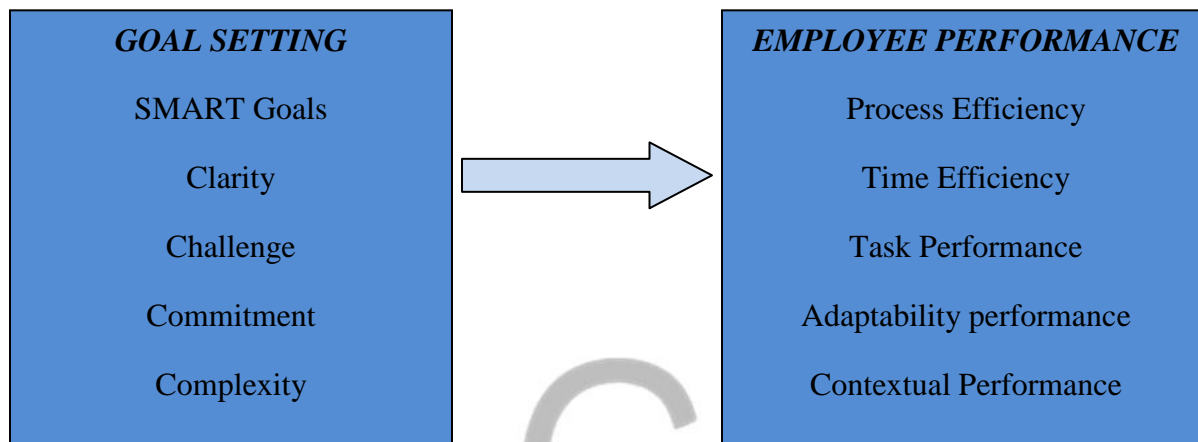
Several studies (Asmus, *et. al.*, 2015; Heslin, *et. al.*, 2009; Khan, 2014; Mogagi, 2014; Obasan & Sotunde, 2011; Ogbewere & Dunmade, 2014) have been carried out on how goal setting affects workers performance across various sectors and countries. In discussing the effect of goal setting on employee performance in the public sector of Nigeria results of research work (Obasan & Sotunde, 2011; Ogbewere & Dunmade, 2014) agreed that goal setting is important in the public sector and employee performance can be effectively measured against set goals. This idea was also supported by the work of Hoke, *et. al.*, (2018) in their study on goal setting in teams looking at goal clarity and team performance in the public sector. Similarly, the study of goal setting and performance within an industrial production process (Asmus, *et. al.*, 2015) findings show that goal setting had different impacts on the examined goal dimensions which were output quantity, output quality and energy consumption of the three experimental groups of employees used to carry out the study. It can be concluded from these results that for all three goal dimensions, goalsetting works as an intensifier of learning effects, with the strongest reinforcement being measured for the quantity. In addressing the effect of goal-setting on real production task and impact of setting goals related to other goal dimensions than output quantity, a gap identified by the work of Asmus, *et. al.*, (2015) submitted that even without financial incentives goal setting improves worker performance.

In a recent study by Maheshwari and Vohra (2018) shows how goal setting can improve performance both for the organization and the individuals. In other areas such as academics the concept of goal setting plays a vital role in enhancing performance (Sides & Cuevas, 2020). An important element of goal setting is feedback. The feedback element in goal setting has been shown to impact employee performance positively (Brown & Latham, 2000; Hepngetich & Bula, 2017) this is especially true for feedback on performance given by peers as against the feedback from supervisors (Brown & Latham, 2000). Hence, Ogbeiw (2018) findings revealed that the key philosophical reasoning behind goal setting it that it motivates the behaviour and effort of workers that are required as goal mediators to improve employee action performance towards achieving the desired changes or outcomes in any work-related setting. His studies further explored the different mediators and moderators in the relationship between goal-setting and task performance and/or goal attainment, and concluded that they are indispensable factors that must be present intrinsically in the individual workers and extrinsically in the organizational contexts for a goal-setting practice to be effective. The mediators identified include directing choice of goal oriented tasks, focusing effort on task, persisting at tasks and, seeking for goal relevant strategies or knowledge; while the moderators of goal setting are goal commitment, feedback, task complexity and situational constraints. While the attributes of goals that have been studied in relation to performance are content and intensity, studies have found consistently that performance is a linear function of goal difficulty (Latham & Locke, 2006).

When considering the effect of SMART goals on performance Weaver (2012) acquiesces that in order for performance to increase, goals must be challenging, specific, and concrete. This is in line with Latham (2016) submission that specificity results in the choice to focus on goal-relevant activities while ignoring those that are irrelevant. Hence, this seminar paper agrees that performance standards should possess SMART features (Halim & Sefer, 2013). Also results from the study of Reemts, *et. al.*, (2016) on goal specificity shows an assumed positive and significant correlation with individual work performance. Similarly, the results of Brown and Latham, (2000) when assessing the effect of goal setting and self-instruction training on the

performance of union employees revealed that difficult goals had significantly higher effect on performance, and given goal commitment, there is a positive relationship between goal setting and performance concluding that goal setting was a way of improving the performance of unionized employees, these findings were supported by several authors (Reemts, *et. al.*, 2016; Anunarrafiq, *et. al.*, 2015). The study by Anunarrafiq, *et. al.*, (2015) supports that the existence of goal characteristics such as goal specificity, goal difficulty, goal participative and goal commitment will moderate or strengthen performance and performance can be seen as the commitment to work better, contribute ideas and provide the best solution to achieving those goals.

The conceptual model for the study on goal setting and employee performance is presented below:



Source: Field study (2020)

Figure 1: Conceptual model of the study

The conceptual model for this study presents goal setting as the process of planning and setting parameters for the accomplishment of clear, rational and challenging outcome statements that have a degree of complexity and is also capable of arousing employee commitment. These goals should be SMART which means that they should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time bound to the overall mission or objectives of organizations, groups or individuals. Employee performance on the other hand is described as the degree of achievability of predetermined objectives. Hence, University Registry workers' performance can be measured in terms of process efficiency, time efficiency, task performance, adaptability performance and contextual performance.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This seminar study adopted a singular source of data collection. The secondary source of data generation, which included the use of textbooks written by different authors on the subject matter, journals, magazines, newspaper, information from the internet and other published and unpublished materials relevant to work. The data was analyzed using the content analysis approach. This is because of its major dependence on the secondary source data.

4.0 FINDINGS

Understanding how goal setting affects employee performance is of strategic importance to management of any institution or organization in that employee performance has been agreed to play a major part in organizational success, improved organizational effectiveness, gaining competitive advantage and overall growth of an organization. The findings from this study show that the goal setting process should be effectively carried out to ensure improvement of employee performance, and in turn organizational success. The thorough understanding of the concept of conceptual scope of goal setting is an essential step towards the implementation and effective management of the goal setting process within an organization or institution. In assessing employee performance, those performance standards should possess SMART features (Halim & Sefer, 2013). Similarly, goal features should be SMART that means that goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time bound, as the key philosophical reasoning behind goal setting is that it motivates the behaviour and effort of workers (Ogbeiwé, 2018).

Goals should be mutually agreed-upon between employees and management, when this is done, those goals can then be used effectively to evaluate employee performance (Anunarrafiq, Rai & Yessi, 2015). In addition, challenging goals could be used to help increase employee persistence, however these goals should be set high enough to encourage high performance but low enough to be attainable (Learning, 2018; Williams, 2016). Further, employee goal commitment which is the degree to which they are dedicated to achieving a goal is hinged on their understanding and acceptance of such goals (Learning, 2018). Suggestions on the need to further improve performance through the proper utilization of the feedback component of goals was established by Brown & Latham, (2000); Hepngetich & Bula, 2017). Hence, findings revealed that employees' commitment to work, work process and time efficiency, contribution of ideas to the actualization of set goals and response to feedback are ways of measuring performance.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Insights from this study advance that goal setting impacts employee performance. This supports the results of several research conducted on goal setting and employee performance, however, this study draws attention to the performance of registry employees in Universities in Southwest Nigeria. Based on the literature reviewed, results obtained from the data analysis and findings of the study, it can be concluded that goal setting can be used to improve the performance of registry workers by involving the workers in the process of goal setting, as this will serve to stimulate them to work towards the accomplishment of such set goals. Similarly, mutually set goals have higher positive impact on employee performance than goals set at the top and just handed down to employees, hence, registry workers should be involved in the process of setting goals so as to motivate them to want to see to its actualization thereby strengthening their level of goal commitment and improving their performance. Also, the skill of each employee should be assessed before goals are set, as too difficult goals can result in misrepresentations and other unethical behavior in an attempt to try to achieve the goal. Likewise, management should ensure that there is periodic feedback on the progress made by employees in the process of achieving set goals. This feedback component helps improve employees' performance as they are able to know the progress made and how much energy, effort and persistence they need to complete the task. This study therefore recommends that universities as a way of improving employee performance must set clear, specific, measurable, attainable, and time-bound goals that are mutually set and incorporates effective feedback mechanism will serve as a medium for enhancing the performance of its registry workers.

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