

Managing Buyer-Supplier Relationship in Construction Project Outsourcing

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ABSTRACT: *The study was undertaken to determine the effects of buyer-supplier relationship management and outsourcing efficiency amongst construction firms in Nigeria. Trust building, strategic collaboration and supplier development constituted the dimension for buyer-supplier relationship, while cost effectiveness, quality delivery and risk mitigation were used as indicators of outsourcing efficiency. The study adopted cross-sectional survey design, and 135 construction firms constituted the population for this study. A random sample of 101 respondents, comprising engineers, construction project managers, procurement officers, and contractors constituted the unit of analysis. This research adopted a structured online survey questionnaire which was administered via e-mail to obtain primary data. The findings showed that buyer-supplier relationship management in terms of trust building, strategic collaboration, and supplier development had a positive and a significant relationship on outsourcing efficiency. Construction and equipment leasing firms should build long term relationship with suppliers to enable them acquire the benefits of efficient outsourcing.*

KEYWORDS: buyer-supplier relationship; construction project outsourcing; trust-building; strategic collaboration in project supply chain; supplier development.

INTRODUCTION

Firms exist to meet the expectations of their stakeholders while remaining profitable and competitive in their chosen market. To achieve competitive market targets, outsourcing has become a major tool for enhancing business performance. Generally, outsourcing can be viewed as a strategy that allows firms to concentrate efforts on their core business mandate and possibly reduce operational the costs while remaining responsive to the ever-increasing

customer or client requirements. Outsourcing operation is usually unavoidable where firms have limited resources, knowledge, and capability to efficiently perform operational tasks in-house.

According to Bustinza, Arias-Aranda, & Gutierrez-Gutierrez (2010), some common reasons firms outsourced some of their functions includes reducing costs, accelerating new products development process, gain the opportunity to innovate and also use latest technologies made available by those who perform the outsourced service. Others, include sharing specialist competencies/knowledge, quality improvement, risk transfer, focus their resources on those activities with high added value, and mitigate risk in the entire cycle in the supply chains (Isaksson & Lantz, 2015; Idemudia & Osayande, 2016; Fidler & Hitch, 2007). However, despite the benefits of outsourcing business operations, many construction firms still grieve in relation to their goal attainment and capacity utilization.

In Nigeria, the construction industry plays a major role; generating employment and serving as professional training ground (Bon-Gang & Fan, 2010). In a bid to develop the capacity of the construction industry to meet up with its expectations, building a strong relationship between buyers and suppliers have been suggested amongst scholars and practitioners (Muhammad, Saeed & Wolfgang, 2019; Kemunto & Ngugi; 2014; Tubigi & Alshawi, 2015).

Buyer-Supplier relationship management (BSRM) is the process that expresses how a buyer firm interacts with its suppliers. Similarly, supplier relationship management is the process of preparation, execution, development and supervision of firm's relationship with capable suppliers to continuously reduce total costs, mitigate risks, and improve performance throughout the supply chain life cycle (Akamp & Müller, 2013). Its application differs from construction, to health, finance, and air travels Industries. As asserted by Muller (2010), poor supplier relationship management has been proven to disrupt and create common problems that impact the growth and expansion of industries especially the construction sector.

Consequently, the Nigerian vice president, Yemi Osinbajo, jointly with the World Bank and Infrastructural Concession Regulatory Commission (ICRC) inaugurated the Nigerian Open Contracting Portal (NOCOPO) in 2017 to encourage proactive disclosure of procurement/contract agreement in the Bureau for Public Procurement (BPP). The aim was to promote supplier relationship management system and possibly enhance supplier's performance to the advantage of all investors (Chima, 2017; Ibeh, 2018; Infrastructural Concession Regulatory Commission, 2017; Procurement Monitor, 2017).

A key characteristic of the construction industry is the huge amount of outsourcing (otherwise called subcontracting) operations. Subcontractors are categorised into service and material suppliers that supply drawings, labour and material and further convert order-related specifications into physical components. The rising competition in the construction project industry and expectations of on-time project delivery within budget, today's construction firms are continually relying on their subcontractors to meet deadlines and remain competitive. Hence, selecting appropriate subcontractors/suppliers and managing

the relationships effectively is key for any construction project, including resource outsourcing to perform efficiently (Adeleke, Olajide, Shiyanbade, 2014; Benton & McHenry, (2010). Poor management of the buyer-supplier relationship is costly, to construction industry, it is manifested in many ways such as delays in project execution time, cost overruns, project under-development, project abandonment, and trust and accountability issues (Quantity Surveyors Registration Board of Nigeria, 2013)

Today, as important as the supplier is to any business, managing buyer-supplier relationship for the purpose of achieving efficient outsourcing, surprisingly, has attracted relatively little empirical attention for the construction industry. This study therefore aims at examining the effect of buyer-supplier relationship management on efficiency of outsourcing function in construction industry.

The study hypothesizes as follows:

Ho1: Trust building has no significant positive relationship with outsourcing operational efficiency

Ho2: Supplier development has no significant positive relationship with outsourcing operational efficiency

Ho3: Strategic collaboration is not positively and significantly related to outsourcing operational efficiency

LITERATURE REVIEW

Buyer-Supplier Relationship Management

The development of supplier relationship management (SRM) is attributed to Peter Kraljic, of McKinsey & Company. As expounded in an article titled "Purchasing Must Become Supply Management" (Harvard Business Review, 1983); this segmented supplier base and charted it into two major dimensions: risk (uncertainties) and profitability (cost-effectiveness). SRM, is a predominant strategic approach to determine and implement different supplier-based involvements, including the development of collaborative relationships with the prequalified few suppliers who can make the greatest level of difference; prioritized against available resources, functional as appropriate across an entire supply base, to optimize value to the firm, lessen supply chain risk and aid the firm to achieve its goals as well as enhancing customer satisfaction. Furthermore, BSRM, involves business practices that vary from totally transactional to collaborative, (Goffin et al., 2006).

In the transactional method, which conventionally has been prioritized, the buyer firm emphasizes on reduction in cost. In order to achieve this objective, the buying firm has to depend on short-term agreements/contracts which specify the terms of the transaction with regards to delivery cost, delivery quality and delivery time. Based on this kind of relationship, supply chain integration and knowledge sharing effort is kept low (Fossas-Olalla et al., 2013).

Trust Building

Trust building involves high level of confidence in the buyer-supplier relationship. Trust is a key factor that boost buyers to engage in (1) Safeguarding a specific investment by collaborating with their suppliers; (2) eliminating short-term disruptions, sustaining the relationship with suppliers, and identifying expected long-term benefits; and (3) recognizing the high-risk behaviour, because of being assured that, suppliers will not engage in opportunistic behaviour. According to Stephenson (2005), trust and commitment constitutes the main foundation of managing construction supply chain. The benefits accrued from long term relationships cannot be over emphasized; steady buyer-supplier relationship reduces transactional costs, reduces the tendency to always resort to formal bonds/agreement, and enhances effective dispute resolution. Furthermore, long-term buyer-supplier relationship creates good understanding of consumer needs, enhances continuous supplier development, build robust opportunity for joint planning through interchange of transaction information and knowledge sharing.

Looking at the studies carefully, it can be deduced that, trust building is strong foundation of the buyer-supplier relationship. Firms who build lasting trust and shared ideologies tend to achieve higher level of fulfilment in their outsourcing relationship and will commit resources to promote its continuity (Prajogo & Olhager, 2012) and this will require, consistency, integrity and capability from both partners in course of the business, Nyaga et al., (2010). Consequently, high levels of commitment may not be realized until partners experiences trust and shared understanding in the relationship (Zhang & Huo, 2013).

Strategic Collaboration

Over the years, arms-lengths contracts, agreement have long governed the way buyers and suppliers execute their businesses (Nyaga et al., 2010), however, firms are now advancing from the traditional method of relationships with numerous suppliers to a more strategic one that fosters longer term relationships with selected few prequalified and trusted suppliers. The most widespread collaboration techniques are JIT purchasing (JITP), which makes the buyer's JIT process possible, as highlighted by Kaynak & Hartley, (2006). In addition, vendor managed inventory (VMI), where suppliers manage several contracts and are responsible for the buyer's inventory (Simchi-Levi et al., 2003). This dimension is usually where creativity and innovative thinking can truly thrive. However, in order that the supplier develops top-tier strategic collaborative relationship with a buyer, parties really need to carefully ascertain their position in the relationship (Kroes & Ghosh, 2010). Also, competencies in the area of project risk management, sourcing quality, and cost reduction is important to be regularly evaluated throughout the relationship (Liou & Chuang, 2010; Wu & Park, 2009).

Most firms spend significantly more than 50% of their revenue on buying goods, services and works. Petersen et al., (2005) in their studies stated that, healthy relationship with supplier aid quality decision-making abilities amongst the supply chain partners during the business development phase for cost effectiveness and other benefits. Furthermore, when communications lines are open to manage outsourced services provider, early integration through a disciplined approach, aligning them with firm's goals, will foster effective

collaboration. In the works of Nyaga et al. (2010), they viewed collaborative relationships in terms of information sharing, commitment to investments and combined relationship hard work.

Supplier Development

Supplier development can be defined as a program established by a buyer firm to upgrade its supplier's competences and enhance continuing improvements (Krause & Handfield, 2007). Supplier development can also be described as any effort of a buying firm with its supplier to increase the performance and/or capabilities of the supplier for the benefit of the buying firm, (Al-Doori, 2019; Okon, 2018; Mose, 2015). The program is usually initiated by a buying firm to improve its supplier's performance or capabilities in a way that enables the supplier meet the long- and short-term needs of the buyer. Now, during supplier development, the buyer most often sends out a cross-functional development team to train, enlighten the suppliers and provide them with knowledge about ways in which they can improve in their products and services.

Furthermore, the rationale behind this, is to create a relationship that will improve supplier's competitive benefit, due to the fact that some construction firms are faced with the challenge of suppliers who lack the ability to improve themselves in some area and strategies have been recommended to improve efficiency. These encompass, rising the standard for supplier performance expectations, sourcing through a global strategy, early involvement of suppliers during design stage; continuous supplier evaluation and assessment, certification, rewards and others (Margolis, Sustaining High Performance through Effective Supplier Development, 2011).

Notwithstanding of importance of supplier development towards ensuring efficient outsourcing operation, there seems to be an almost dearth of documented research in Nigeria. However, some documented research has stated conflicting outcomes; the works of (Al-Doori, 2019; Essien et al., 2019) found insignificant positive link, studies asserted by (Anand & Grover, 2015; Ogundare & Alalade, 2018) reported significant negative link while a few studies as cited by (Babatunde et al., 2016; Adedokun et al, 2017; Erakpotobo, 2018) stated positive significant link seemingly inspired by means of the shortage of experimental studies and inconsistencies, this research is poised to observe how supplier relationship management can impact outsourcing efficiency in construction firms in Nigeria.

Outsourcing Efficiency

Outsourcing as a concept emerged from an American terminology, meaning, outside resourcing. Outsourcing is a strategy of using outside resources to carryout activities traditionally done by insourced personnel. As posited by Letica (2016) outsourcing is a strategy used by firms to contract some of their core services to specialized and efficient providers of goods or services, who turn into valued business partners afterwards. In recent time, with the invasion of COVID-19 globally prompted most firms to organize distant/remote work procedures to safeguard their workforce's wellbeing. At the same time, financial managers in firms considered exploring a cost-effective strategy that could help

them handle costing and efficiency challenges. Notably, outsourcing strategy helped most firms at the peak of the unfamiliar circumstance.

Lee et al. (2011) suggests that new ways of doing business affects supplier efficiency as it fosters collaboration with buyer firm, based on increased efficiency and quality delivery of products and services. The unceasing search for ways of gaining competitive edge has given SRM the millage it desires as a tool for putting a firm ahead of its rivals. Though improved supplier relationship management has the potential to enhance the operational capabilities of firms, which will ultimately meet the desires of managers seeing the relationships lead to achievement in terms of improved market share, growth in services and profitability (Hartmann et al., 2012).

Lavastre et al. (2014) in their studies expounded that, supplier relationship management aids improvement of internal relationship, this includes commitment, trust, mutual receipt of knowledge amongst firms, information systems, and while external relationships including stability in demand, and collaboration between firms. Trust built over time in buyer and supplier relationships activates the development of new ideas that can be channeled together and thus, the outsourcing as a strategy will work out well. Relational trust boosts the exchange of knowledge and development in operational effectiveness.

Similarly, Homas (as cited in Ahiauzu & Asawo, 2016) espoused social exchange theory; that human behaviours and social interaction (relationships) is largely involved in exchange of both tangible and intangible activities, sharing and disclosing verifiable information. Hence SRM, establish and maintain social bond on the foundation of interactive value (Ahiauzu & Asawo, 2016). Therefore, it is supported that buyer-firm establishes collaborative contractual relationship with its supplier that will aid in restructuring, boosting competitive benefit and achieving value for money (Seurey, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive and cross-sectional survey design was adopted for this study. This design was considered suitable because the variables of interest and data were collected at one-time period. In addition, online survey was adopted, this is because, online surveys are reported to be more economical in usage, rapid in data collection, and precise in targeting the right research population, (Spitz, Niles & Adler, 2006). By using an online survey, the researcher does not have to be physically present, making it easier and much more economical to reach a wide population, (Wilson 2007). According to Spitz, Niles & Adler, (2006); online survey is widely used in contemporary research, due to its flexibility, simplicity and low cost of administration than other survey methods. The population of this study comprise of all registered construction and equipment leasing firms in Nigeria. Accessible records at the time of this study, shows that 466 construction and equipment leasing firms (available at the appendix section) were registered (businesslist.com 2021; & findlib.com 2016).

A hundred and thirty five (135) firms were selected for this study on the following two criteria: Having a functioning project management department with at least three (3)

certified project management professionals; Such professional must be a registered member of either, the Council for the Regulation of Engineering in Nigeria (COREN), Association for consulting Engineers in Nigeria (ACEN), Nigerian, Institute of Quantity Surveyors (NIQS) or Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply Nigeria (CIPSN).

The sample size was determined by the use of Taro Yamane (Yamane, 1973) formula with 95% level of significant. The sample size for this survey was therefore not expected to be less than 101 respondents. Random sampling technique (a probability sampling method), was adopted. Random sampling technique was adopted because of the need to avoid bias in sample selection. Therefore, each member of the study population was given a fair opportunity of being selected.

The structured online survey questionnaire was developed and was administered via e-mail. The questionnaire was divided into two sections; section one comprised questions relating to the socio-demographic data of the respondent such as age, sex, educational background among others. Section two comprised of 5-point Likert scale statements that measure the dependent and independent variable of the study which were arranged as follows; Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1) and Undecided (0). There were 20 questions in all addressing the four research questions of the study. A total of 101 copies of the questionnaire were personally received via google sheets from respondents. It took over two weeks to administer and collect copies of questionnaire.

RESULTS

Respondent's Demographic Profile

The respondent's demographic profile is as shown on 1. A total of 86.1% are males and (13.9%) are females who responded to the survey instrument. This suggest that, most of the respondents are males. The results of respondent's age show that those within 41-50 of years recorded (58.4%) contributed more in the study, 31-40 had (19.8%), while 51years and above had 11.9%, 21-30 had (8.9%) and less than 21years had only (1.0%) respectively. This infers that most of the respondents are between 41-50 years of age. Correspondingly, for the years of experience, 13.9% of the respondents have less than 5 years of experience, 11.9% of the respondents have years of experience between 6 to 10, 74.2% of the respondents have 11years and above experience. This indicates that the respondents can submit good opinions on the subject matter, based on their various years of work experience.

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Table 1: Analysis of Demographic Profile of Respondents (N= 101)

VARIABLE	ITEM	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Gender	Male	87	86.1
	Female	14	13.9
Age	Less than 21	1	1.0
	21-30	9	8.9
	31-40	20	19.8
	41-50	59	58.4
	51years and above	12	11.9
Professional	Engineers	49	48.5
	Quantity Surveyors	2	2.0
	Construction Manager	8	7.9
	Project Manager	24	23.8
	Valuers	3	3.0
	Procurement Officers	15	14.9
Highest Educational Qualification	Postgraduate (MA/MSc/MPhil/PhD)	51	50.5
	Bachelor Degree (including Honours)	39	38.6
	Higher National Diploma	11	10.9
Years of Experience	1-5 years	14	13.9
	6-10 years	12	11.9
	11 years and above	75	74.2

Lastly, for respondents' highest educational qualification, (50.5%) are Postgraduate (MA/MSc/MPhil/PhD), while (38.6%) respondents have bachelor degree. Only (10.9%) respondents have Higher National Diploma. Analysing the result, it therefore means that most of respondents holds master's degree. Furthermore, the result of respondents who took part in the study shows that (48.5%) are Engineers, (23.8%) respondents are Project managers, (7.9%) of the respondents are Construction managers, (3.0) are values, while only (2.0%) are Quantity surveyors.

Correlation analysis of all variables

Table 2 displays the summary of results, indicating the effect of buyer-supplier relationship on outsourcing efficiency, their intercorrelation amongst the variables. It reveals an existence of positive and significant relationship between buyer-supplier relationship on outsourcing efficiency. The Correlation analysis between the three independent variables: trust building, strategic collaboration, supplier development ($r = .427^{**}, .479^{**}, .588^{**}$; $p < 0.05$). This indicates that, the relationship between the predictor variables (TB, SC & SD)

and the dependent variable (OE) is positive and significant at 0.01 level, since p-value is 0.000 which is less than the common alpha level (α) of 0.05.

Table 2: Mean, Standard Deviation (SD), Reliability Analysis, and Correlations Matrix (N=101)

	TB	SC	SD	OE	Reliability Coefficient (α)	Mean	Std. Deviation
TB	1				0.65	14.8614	2.74601
SC	.382** .000	1			0.69	14.6733	3.17524
SD	.424** .000	.610** .000	1		0.73	15.1386	3.45841
OE	.427** .000	.479** .000	.588** .000	1	0.82	14.8713	3.84620

NB: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

a. Predictor (Constant): Trust Building (TB), Strategic Collaboration (SC), Supplier Development (SD)

b. Dependent Variable: Outsourcing Efficiency (OE)

Regression analysis between the predictors and dependent variable

Regression analyses are sets of procedures that is used to assess the ability of an independent variable(s) to predict the dependent variable(s). Thus, as part of the analysis, Regression Analysis was done. The results are as seen on Table 3

Table 3 ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	of Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	590.259	3	196.753	21.466	.000 ^b
	Residual	889.068	97	9.166		
	Total	1479.327	100			

a. Dependent Variable: OE

b. Predictors: (Constant), SD, TB, SC

The ANOVA reveals that the model can predict outsourcing efficiency using the independent variables. The F statistic ($F=21.466$) was significant at a 95% confidence level, predicting and enhancing a positive relationship, ($\text{Sig. } F < 0.05$). It shows the statistical significance of the regression model that was run; $p < 0.0005$. This is less than the significance level of $\alpha = 5\%$, signifying that statistically significant relationship exist between TB, SC, SD and OE.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The main aim of this study was to investigate the effects of buyer-supplier relationship management and outsourcing efficiency amongst construction firms in Nigeria. Precisely, the study looked at Trust building, Strategic collaboration, Supplier development and Outsourcing efficiency on 101 employees, four (4) hypotheses were formulated as tentative

responses to the research questions raised and were experimented to investigate possible backing for the proposition.

Firstly, this study clearly shows that the respondents are well informed of the subject matter and can submit good opinions based on their various years of work experience; this can significantly lead to efficient outsourcing practices. Secondly, the hypothesis test on the relationship between trust building (TB), strategic collaboration (SC), and supplier development (SD) on outsourcing efficiency (OE) reveals that, there exists a statistically significant relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. However, the output shows supplier development having the strongest relationship with ($r = 0.588$, $p < 0.05$), closely followed by strategic collaboration with ($r = 0.479$, $p < 0.05$), while trust building had the lowest correlation to outsourcing efficiency with ($r = 0.427$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, it can be said that the three independent variables have strong dependence on buyer-supplier relationship such that the absence of these three would lead to a significant decrease in outsourcing efficiency.

From the result also, it means that, management of most construction firms have demonstrated as well as built trust in its supplier; by keeping to the terms and conditions of the relationship; exchange of knowledge and information frequently; strategically collaborating with their suppliers at an early stage of construction projects, making available continuous improvement programs which have efficiently improved their outsourcing activities. Relatedly, firm's operating cost has reduced; their compliance with statutory regulations have improved; firms have better security service and ultimately, firm's productivity has increased. With the effective adoption and benefits gained by firms under this study, other firms would begin to practice a proper buyer and supplier relationship management and this will eventually make outsourcing activities efficient. This is in line with the study of Chan & Chin, (2007), emphasizing that, outsourcing has evolved beyond tactical option, that aids firms save monetarily, to using strategies and other behavioural options in fostering best practices for value creation as well as boost competitiveness of the supply chain amongst industry players (firms) in the global market

Thirdly, the independent variable which includes trust building, strategic collaboration selection, and supplier development positively influenced the dependent variable, outsourcing efficiency. This discovery also corroborates results from earlier studies which emphasized on the existence of significant relationship between trust building, strategic collaboration and supplier development and supply chain efficiency globally (Ochieng, 2014; Prajogo & Olhager, 2012; Ding et al. 2011; Nyaga et al. 2010).

Lastly, findings from the regression analysis, displays the view of the respondents and also maintain the fact that buyer-supplier relationship management through trust building, strategic collaboration, and supplier development has a positive and a significant joint effect on outsourcing efficiency on the firms under study to a great extent. Here, project managers are inferring that construction firms can relatively enjoy some level of competitive benefit over their competitors, thus, guaranteeing their existence.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the relationship between buyer and supplier gets stronger with the demonstration of trust, facilitated with functional correspondence among buyer and supplier, justifiable treatment of suppliers by buyers, and willingness of suppliers to put resources into the core activities of the buyer. The findings in this study has shown that trust, strategic collaboration and continuous development of suppliers are interdependent, as they are the essentials of efficient outsourcing operation. The study has also confirmed that buyer-supplier relationship is positive and significant in enhancing the efficiency of firm's outsourcing activities. All construction and equipment leasing and other firm are advised to embrace this concept so as to obtain the benefits of developing buyer-supplier relationship. By keeping and sustaining healthy relationship with their suppliers, construction and equipment leasing ensure that they perform well; they also help suppliers execute their given task efficiently as well as achieve their goals.

Importantly, there is need for construction and equipment leasing firms to encourage long term collaboration on buyer-supplier relationship management involving suppliers of construction firms and original equipment manufacturers. This will further enhance the integrity of outsourcing as a tool as risk is mitigated. Implementing supplier relationship for efficient outsourcing function requires top management input and commitment, this is because decision made by management will strengthen buyer-supplier collaboration. Hence, it is recommended that, management embrace and sustain the ideology of relationship management; this will give suppliers a positive mind set, and eventually enhance continuous existence that leads to continuous product and service availability.

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