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Bridging the Gap Between Public Sector Employment and Youth Expectations in Nigeria: An Analysis of Workforce Development and Retention

Madike, Hope Chinelo
Department of Public Administration, School of Business Studies, Federal Polytechnic, Oko, Anambra State, Nigeria
Corresponding Author: hope.madike@federalpolyoko.edu.ng
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Abstract

The growing dissonance between youth aspirations and the structural realities of public sector employment in Nigeria poses significant policy and management challenges for sustainable governance. This study, anchored in the framework of workforce development and retention, examines how systemic inertia, outdated personnel policies, and misaligned reward mechanisms have failed to meet the evolving expectations of Nigeria's youthful labour force. Employing a documentary research design, the study critically synthesizes data from policy documents, government reports, institutional reforms, and extant scholarly literature to interrogate the interface between public service transformation and youth career paths. Findings reveal that the Nigerian public sector's traditional bureaucratic model characterized by rigid hierarchies, opaque recruitment practices, and limited innovation space; contradicts the values of a generation seeking flexibility, creativity, and merit-driven advancement. Drawing insights from human capital theory and expectancy theory, the paper argues that bridging this gap demands a strategic policy shift toward talent-based management, digital capacity building, and performance-oriented culture. It recommends a recalibration of public service structures to foster inclusivity, continuous learning, and motivational equity capable of retaining skilled youth within the system. The study contributes to ongoing debates in public administration and development management by proposing a pragmatic framework for re-engineering Nigeria's public workforce toward adaptive, youth-responsive governance.

Keywords: Public sector reform, youth employment, workforce development, talent retention, human capital.

Introduction

Across developing economies, the public sector remains a vital employer and a cornerstone of national development. In Nigeria, however, its role in attracting, developing, and retaining young professionals has come under increasing scrutiny. Historically, public service employment represented security, prestige, and a stable income (Eneanya, 2018). Yet, for Nigeria's growing youth population—constituting over 60% of the labour force—the public sector now appears rigid, uninspiring, and misaligned with the aspirations of a digital-era workforce (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). The disconnect between the expectations of contemporary Nigerian youth and the employment realities of the public sector reflects a deeper structural and cultural crisis in public administration and human resource management.

Nigeria's public service has undergone several reforms—such as the Udoji Commission of 1974, the Ayida Panel of 1995, and the SERVICOM initiative of 2004—intended to enhance productivity, accountability, and professionalism. Yet, these reforms have yielded limited impact on workforce renewal and youth integration (Okotoni & Ere, 2020). As technological transformation reshapes global work environments, young Nigerians increasingly prioritize creativity, flexible work arrangements, rapid career mobility, and purpose-driven employment (Akinwale, 2021). Conversely, the public sector remains bound by hierarchical control, bureaucratic delays, and inadequate reward systems (Olaopa, 2020). This imbalance has contributed to brain drain, skill flight, and growing youth disinterest in government employment.

The gap between youth expectations and public sector employment in Nigeria is not merely generational; it embodies an institutional failure to modernize workforce policies and align them with evolving socio-economic realities. Unemployment and underemployment among youth remain persistently high—33.3% and 21% respectively—as of the latest NBS report (NBS, 2023). The attraction of the private and digital sectors, which offer better incentives and growth prospects, has intensified talent migration away from government institutions (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, the slow adoption of digital technologies and the absence of performance-based management systems have constrained innovation and retention among young employees (Ogunyemi & Oni, 2020). These dynamics raise critical policy questions on how Nigeria can reposition its public service to remain competitive and relevant to its youthful population.

Existing scholarship on public service reform in Nigeria has predominantly focused on administrative efficiency, corruption control, and institutional restructuring (Ezeani, 2019; Olojede & Fatile, 2020). However, limited attention has been given to the psychosocial and generational dimensions of workforce motivation, particularly the expectations of Generation Z and millennials within public employment (Adeyemi & Adeoye, 2021). Studies in public management underscore the growing importance of workforce agility, digital competency, and employee

engagement in sustaining institutional performance (Osibanjo, Salau, & Falola, 2020). Yet, the Nigerian public sector continues to apply conventional management practices that fail to attract or retain creative youth (Okonkwo, 2022). This literature gap highlights the need for an inquiry that integrates workforce development, human capital optimization, and youth-centric retention strategies within public administration discourse.

This study, therefore, canvasses a rethinking of Nigeria's public sector workforce model toward a talent-centered and performance-oriented paradigm. It interrogates the structural, motivational, and policy dimensions that contribute to workforce disengagement and explores innovative pathways for bridging generational divides in public employment. Using a documentary research design, the paper synthesizes existing reports, policy frameworks, and scholarly evidence to propose a strategic model of workforce development and retention suited to Nigeria's evolving governance landscape. The ultimate goal is to reposition public service employment as a viable, aspirational, and future-ready career path for Nigeria's youth.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine the gap between public sector employment and youth expectations in Nigeria and explore strategies for effective workforce development and retention. The specific aims include**:**

1. To review existing public sector policies on youth employment and workforce management in Nigeria.
2. To identify key factors responsible for the mismatch between youth expectations and public sector work conditions.
3. To recommend practical measures for improving youth engagement, development, and retention in the public service.

Review of Related Literature

Clarification of Key Concepts

Three clusters of concepts: public sector employment**,** youth expectations, and workforce development/retention; are tightly interwoven in the literature rather than isolated constructs.

Public Sector Employment: Public sector employment refers to work carried out within government institutions at national, state, or local levels aimed at delivering public goods and services (Olaopa, 2020). It is typically characterized by hierarchical bureaucracy, tenure-based appointments, and adherence to civil service rules. In Nigeria, the public sector is not only a major employer but also a critical instrument of policy implementation and socio-economic stability (Ezeani, 2019). However, scholars have observed that it has become increasingly unattractive to young professionals due to low remuneration, limited innovation, and inadequate career mobility (Okonkwo, 2022).

Youth Expectations: Youth expectations in the context of employment encompass young people's aspirations for decent work, fair compensation, skill growth, autonomy, and meaningful contribution to society (Akinwale, 2021). For Nigerian youths, these expectations

are shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and exposure to private-sector work cultures emphasizing merit, innovation, and flexibility (UNDP, 2022). The divergence between these expectations and the bureaucratic realities of public employment has generated frustration and disengagement among the country's young workforce (Adeyemi & Adeoye, 2021).

Workforce Development and Retention: Workforce development involves policies and practices that build employee capacity through training, mentorship, and performance management to improve institutional productivity (Osibanjo, Salau, & Falola, 2020). Retention refers to the ability of organizations to maintain a stable, motivated, and competent workforce over time (Okotoni & Ere, 2020). In Nigeria's public sector, the inability to attract and retain talented youths has been linked to outdated human resource systems, poor motivation, and inadequate career progression opportunities (Olojede & Fatile, 2020).

Thematic Review

Public Sector Policies and Youth Employment: Nigeria's public service reforms: from the Udoji Commission (1974) to the SERVICOM Charter (2004); have aimed to modernize human resource management and improve efficiency. However, their implementation has been inconsistent and largely elitist, with little consideration for youth inclusiveness (Olaopa, 2020; Okotoni & Ere, 2020). Studies by Ezeani (2019) and Eneanya (2018) show that existing policies focus on structural efficiency rather than workforce rejuvenation. Furthermore, the absence of a youth-centered employment policy in the civil service has limited the infusion of digital skills and innovation in governance (World Bank, 2022).

Institutional and Organizational Factors Affecting Youth Engagement: The bureaucratic structure of the Nigerian public service remains rigid and hierarchical, discouraging creativity and innovation (Ogunyemi & Oni, 2020). Research indicates that leadership culture emphasizes control rather than collaboration, and promotions are often seniority-based rather than performance-driven (Adeyemi & Adeoye, 2021). In a study of federal ministries, Osibanjo et al. (2020) found that 64% of young employees expressed dissatisfaction with supervisory relationships, citing limited feedback and poor mentoring structures. Additionally, gender bias, nepotism, and politicization of appointments have further weakened employee morale and commitment (Okonkwo, 2022).

Strategies for Workforce Development and Retention: Recent literature emphasizes that employee retention in the public sector depends on a mix of motivational, professional, and social factors (Olojede & Fatile, 2020). The application of human capital theory underscores that investing in skill development enhances productivity and loyalty (Becker, 1993). Expectancy theory further explains that when employees perceive that effort leads to valued rewards, their performance and retention increase (Vroom, 1964). However, Nigerian public institutions often neglect these dynamics. Training programs are irregular, incentives are poorly structured, and performance appraisal systems lack transparency (Okotoni & Ere,

2020). Thus, workforce retention remains a systemic challenge that demands strategic human resource reorientation.

The core problem underpinning this study is the widening expectation-reality gap between Nigerian youth and public sector employment. While government institutions continue to serve as major employers, they fail to appeal to the younger generation seeking dynamic, technology-driven, and purpose-oriented careers (Akinwale, 2021). The situation is worsened by poor working conditions, slow promotion cycles, and lack of recognition, which collectively drive youth attrition and apathy (UNDP, 2022). The resultant effect is a stagnated workforce with low innovation and declining service quality. Despite various reform initiatives, policy inertia and outdated bureaucratic structures have hindered adaptation to contemporary workforce demands (Olaopa, 2020). The problem, therefore, is not the absence of reform efforts but the misalignment between institutional design and youth expectations, which this study seeks to explore and address.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies reveal a persistent pattern of workforce dissatisfaction and weak retention in Nigeria's public sector. In a survey of 1,000 civil servants across three states, Osibanjo et al. (2020) found that over 70% of respondents under 35 years expressed intent to leave within five years due to limited growth opportunities. Similarly, Okonkwo (2022) reported that only 25% of young employees in federal ministries felt their organizations encouraged innovation. Akinwale (2021) observed that the private sector and international organizations are increasingly attracting skilled Nigerian youths by offering competitive remuneration and flexible work models. In contrast, public institutions are perceived as stagnant, politicized, and resistant to change. Moreover, Ogunyemi and Oni (2020) found that digital transformation initiatives in the Nigerian public service were hampered by inadequate training and a lack of youth participation in ICT decision-making processes.

Comparative studies from Ghana and Kenya (Boateng, 2021; Mutinda, 2020) demonstrate that public sector youth engagement can improve significantly through targeted internship programs, performance-based promotions, and hybrid work systems. Yet, similar approaches remain underdeveloped in Nigeria due to policy inconsistency and leadership inertia (World Bank, 2022). The cumulative evidence underscores a structural and cultural deficit that impedes workforce renewal and retention.

Summary and Identified Gaps

The reviewed literature reveals a growing scholarly consensus that Nigeria's public sector is lagging behind in aligning its employment systems with the aspirations of its youthful population. Studies have illuminated issues of bureaucracy, poor motivation, and weak performance management, but there is limited exploration of the expectation gap as a policy and management problem within the context of workforce development and retention.

While several works (Ezeani, 2019; Okotoni & Ere, 2020; Osibanjo et al., 2020) address public service reform broadly, few integrate youth perspectives, human capital optimization, and

retention frameworks within a single analytical model. Moreover, much of the existing research is empirical but lacks a comprehensive documentary analysis of policy evolution and reform failures in relation to youth integration.

This study, therefore, fills these gaps by employing a documentary research design to synthesize policy documents, reform reports, and scholarly evidence. It aims to propose a pragmatic framework for bridging the expectation gap between Nigerian youth and public sector employment through innovative workforce development and retention strategies grounded in human capital and expectancy theories.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored on *human capital theory* and *expectancy theory*. Together, these frameworks provide a dual perspective for understanding the structural and motivational dimensions of the gap between public sector employment and youth expectations in Nigeria. While Human Capital Theory emphasizes the economic and developmental value of investing in people, Expectancy Theory explains the psychological processes that drive individual motivation and work performance. The integration of both theories thus enables a multidimensional understanding of workforce development and retention challenges in the Nigerian public service.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory (HCT), originally advanced by Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961), posits that individuals and societies derive economic returns from investments in education, skills acquisition, and professional development. The theory suggests that a productive and innovative workforce is the outcome of sustained investment in human competencies and capacity building. From this lens, workforce development is not merely an administrative function but a strategic investment essential for institutional competitiveness and national progress (Romer, 1990). In the context of the Nigerian public sector, the application of Human Capital Theory underscores the critical role of training, mentoring, and continuous professional development in aligning employee performance with institutional goals (Eneanya, 2018; Okotoni & Ere, 2020). Unfortunately, recurrent underinvestment in staff training, obsolete recruitment systems, and limited career development pathways have weakened the quality of human capital in public institutions (Olaopa, 2020). This neglect has particularly alienated young professionals who seek opportunities for personal growth, creativity, and digital innovation. Empirical evidence shows that when employees perceive that their skills and competencies are valued and developed, their job satisfaction and organizational commitment increase (Osibanjo, Salau, & Falola, 2020). However, the Nigerian public sector often treats employees as administrative functionaries rather than strategic assets, thereby undermining motivation and long-term retention. Applying Human Capital Theory to this study therefore highlights the need to reconceptualize workforce

development as a deliberate policy investment aimed at rejuvenating the public service with youth-driven energy, creativity, and adaptability.

Expectancy Theory

Expectancy theory (ET), propounded by Vroom (1964), provides a psychological explanation for employee motivation and behavior at work. The theory is built around three core components: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence; which together determine the effort an individual is willing to exert. In essence, employees are motivated when they believe that their efforts will lead to desirable performance (expectancy), that performance will lead to certain rewards (instrumentality), and that those rewards are personally valuable (valence). Applied to the Nigerian public sector, Expectancy Theory reveals the misalignment between employee effort, reward systems, and career outcomes. The bureaucratic and hierarchical structure of the civil service often suppresses initiative, innovation, and merit-based recognition (Adeyemi & Adeoye, 2021). Promotions are commonly determined by tenure rather than performance, while recognition for outstanding contributions is rare or politically mediated (Olojede & Fatile, 2020). Consequently, many young employees experience low expectancy and instrumentality, leading to disengagement and eventual attrition. Expectancy theory also emphasizes the psychological contract between employer and employee. When the public service fails to meet the implicit expectations of fairness, career growth, and motivation, employees; especially younger ones, develop a sense of disillusionment (Akinwale, 2021). This study therefore uses Expectancy Theory to interrogate how inadequate motivation, poor reward structures, and unfulfilled expectations contribute to workforce instability and low retention rates among Nigerian youth in the public service.

The integration of human capital theory and expectancy theory provides a holistic framework for analyzing the workforce development-retention nexus in Nigeria's public sector. While human capital theory emphasizes structural investment in skills and institutional development, expectancy theory focuses on psychological motivation and reward alignment. Together, they explain both the supply-side and demand-side challenges of the expectation gap. The Nigerian public service's failure to invest adequately in training and digital capacity (human capital deficit) coexists with its inability to design motivating, merit-based reward systems (expectancy deficit). These twin failures lead to a cyclical problem: underdeveloped human capital lowers performance, while weak motivation discourages the retention of high-performing youth employees. This theoretical synthesis therefore guides the present study in identifying not only structural reforms required for workforce renewal but also motivational frameworks necessary for sustainable retention and engagement.

Methodology

This study adopted a documentary research design, a methodological choice that aligns closely with both the nature of the research problem and the type of evidence required to explore youth expectations, workforce development, and the dynamics of public-sector employment in

Nigeria. Documentary analysis is especially well suited to studies that seek to understand how institutions function, how policies evolve, and how administrative reforms unfold. These processes are rarely captured through real-time behaviour or experimental observation; instead, they are most reliably documented in written sources such as government policies, reform blueprints, official circulars, committee reports, and institutional reviews (Mogalakwe, 2006; Ahmed, 2020).

A documentary research design was selected ahead of more empirical approaches for several practical and conceptual reasons.

First, the central aim of this study is to understand how public-sector structures, policies, and administrative cultures shape youth engagement. To achieve this, the researcher must reconstruct the historical and contextual journey of various reforms and recruitment practices. Such reconstruction is only possible through documents that record institutional intentions, decision-making processes, and reform outcomes over time. Although interviews and surveys can capture personal perceptions, they cannot fully illuminate the deeper logic, constraints, and administrative patterns embedded within official government records.

Second, the expectation gap between young people and public institutions is largely a product of long-standing policy frameworks and organizational practices that span multiple administrations. A documentary approach allows the researcher to compare documents across different time periods, highlighting continuities, shifts, stagnation, or recurring implementation failures. This longitudinal insight is something cross-sectional empirical methods cannot adequately provide.

Third, critical elements of workforce development: such as recruitment procedures, promotion guidelines, appraisal systems, and staff training commitments; are mostly codified in official documents. Assessing these systems meaningfully requires consulting authoritative, standardized, and verifiable records, rather than relying solely on individual accounts that may differ widely across ministries, departments, and agencies.

Finally, the choice of a documentary design aligns with the study's theoretical foundations. Both human capital theory and expectancy theory emphasize how institutions define incentives, outline skill-development pathways, and articulate reward mechanisms. These theoretical concerns are translated into practice through policy documents, circulars, and organizational manuals. Therefore, using documentary analysis provides the most coherent and theoretically consistent means of examining how these ideas are expressed and operationalized in Nigeria's public sector.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources. These include:

a) **Official documents and policy frameworks** from government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), such as the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), and Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC).
b) **Academic and institutional reports** on youth employment, workforce development, and retention in Nigeria.

c) **Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings** addressing issues of public service motivation, organizational development, and generational expectations in the workplace.
d) **Media publications and think-tank reports** that provide insights into public perceptions of the Nigerian public service and youth employment challenges.

These sources were critically selected based on relevance, credibility, and recency to ensure that the data accurately reflect current realities and trends within the Nigerian public sector.

Data collection followed a systematic four-stage documentary review: identification, selection, evaluation, and interpretation of documents. Guided by Krippendorff's (2018) content analysis model, materials were examined using themes aligned with the study's objectives:

1. Public-sector policies influencing youth employment and workforce management.
2. Institutional and organizational determinants of youth engagement and retention.
3. Strategies and reform proposals aimed at reducing expectation gaps.

The analysis paid attention to both explicit content (policies, statistics, institutional statements) and latent meanings (underlying values, assumptions and ideological positions).

Qualitative content analysis (Bowen, 2009) was employed to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and implicit policy orientations. Data were coded into conceptual clusters reflecting human capital development, motivational incentives, performance expectations, and youth employment dynamics. The analysis involved thematic grouping, comparative synthesis, and interpretive reading, enabling the researcher to connect institutional policies to broader theoretical insights from human capital and expectancy theories.

To strengthen the credibility of the study, several strategies were adopted:

a) **Source triangulation:** Findings were cross-validated across multiple document types (policy papers, statistical reports, academic literature) to ensure consistency and reduce the risk of relying on a single narrative.
b) **Systematic coding procedures:** A uniform set of coding criteria was applied throughout the analysis, increasing reliability and enabling repeatability of the analytical process.
c) **Document quality screening:** Only official, peer-reviewed, and verifiable documents were included to avoid misinformation or interpretive bias.
d) **Contextual and temporal verification:** Documents from different time periods were compared to ensure accurate interpretation of reforms and evolving institutional practices.
e) **Reflexive interpretation:** The researcher maintained detailed analytic memos to document reasoning steps and minimize subjective bias when interpreting documents with differing ideological orientations.

Human capital theory underpins the study's focus on institutional investment in youth development, skills acquisition, training, and career progression. Expectancy theory guides the examination of how institutional incentives, fairness, and recognition influence youth

motivation and retention. By grounding interpretation in these theories, the methodological framework ensures that the documentary evidence is analyzed within a coherent and theoretically informed lens.

Discussion of Findings

The documentary analysis revealed that while Nigeria's public sector remains a significant employer of labour, it has failed to evolve in tandem with the expectations, skills, and aspirations of the country's growing youth population. The reviewed policy documents, including the National Youth Policy (2019), the National Employment Policy (2020), and the Public Service Renewal Blueprint (2021), indicate ongoing reform efforts, but these initiatives have not adequately translated into tangible workforce development or retention outcomes. The findings are presented and discussed under three major themes aligned with the study's objectives: (1) policy and institutional alignment with youth expectations, (2) organizational and motivational factors affecting youth retention, and (3) strategic pathways for bridging the expectation gap.

1) Policy and Institutional Alignment with Youth Expectations: The analysis showed that existing policy frameworks recognize youth employment as a national priority but largely adopt a supply-side approach, focusing on skill acquisition without reforming the demand-side dynamics of public sector work (NBS, 2023; Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2022). For example, while programs such as N-Power and the Youth Empowerment and Development Initiative have expanded training opportunities, they have not led to sustainable absorption into public employment. Public institutions continue to operate under rigid bureaucratic structures, limited recruitment autonomy, and outdated personnel management systems (Adebayo & Ojo, 2021). This misalignment creates a gap between the youth's expectations for career progression, innovation, and digital engagement and the public sector's slow-paced, rule-bound operational culture. Viewed through human capital theory, this finding reveals a fundamental underinvestment in the productive capabilities of the youth workforce. Despite the policy rhetoric on human capital development, the institutional mechanisms for translating knowledge and skill acquisition into professional growth and retention remain weak. This disconnect leads to an erosion of human capital value, as many trained youths seek opportunities in the private sector or abroad.
2) Organizational and Motivational Factors Affecting Youth Retention: The study also found that motivation and career satisfaction among young public sector employees remain low due to limited incentives, hierarchical rigidity, and lack of performance-based recognition systems. Salary structures are often not competitive, promotion processes are slow, and recognition for innovation or extra-role performance is minimal (Okafor & Ibe, 2020). These conditions contrast sharply with the expectations of Generation Z and Millennial employees, who prioritize purpose, recognition, and growth opportunities in their careers (Adeleke & Fajana, 2022). Drawing from expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), these

findings indicate a breakdown in the motivation process within public institutions. When the perceived effort-to-performance and performance-to-reward linkages are weak, employees—particularly the younger cohort—experience diminished motivation and organizational commitment. This aligns with empirical evidence suggesting that Nigerian public servants often perceive limited reward for hard work and innovation (Ibrahim & Mohammed, 2021). Consequently, the public sector struggles with talent flight, low morale, and poor retention rates. The lack of alignment between youth expectations and institutional reward systems also manifests in absenteeism, disengagement, and reduced productivity—factors that weaken institutional efficiency and undermine reform objectives.

3) Strategic Pathways for Bridging the Expectation Gap: Findings across the reviewed documents suggest the need for a paradigm shift in workforce development, moving beyond mere employment generation to building sustainable career pathways for youth in the public service. Key strategies include:
    a) **Human capital investment** through targeted training, mentorship, and digital literacy programs that align with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) skills.
    b) **Motivational redesign of work environments** through performance-based reward systems, flexible work models, and innovation-driven job structures.
    c) **Institutional renewal** to promote transparency, accountability, and participatory management that empowers younger employees to contribute ideas and leadership (World Bank, 2022).

Informed by human capital theory, such measures would enhance the quality and productivity of the youth workforce, improving the return on investment in education and training. Simultaneously, drawing from expectancy theory, aligning reward structures and recognition systems with youth aspirations would foster greater commitment, creativity, and retention in public employment. The synthesis of these findings reveals that bridging the expectation gap requires both systemic reform and motivational realignment: combining structural change with psychological reinforcement to make public sector employment both rewarding and sustainable for the Nigerian youth population.

The relationship between human capital theory and expectancy theory provides a multidimensional explanation for the persistent challenges of youth engagement and retention in Nigeria's public service. From the human capital perspective, youth are potential assets whose value depends on institutional investment in learning, innovation, and adaptive leadership. However, the failure to nurture and reward this capital through fair and transparent mechanisms as explained by expectancy theory; leads to wasted potential and declining institutional performance. Thus, while Nigeria's public sector policies articulate noble goals for youth inclusion, the implementation gap reflects a lack of motivational intelligence within administrative systems. Bridging this divide requires an integrated workforce development policy that treats youth not just as beneficiaries but as co-drivers of institutional renewal.

Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to reform Nigeria's public sector employment framework to better align with the expectations, competencies, and aspirations of the youth. Drawing insights from human capital theory and expectancy theory, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. **Reform Public Sector Recruitment and Career Development Policies**: Recruitment processes should prioritize merit, digital competency, and innovation potential rather than seniority or patronage. Structured career development frameworks: supported by regular capacity-building, mentorship, and performance reviews; should be institutionalized to promote continuous learning and professional growth (World Bank, 2022). This aligns with the Human Capital Theory's emphasis on sustained investment in human resources as a driver of national productivity.
2. **Institutionalize Performance-Based Reward Systems**: Public institutions should transition from tenure-based to performance-based appraisal systems. This will foster a culture of accountability and motivation consistent with Expectancy Theory, where effort and performance are visibly linked to rewards such as promotions, recognition, and incentives. This approach can strengthen morale among young employees and reduce attrition.
3. **Enhance Workplace Flexibility and Inclusion**: The bureaucratic rigidity of Nigeria's public service should be reformed to embrace adaptive work environments that encourage creativity and inclusivity. Policies allowing flexible schedules, hybrid work options, and participatory management can make the public sector more attractive to the digital-native youth demographic.
4. **Integrate Technology and Digital Skills into Workforce Development**: The government should invest in digital transformation strategies that bridge the gap between traditional administrative processes and emerging technological competencies. This will not only modernize the public service but also increase the sector's appeal to young professionals seeking technologically enabled workspaces.
5. **Strengthen Institutional Accountability and Leadership Ethics**: Reform outcomes depend on credible leadership committed to transparency and fairness. Public institutions must promote ethical leadership that fosters trust, meritocracy, and youth inclusion. Strengthening accountability mechanisms within ministries and agencies will create an environment where youth can envision long-term careers in public service.
6. **Establish a National Public Sector Talent Management Framework**: A coordinated framework should be developed to identify, recruit, and retain top youth talents across MDAs. This framework should integrate continuous skills mapping, mentorship programs, and leadership succession planning to institutionalize youth engagement in governance and service delivery.

The study's findings reaffirm the human capital theory's argument that economic and institutional advancement depends on the strategic development of human resources.

However, the Nigerian experience shows that investment in education and training without corresponding structural and motivational reform results in underutilized human capital. Thus, policy design must go beyond training initiatives to include organizational reform, fair reward systems, and conducive work environments that allow youth to realize their potential. Similarly, expectancy theory provides critical insight into why the public sector struggles to retain young professionals. When youth perceive a disconnection between effort, performance, and reward, motivation declines—leading to disinterest and turnover. Therefore, aligning expectation and reward structures is essential for improving morale and productivity. By operationalizing both theories, Nigeria's public sector can foster a workforce that is not only skilled but also motivated to contribute meaningfully to national development.

Conclusion

This study examined the gap between public sector employment realities and youth expectations in Nigeria, highlighting the structural, motivational, and institutional factors that undermine workforce development and retention. The evidence from documentary analysis revealed that while policy frameworks exist to promote youth employment, their implementation remains hindered by bureaucratic inertia, weak incentives, and limited investment in human capital utilization.

Bridging this gap requires a dual policy approach: investing in youth as assets of national development (as posited by Human Capital Theory) and creating motivationally intelligent institutions where performance and reward are directly linked (as advanced by Expectancy Theory). Sustainable reform must thus prioritize both capacity and motivation; ensuring that young Nigerians view public service not as a last resort but as a viable and fulfilling career path. Ultimately, achieving alignment between youth aspirations and public sector employment in Nigeria is essential for building a competent, innovative, and future-ready workforce capable of driving effective governance and inclusive development.

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