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Development in Nigeria*



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Content

1	Address Delivered By The National President, Nigerian National Council For Adult Education (Nncae)	vii
2	Contemporary Adult Education – The Challenges, Risks And Chances! Keynote Address Delivered By Prof. Dr Katarina Popovic	xi
3	Promoting Knowledge Economy Society Through Lifelong Learning In Nigeria <i>Abdullahi Umar Alhasan</i>	1
4	Celebrating The Vision And Resources Of Adult Education Towards Attainment Of Sustainable Development In Nigeria: The Institutional Perspective <i>Echezue, Benjamin.C, Mbadiwe-Woko, Ebinabobo F. and Agi, Patience</i>	15
5	Extension Education Strategies For Awareness Creation Of Covid -19 Among Rural Communities Of Bende Local Government Area Of Abia State Imo <i>Onyeodiri Charity (Ph.D), Ngurukwem, Chinyere Chinwe and Prof. Ebirim Ugomma Nkeonye</i>	30
6	Adult Education And The Changing Global Environment <i>Dr Mbalisi, Onyeka Festus Ebohon Rose Eyefujinrin and Dr Tommy, Korinaki Anny</i>	41
7	Distance Learning Strategy And Increasing Education Access For Drop-Out-From-School Youths In Enugu State, Nigeria. <i>Okechukwu, Ann Ebere, Nwaubani, Ogochukwu Vivian and Ogbonnaya, Kingsley Asogu Ph.D</i>	59
8	The Role Of Tertiary Institutions In-Service Training And Workers' Productivity In Cross River State, Nigeria. <i>Edoho, Glory Emmanuel, Ph.D, Olabisi, Bella Charles, Ph.D and Ekpeyong Violet Oyoph. D</i>	76
9	Contributions Of Adult Literacy Programmes Towards Achieving The Empowerment Of Adults In Enugu State, Nigeria <i>Ozurumba, I. G, Ochiagha C.D, Echem G.C.C and Ugwuoke A.C.</i>	91
10	Indigenous Practices Militating Against Biodiversity Conservation In Cross River State, Nigeria <i>Omang, Theresa Nkim, Ojong, Aganyi Asu (Ph.D), Ulayi, Agnes Inlagar (Ph.D) and Dr. Onnoghen, Usang Nkanu</i>	114
11	Strategies For Promoting Digital Learning Environment In Adult Education Department In Nigerian Universities <i>Mrs. Aniameka Gloria Nwanneka and Prof. Helen Ebunoluwa Adebola</i>	131

12	A Peep Into Another 50 Years Of Nncae And Nigeria's Educational Status As A Member Of E-9 Countries	149
	<i>Adeshina Abideen Olojede, Mohammed Jiya Lakan and Etsu Abubakar Bello</i>	
13	Maximizing The Benefits Of Adult Education For Sustainable Development In Nigeria	158
	<i>Chinonyelum Chioma Osilike</i>	
14	Utilization Of Digital Learning In Adult Education For Sustainable Development In Jalingo, Taraba State Final	173
	<i>Igwe Justina Ngozi (Ph.D), Yusuf Linus, Koledoye, Uzoamakalucynda (Ph.D) and Ekwealor Nwakaego Ebele (Ph.D)</i>	
15	Impact Of Information And Communication Technology On Adult Education Delivery System.	189
	<i>Bell-Gam Roseline Soprinye and Oyebamiji, Morufu. Adekola</i>	
16	Adult Education For Improving Environmental Knowledge And Environmental Behavior Of Youths In Enugu State.	206
	<i>Michael O. Ugwueze, Matthias U. Agboeze and Maryrose N. Agboeze</i>	
17	The Role Of Information And Communication Technology In Human Resource Development In State Agency For Mass Literacy Adult And Non-Formal Education Enugu State	218
	<i>Ugwuoke Ngozika Josephine Ph.D, Obiozor, Elizabeth Ebere, Osagie Alice O. and Peterside, Henry Vincent</i>	
18	Adult Education In Nigeria: The Present Scenario And The Future Projection	233
	<i>Mkpa, Iquo Okon Phd. Jane Asonze Phd, Ezeala, Joy Ijeoma Phd and Costly M. Erim Phd</i>	
19	The Impact Of Knowledge Aquisition And Management On The Entrepreneurial Skills Development In A Knowledge Economy Society	246
	<i>Adeosun, Motunrayo Ajoke and Anyikwa, Blessing E.</i>	
20	Strategy For Promoting Mass Literacy For Sustainable Development Of Rural Communities In Rivers State	262
	<i>Ebere, Patience Uwelegbewe; Dokubo, C. and Bruce, Seagirl Esther</i>	
21	Adult Education In Nigeria: Bridging Lost Grounds	279
	<i>Mbara, Kingsley Ugochukwu (Phd), Emeakama, Felicitas Obumneke, Ofonagoro, Geoffrey Chukwuemeka and Ezeugwu, Nkechinyere Gloria</i>	
22	Functional Literacy Education As A Strategy For Adults Socio-Economic Sustainable Development In Nigeria	288
	<i>Adeyemo C. W., Agboola B. G., Kayode G. M. and Olanipekun A. O.</i>	
23	Resource Allocation And Rehabilitation Of Internally Displaced Persons In Cross River State, Nigeria	301
	<i>Dr. Virginia E. Ironbar, Uba, James E. and Dr. Obibessong, Vera M.</i>	

- 24 **Sustaining Information And Communication Technology Skills Of Household Heads In Ezira Community, Anambra State, Nigeria** 316
Alexander Chukwudi Onyeme, Phd and Victoria A. Ifeanacho, Phd
- 25 **Whatsapp As A Learning Tool Among Sandwich Students Of Alvan Ikoku Federal College Of Education, Owerri** 329
Anurugwo Appolonia Osita Ph.D. and Mbara Kingsley Ugochukwu Ph.D
- 26 **Methodological Approaches In Adult Education Research: A Review Of Quantitative Research In Nigerian National Council For Adult Education Journal** 341
Dr. John M. Patrick and Dr. Christiana N. Ijah
- 27 **Towards An Effective Implementation Of Non-Formal Education Curriculum In Nigeria: An Advocacy For Learning And Innovation Skills-Based Instructional Strategy** 356
Joseph Bamidele Odunuga
- 28 **The Role Of Information And Communication Technology In Human Resource Development In State Agency For Mass Literacy Adult And Non-Formal Education Enugu State** 375
Ugwuoke Ngozika Josephine Ph.D, Obiozor, Elizabeth Ebere, Osagie Alice O. and Peterside, Henry Vincent
- 29 **Adult Education In Nigeria: Bridging Lost Grounds** 389
Mbara, Kingsley Ugochukwu (Phd), Emeakama, Felicitas Obumneke, Ofonagoro, Geoffrey Chukwuemeka and Ezeugwu, Nkechinyere Gloria
- 30 **Promoting Digital Technology For Labour Leaders Training In Nigeria: Issues And Perspectives** 398
Funmilola Elizabeth Akinyooye
- 31 **Participation In Adult Literacy And Skill Acquisition Programmes For Poverty Alleviation And Sustainable Development Among Women In Abeokuta Metropolis.** 412
Elizabeth Abosede Adewuyi P.H.D, Victor Akinsanya Idowu and Rebecca Yemisi Akinkunmi
- 32 **The Place Of Adult Education In Enhancing The Delivery Of Relief Services To Emergency Victims In Kano State, Nigeria** 426
Abdulhamid Bashir Aminu

Promoting Digital Technology for Labour Leaders Training in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives

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Abstract

Labour union leaders are very important to the success of any union activities. The labour leaders are expected to drive their members towards the achievement of the various goals set by the union. These leaders therefore need the necessary leadership skills to enable them lead effectively. Hence, the need for regular training programs to equip them with adequate skills such as empathy, communication, problem solving, creativity, interpersonal and team work. However, such regular training programmes aimed at equipping, building and enhancing union leaders' capacity may not be possible due to constraints like time and finance. The break out of COVID-19 which ravaged the whole world has also served as a deterrent to physical training or gathering of people in large numbers. In order to overcome these barriers, there is a call to promote digital industrial training programmes for the labour leaders through the principles of Adult Education. This paper examined the rationale and perspectives for promoting digital industrial training programmes among labour union leaders in Nigeria.

Keywords: Training, Digital Technology, Industrial Training, Labour Union, Leaders,

Introduction

Labour Unions are groups of workers organized to interact with employers and their organizations on the welfare and conditions of service of their members. These unions comprise of contracted employees in an industry or across industries within a sector. Labour union leaders are the vehicle for the representation of these union aspirations and harmonization with organizational goals for productivity and shareholders' guarantee of return on investment. They serve as the hub of social network for employees' communality and workplace interests to manage management-employees interactions, encourage harmonious working relationship, create industrial harmony and engender organizational growth (Ncube, 2021; Okolie and Agbefe, 2020, Onyeizugbe, Aghara, Olohi and Chidiogo, 2018). They are also responsible for governance, administration, revenue generation,

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collective bargaining and dispute resolutions of their unions and members in the workplace (Ugbomhe and Osagie, 2019; Enenya, 2013; Nwagbara, 2013).

Trade Union Leaders are key influencers and decision-makers who lead and manage their different unions. These leaders play pivotal roles in the preparation of the future of the world of work in any economy, particularly a developing economy like Nigeria that is highly vulnerable and have negatively impacted the welfare and limited the physical capacity of workers for productive engagement. The level and relevance of their industrial training and the currency of their competences are important in the determination and direction of skills development, mobility and availability in the labour sphere.

It is the duty of the labour union leaders to mobilize, coordinate, direct, control and manage the perception of their members. This is geared towards industrial harmony. A wrong perception of weak leadership can create instability among the workforce or distrust in leadership and accusation of compromise or sell out to management at the expense of their welfare. Training and information reinforce leadership performance and credibility. It infuses confidence in the labour union leaders and builds trust in the membership that their interests will be ably protected and represented to management.

However, over the years, labour union movements have been pulled in a direction that jeopardize the industrial training and development of the competences of their leaders. They have been preoccupied with class struggle, political militancy, activism and fight for leadership legitimacy that they have little time left to train or organize training programmes for their leaders and members (Nwoko, 2009; Osiki, 2009; Nesbit, 2002). On the other hand, COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamics of work and ushered in opportunities for the rapid increase in the deployment of digital technology in the workplace. In spite of its fragile labour market, the Nigerian government through Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) adopted remote work alternatives and instituted framework for non-contact and remote learning interventions to improve digital connectivity and remedial education through digital technologies on a medium-term basis (WHO, 2021; NCDC, 2020; World Bank Group, 2020; ILO, 2020; Kazeem, 2020; Weber et al, 2020).

The implication of this initiative is not lost on workers education for labour union movements, particularly the need for labour union leadership to adopt digital industrial training to bridge the gap in their supervisory and leadership education in today's new Normal World. There remains a shortfall in leadership training among labour unions. The Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies (MINILS) have only trained 30,0000 workers in the areas of manpower development, labour policies and industrial relations practices. There has not been digital training for labour union leaders to sharpen their leadership capabilities and grow their unions in a competitive work environment. This paper seeks to critically examine the imperatives of industrial training programmes among labour union leaders and discuss the promotion of digital industrial training programmes among them in Nigeria.

Theoretical and Literature Review

This part will consider a review of Human Capital theory as it relates to the paper and also review key concepts in the study.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory which can be traced to economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz who stated that education make employees more productive. The theory is a neoclassical economic orthodoxy that is premised on the assumption that jobs in the work place require certain complementary cognitive skills which can be acquired only through formal education and the marginal product of the educated employee increased relative to the one of employees who are not so educated.

Richard Freeman and Marxian economists like Samuel Bowels and Herbert Gintis in 1976 have stressed that the theory was built around class conflict and attempts to empower labour. This criticism was followed by the rise of behaviour economics in the 1980s and 1990s that human capital theory failed to explain the phenomenon of human motives, goals and decisions. Contemporary sociologists and anthropologists argued that the theory is too simplistic in establishing the nexus between human capital, productivity and income which cannot be objectively measured. Ross (2021) stated that the outcome of research in a 2018 paper establish a correlation between income and productivity with the use of circular logic.

The Human Capital Theory and its latter-day criticism identified class conflict in the workplace and positioned a nexus between education and labour market with the assumption that the better educated employees are likely to perform better than others who are not and may subsequently receive an education premium which amounts to higher income and economic benefits (Karasiotou, 2013; Merwe 2010). The Theory implies that the performance outputs of labour union leaders and the productivity of labour unions and path-goal achievements of employees could be adduced to the level of industrial education and subsequent cognitive skills of the labour union leaders. The argument is that labour union leaders who are trained through digital learning are likely to acquire contemporary skill sets to direct the affairs of their labour unions and manage the relationship between the employers and employees better for organizational competitiveness.

Mosweunyane (2013) was of the opinion that classical bureaucratic leadership postulated by Max Weber (1947) and supported by Thompson (1965) would engender productivity and professionalism in the organisation. The missing link is the ability of the bureaucracy to proactively respond to the environment through risk management and value creation (Ratten 2010, 2011a, 2011b cited by Winand, Scheerder, Vos and Zintz, 2016). The proposition to consider new ways to upscale their skills may encounter bottleneck through the hierarchy of the labour unions if the value proposition is not obvious to the echelon of their leadership unless there is multi-actor collaborative interaction that mediate innovations in bureaucracy through risk management, institutional design and transformational leadership (Torfing, 2018).

Digital industrial training of bureaucratic leaders in the labour unions will remove the blind spots of colonial distortion of roles and engagements the leaders and their unions in industrial relations and create a digitally compliant workplace where innovation lead functional and hierarchical organizations (Wegrich, 2018). Behavioural modifications of leadership can create innovation readiness that embraces technological. COVID-19 pandemic creates unstable and competitive environment. Labour unions have to improve their productivity, efficiency and competitiveness and it is the responsibility of their leadership to drive this process with insignificant alteration to their constitutional objectives in the organization. Behavioural modifications of leadership can

create innovation readiness towards the acceptance of technological solutions for digital industrial training (Koziol-Nadolna, 2020).

Conceptual Framework

In this part of this work, effort shall be made to explain certain concepts that are germane to the underpinning of the title of this work. Such concepts include; labour education, digital technology, labour leaders and training among others.

Labour Education

Sunmonu (1996) had recommended that Nigeria Labour Congress and its affiliates should promote human resource development and capacity building of the Nigerian trade union movement and subsequently set aside 20% of their income for Workers Education and Research. Essentially, labour education is largely non-formal in nature. Whereas formal education attainment of labour union leaders is becoming a prerequisite for leadership position, many office holders have not considered higher degree as a condition for contesting for the position of leadership. In Britain, 75% of union officials had formal post-secondary educational qualifications in 1994 which was a significant improvement when compared to 75% in 1990, 44% in 1982 and 20% in 1972. Industrial unions in Nigeria are categorized through hierarchical levels into junior staff unions, senior staff unions and employers' associations, and are organized along craft and professional lines. This configuration and democratization of trade unions through the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2005 determine the use of formal educational attainment as prerequisite for leadership positions in labour unions (Otuturu, 2013).

Digital Technology

Globalization, technology and advancement in digital technological interfaces amidst COVID-19 pandemic are the forces redefining the roles of labour unions in the organization, duties of their leaders and the dynamics of their training to make leadership impactful for labour unions viability. The economic landscape across the world is shifting. Innovativeness in trade and technology is fostering new challenges that seek to redefine labour-employer engagement on union leaders. Trade unions must devise new tactics and strategies to rise up to the challenges of the 21st century.

Labour Leaders

Labour leaders can only perform through the right labour education that give them the skill sets to mobilize their unions in the right direction. The path to labour union leadership is more or less through non-formal education. Leadership often rises through rank-and-file and develop competencies through what Nesbit (2002) called 'lay apprenticeship' where prospective leaders understudy incumbent office holders and acquire the competencies by learning the language and modalities for political and administrative engagements. They also acquire the knowledge of the union's constitutions, rules and administrative procedures through trial and errors learning. They become versed in the relevant industrial consultative and bargaining machinery over time because they become involved through practice. The rationale for trade unionism is intellectualism that is premised on the working knowledge of industrial relations through the promotion of employee welfare, safe and decent work, workplace harmony, negotiations and collective bargaining techniques to mitigate poor working condition and underperformance at work. Leadership is essential to effective functioning of trade unions in Nigeria. Poor leadership could hamper the advantages of trade unions. Lack of training, among other factors, can account for poor leadership.

Dunmade, Kadiri and Aliyu (2020) conducted a study on trade unionism and employees' welfare in the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) in Kwara State. The study used simple random sampling techniques and descriptive statistics to test three formulated null hypotheses. The findings corroborated Collins (2003) that trade unionism significantly impacted workers' working conditions, remunerations and general wellbeing at work in Jos International Breweries Plc, supported the research carried out by Odey and Owan (2014) that participation in trade unions significantly influence the welfare of works in Nigerian Maritime industry, and confirmed Gichaba (2013) that trade union function of negotiations has significant impact on workers' conditions of service and job security in Kisii University, Kenya. The study hinged the performance of trade unionism on effective leadership and recommended the possession of requisite leadership qualities, acquisition of the knowledge of best practices in industrial relations and adequate training and education in the areas of collective bargaining and labour rights to enable trade union members maximize the full benefits from their subscription and involvement in trade unionism.

The role of digital technology training in the effective performance of Labour Leaders in Nigeria

The continued relevance of the labour union leaders and their ability to perform their functions very well in this New Normal economy and workplace necessitate the need for the promotion of digital industrial training in order to remain competitive and up-to-date with their knowledge, skills and capabilities to cope with the changing demands of managing their labour union organizations in the digital world. Labour union leaders have the responsibility to promote ideals that sustain internal political structure for institutional change and social framework that align with the organisational culture and support the corporate objectives of their employers. In order to effectively utilise digital technology for the training of labour union leaders, there are certain factors and issues which must be given priority attention. Consideration of these issues will help in the promotion and effectiveness of digital technology for the purpose of equipping the labour leaders with required skills and the achievement of union objectives through effective leadership. Some of these issues are discussed below:

1. Labour Leaders' Training Need Analysis

Workers' education and capacity development of the leadership of labour unions remain sacrosanct in the roles and responsibility of labour union leaders. They organize conferences, workshops and seminars to build the competences of their executive leadership for membership mobilization, revenue generation, conflicts management, collective bargaining, negotiation and change management. They also need contemporary soft skills in information and communications technology, interpersonal relationships and teambuilding. In the past, union leaders have mobilized their membership to confrontationally engage their employers and the government without following due process thereby creating social disorder and economic impasse for all stakeholders in the country.

With technology and globalization, the rule of engagement is changing, and the business landscape can tolerate minimal disruption without innovative change in the face of lean resources and competition driven by the Internet and digital technology as the world accelerate from the Fourth Industrial Revolution to the Fifth Industrial Revolution of virtual reality and

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digital synergy. As labour unions redirect their orientation towards the training of their leadership, it is imperative that labour union leaders focus on digital industrial education to give themselves and their members a competitive edge in their organizations. The implication of determining the training needs analysis of labour union leaders is to elicit digital training interests and design appropriate training curriculum which aligns these interests with relevant skill sets that are necessary for contemporary workplace and effectiveness of these leaders. It therefore becomes important to carry out a thorough need-gap analysis for the labour union leaders before designing suitable digital training which can achieve set objectives.

2. Digital Resources and Online Training

No meaningful digital industrial training can take place without well thought out programme for the digitalization of the processes of membership education among labour unions. The availability of digital resources such as e-library and online training for labour union leaders where they can access information that they need for decision making and engagement of their stakeholders for the improvement of their unions on one hand, and access to online training facilities with minimal disruption to their daily operations on the other will go a long way to increase their new capabilities as leaders.

Carneiro and Costa (2020) advocated for digital unionism as a renewal strategy and the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to coordinate and promote labour relations for labour union leaders. Traditional leadership is giving way for digital leadership and labour unions need to find creative ways to increase their leaders' digital presence and competencies (Schoemann, 2018).

3. Funding of Labour Leaders' Training

The bane of labour training has always been the lack of funding. This is attributable to government interference and management of organizations rather than low inflow of contributions from membership. Labour unions are not able to generate revenue from their members or plan their annual financials if government proscribe labour union in the country. Osiki (2009) related the radicalism of the labour movement from 1940 to 2007 to incessant government interference with corollary on their ability to fund their activities.

This interference leaves little room for constructive capacity development of labour unions. Rather than deploy funds to build internal processes and efficiency to enhance growth through the use of progressive technologies, the labour union leaders have been perceived as opposition and treated with suspicion, brutality, arrest and imprisonment. Times are changing, and both the employers (representing the government and organizations in public – and organized private sectors) and employees (through their labour unions) are shifting more to collaboration to build their institutions for development through the use of technology as key stakeholders work together to build frameworks to recover from and survive the hostile and tough operating environment posed by the effects of global pandemic of COVID-19. As a result, adequate funding of leaders' training should be factored into the internal process of labour union movement.

4. Digital Readiness of Labour Union Leaders

Labour education of union labour leaders cannot be possible without training, particularly contemporary training that involves digital learning with robust curriculum. Before the leaders can employ digital training, they must have acquired digital skills and be ready to make use of various technology platforms. These digital skills and competencies will help them to access and use these platforms for their training and development as labour leaders. They are expected to use and interact with facilitators when they are given the curriculum, learning materials and assignments on electronic/digital discussion boards, blogs and chat trails. Some of these include Whatsapp, Facebook Chat and Telegram and similar chat groups on the internet. Synchronous learning environment enables the facilitators and labour leaders to engage and interact virtually real-time simultaneously using video chat, audio chat and text message. Google Workspace, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Facebook Workplace, Slack and Instagram are among digital technology tools for synchronous learning. The hybrid learning environment provides for blended digital learning where employees are exposed to both online interaction and face-to-face facilitation. The labour leaders need to have acquired basic digital skills to navigate these technological platforms if they will successfully get trained through digital media.

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International Labour Organization (ILO) acknowledged the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on labour, welfare, competences and productivity and asserted that skills development and lifelong learning should form a part of the prerequisite for economic transformation. This means that ILO recognizes the role of Adult Education in upscaling skills and competences in the future of the world of work in a post-COVID-19 ecosystem and places the responsibility on not only governments and companies but also Trade Unions which are key stakeholders in the determination of professional development of workers across cadres, levels, disciplines and industries.

Management literature from Weiss (1983) is critical of Max Weber's bureaucratic leadership which is based on hierarchy of authority and functions through strict adherence to rules, regulations, procedures and standards set by governing frameworks (Paudel and Gupta, 2019). He opined that innovativeness and creativity can fuse functional and hierarchical organizations into bureaucracy to create a post-bureaucratic organization that is adaptive to the contemporary society; an organization that is proactive and responsive to changes in its environment (Chen, 2019; Bretschneider and Parker, 2016; Styhre and Borjesson, 2006, Damanpor, 2002).

Conclusions

The challenges that labour union leaders face as they respond strategically to the need to transform their operations in the post-COVID-19 New Normal World is the need to innovate. There is pressure for increased membership enrolment and volume in revenue generation that looks beyond membership subscriptions. This innovation demands the acquisition of new skills and competences that cannot be derived from the conventional brick-and-mortar classrooms. Innovation places a demand on the resourcefulness, personal attributes and competences of these leaders to re-invent themselves and innovate new ideas for their membership. This requires what Abbu, Mugge, Gudergan and Kwiatkowski (2020) described as digital leadership to build the character and competence of the labour union leaders to respond to the challenges of managing their labour unions in the New Normal World.

The effectiveness of operations and activities of labour unions in the New Normal World will depend on the level of digital capabilities of their leaders. There is, therefore, a need for reviews of the unions' policies and programmes to ensure that their leaders receive digital education which will enable them upgrade their skills and competences to discharge their duties effectively.

The labour union leaders need new skills and new competences that require a redesign of the unions' training curriculum. Labour unions can partner with training institutions and development partners to develop multidisciplinary curriculum which incorporates trends in the global economy and development in the world of work. Labour union leaders should be given refresher courses on automation and digital education as well as provided with necessary digital tools to aid communication and work planning to function effectively. Labour unions may consider the provision of digital library resources for their leaders to increase their knowledge base.

Funding plays important role in the provision of digital education for labour union leaders. Labour unions should prioritize digitalization of their activities and devote certain percentages of their revenue to the digital industrial training of their leaders, and members at large. The amount may be a factor of their annual revenue but a benchmark of 15% may be set to facilitate rapid digital transformation over the next five years. This has implications for their revenue collections and their leaders must drive the process to ensure that more members benefit from labour unionism to encourage active participation as financial members.

Labour unions leaders need new skills and competences to perform their duties in guiding their labour unions to interact and engage their organizations and society at large in this digitally conscious environment in Nigeria. Organizations are moving towards rapid digitalization of their processes and the rule of engagement has changed. Labour unions should consider the implementations of digitalization of their training and expose their leaders to the right curriculum to enable them develop the right competences for the New Normal World.

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