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Employee Incentives and Employee Performance in the Port Sector of Cameroon: An Empirical Assessment

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Abstract

The port sector is a strategic artery of the Cameroonian economy, with the Port of Douala-Bonabéri alone handling the overwhelming majority of the country's seaborne trade and serving as a maritime gateway for landlocked neighbours such as Chad and the Central African Republic. Sustained pressure to reduce cargo dwell time, cut congestion, and compete with rival regional ports has placed the productivity of port employees, dockworkers, terminal operators, customs liaison staff, and administrative personnel, at the centre of national economic policy. This article empirically examines the relationship between employee incentives and employee performance within Cameroon's port sector, drawing on equity theory, expectancy theory, and Herzberg's two-factor theory. A descriptive correlational design was adopted, combining a structured questionnaire administered to staff of the Port Autonome de Douala and affiliated terminal and forwarding companies with key-informant interviews of union and management representatives. Findings show that both monetary incentives (salary, bonuses, and overtime pay) and non-monetary incentives (recognition, training, promotion prospects, and job security) are significantly and positively associated with employee performance, with monetary incentives showing the strongest association among unionized dockworkers and non-monetary incentives mattering more among administrative and supervisory staff. However, respondents also reported persistent gaps between incentive policy and practice, delayed bonus payments, opaque promotion criteria, and limited recognition for shift and casual workers, that blunt the motivational effect of existing schemes. The article concludes that a balanced, transparently administered incentive architecture, rather than reliance on pay alone, offers the most promising route to improved productivity and service reliability across Cameroon's port sector, and it proposes targeted reforms for port authorities and terminal operators.

Keywords

employee incentives, employee performance, port sector, Cameroon, Port Autonome de Douala, motivation, human resource management

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1. Introduction

Ports are among the most labour-intensive nodes of any national economy, and the efficiency with which port employees discharge, warehouse, and clear cargo has direct consequences for trade competitiveness, government revenue, and the cost of doing business. In Cameroon, the Port Autonome de Douala (PAD), together with the deep-water Kribi Port managed by the Port Autonome de Kribi (PAK) and a network of licensed stevedoring, forwarding, and terminal-operating companies, forms the backbone of the country's maritime trade, handling the great majority of freight moving to and from Cameroon's hinterland and neighbouring landlocked states such as Chad and the Central African Republic (Cameroon Marine Port Authority, n.d.; Port autonome de Douala, n.d.). Persistent congestion, lengthy cargo dwell times, and periodic disputes over pay and working conditions at Douala-Bonabéri have repeatedly drawn public and policy attention to the question of what motivates, or fails to motivate, the sector's workforce.

Employee incentives, financial and non-financial inducements offered by an employer to encourage desired levels of effort and output, have long been argued in the human resource management literature to be central to organizational performance (Aguinis et al., 2013; Armstrong, 2012). Yet whether, and to what extent, this relationship holds within Cameroon's specific port sector context, characterized by a mix of unionized manual labour, public-enterprise pay scales, and increasingly competitive private terminal operations, has not been systematically documented. This article addresses that gap through an empirical assessment of the relationship between employee incentives and employee performance among staff of Douala's port community.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite periodic wage negotiations, productivity bonuses, and training programmes introduced by the PAD and private terminal operators, port stakeholders continue to report inconsistent cargo-handling turnaround, recurrent labour unrest, and complaints of unequal treatment between permanent and casual dockworkers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that incentive schemes exist on paper but are unevenly and sometimes untimely applied, particularly for lower-cadre and casual staff, potentially undermining their intended motivational effect. Without empirical evidence on which incentive types are associated with which performance outcomes, and for which categories of port employees, management interventions risk being generic, costly, and ineffective. This is the problem the present study investigates.

3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to empirically assess the relationship between employee incentives and employee performance in the port sector of Cameroon. The specific objectives were to:

1. Identify the monetary and non-monetary incentive schemes currently in use across sampled port institutions;
2. Assess employee perceptions of the adequacy and fairness of these incentive schemes;
3. Examine the strength and direction of the relationship between monetary incentives and employee performance;
4. Examine the strength and direction of the relationship between non-monetary incentives and employee performance; and
5. Identify the constraints limiting the effectiveness of incentive administration in the sector and propose recommendations.

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3.1. Research Questions

1. What monetary and non-monetary incentive schemes are currently applied within Cameroon's port sector?
2. How do employees perceive the adequacy and fairness of these incentive schemes?
3. What relationship exists between monetary incentives and employee performance in the sector?
4. What relationship exists between non-monetary incentives and employee performance in the sector?
5. What constraints limit the effectiveness of incentive administration, and how might these be addressed?

3.2. Research Hypotheses

In line with the study's quantitative component, the following hypotheses, stated in the null form, were tested:

H01: Monetary incentives have no significant relationship with employee performance in the port sector of Cameroon.

H02: Non-monetary incentives have no significant relationship with employee performance in the port sector of Cameroon.

3.3. Significance of the Study

The findings are intended to inform incentive policy design at the Port Autonome de Douala, licensed terminal and forwarding companies, and the Ministry of Transport, while contributing to the limited empirical literature on human resource practice within Central African maritime logistics. The study also extends established motivation theory, developed largely in Western and service-sector contexts, to a labour-intensive, unionized, and partly casualized African port workforce.

3.4. Scope and Delimitation

The study covers employees of the Port Autonome de Douala and a purposive sample of stevedoring, terminal-operating, and forwarding companies operating within the Douala-Bonabéri port perimeter. It does not extend to the Kribi or Limbe ports, nor does it examine shipowners, importers, or customs administration staff, whose incentive structures fall outside the direct employment relationship examined here.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Conceptual Review

Employee incentives refer to the monetary and non-monetary inducements an organization offers to encourage employees to direct effort toward desired performance outcomes (Armstrong, 2012; Bardot, 2014). Monetary incentives include base pay, overtime, productivity bonuses, and profit-sharing, while non-monetary incentives encompass recognition, promotion, training and development opportunities, job security, and favourable working conditions (Okeke et al., 2020). Employee performance, the outcome variable in this study, is understood as the extent to which an employee accomplishes assigned

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tasks against established standards of quantity, quality, and timeliness (Aguinis, 2007). The relationship between the two concepts rests on the proposition that incentives, when perceived as fair and contingent on performance, strengthen the motivation-effort-outcome chain central to most contemporary theories of work motivation (Gerhart, 2017).

4.2. Theoretical Review

Three theories anchor this study. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory together distinguish between hygiene factors, pay, job security, and working conditions, whose absence causes dissatisfaction but whose presence does not by itself motivate superior performance, and true motivators, recognition, achievement, and growth, which drive discretionary effort. This distinction is directly relevant to the port sector, where base pay and job security function largely as hygiene factors expected by unionized dockworkers, while recognition and advancement may carry greater motivational weight for supervisory and administrative staff.

Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory offers a complementary, more cognitive account: employees are motivated to perform when they believe effort will lead to performance (expectancy), performance will lead to a reward (instrumentality), and the reward itself is valued (valence). Where any of these links is weak, for instance where bonus payments are delayed or awarded inconsistently, the theory predicts a corresponding decline in motivated effort, a pattern reported in a recent port-sector study in the Horn of Africa (Hussein & Simba, 2017).

The third framework, Adams's (1963) equity theory, holds that employees evaluate the fairness of their rewards by comparing their own ratio of inputs (effort, skill, tenure) to outcomes (pay, recognition) against that of relevant others, co-workers, other cadres, or workers in comparable firms. Perceived inequity, whether under-reward or over-reward, is theorized to reduce motivation and, in extreme cases, to prompt withdrawal of effort or turnover. Equity concerns are especially salient in the port sector given the coexistence of permanent, unionized staff and casual or subcontracted dockworkers performing similar tasks under markedly different incentive terms.

4.3. Empirical Review

A growing body of African empirical work supports a positive incentive-performance relationship while highlighting important boundary conditions. Njanja et al. (2013), studying the Kenya Power and Lighting Company, found that both financial and non-financial rewards were positively associated with employee performance, though the strength of the relationship depended on how consistently rewards were linked to actual output. In a study of a South African university, Mbukwana and Ayandibu (2023) found that financial incentives, in the form of performance bonuses and promotion prospects, were the strongest predictors of employee performance reported by academic staff, while also noting that the perceived fairness of how bonus size was determined shaped whether the incentive translated into sustained effort.

Directly relevant to the present study, Hussein and Simba (2017) examined the effect of employee motivation on organizational performance at Mogadishu Al Port in Somalia and found that both extrinsic rewards (pay, working conditions) and intrinsic rewards (recognition, participatory management) were significantly related to organizational performance, with the length of an employee's service moderating the strength of the relationship between extrinsic rewards and performance. This finding is instructive for Cameroon's port sector, where a substantial share of the workforce, casual dockworkers, may have short or precarious tenure that alters how incentive schemes are experienced. More broadly, Aguinis et al. (2013) caution that monetary rewards, while powerful,

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can also crowd out intrinsic motivation or generate unintended competition among staff if poorly designed, underscoring the importance of complementing pay with non-monetary incentives such as recognition and skills training (Gerhart, 2017).

4.4. Conceptual Framework

Building on this review, the study conceptualizes monetary incentives (pay, bonuses, overtime) and non-monetary incentives (recognition, training, promotion, job security) as independent variables expected to influence employee performance (task completion, punctuality, cargo-handling accuracy, and supervisor-rated output), the dependent variable. Perceived fairness of incentive administration is treated as a factor that conditions, without being formally tested as a moderator in the regression model, the strength of both relationships, consistent with the equity-theoretic reasoning outlined above.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive correlational design using a quantitative survey as the primary data-collection method, supplemented by qualitative key-informant interviews to contextualize the statistical findings. This design was considered appropriate for testing the hypothesized relationships between incentive types and employee performance while also capturing employees' and managers' own explanations for observed patterns.

5.2. Study Area

The study was conducted within the Douala-Bonabéri port perimeter, covering the Port Autonome de Douala and a purposive sample of five licensed stevedoring, container-terminal, and forwarding companies operating within the port community.

5.3. Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The target population comprised permanent and casual dockworkers, terminal equipment operators, administrative staff, and first-line supervisors employed by the PAD and the sampled private operators. A sample of 150 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across employment cadre (permanent versus casual) and functional area (operations, administration, and supervision), complemented by eight key-informant interviews with union representatives and human resource managers.

5.4. Data Collection Instruments

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire built around a five-point Likert scale measuring perceived incentive adequacy, perceived fairness, and self- and supervisor-rated performance, complemented by a semi-structured interview guide for key informants. Instruments were pre-tested for clarity and reliability before full administration.

5.5. Data Analysis

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Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) and inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation coefficient and multiple linear regression, to test the two null hypotheses, using SPSS software. Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically to contextualize and explain the statistical results.

5.6. Ethical Considerations

Administrative authorization was obtained from the Port Autonome de Douala and participating private operators prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and the identities of individual respondents and specific employing companies were kept confidential throughout the study and in the reporting of findings.

6. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

6.1. Incentive Schemes in Use

Findings indicate that base salary, seniority-linked increments, and occasional productivity bonuses tied to cargo-handling volumes constitute the principal monetary incentives reported by respondents, while non-monetary incentives most frequently cited included on-the-job training, safety equipment provision, and, for permanent staff, defined promotion pathways. Casual and subcontracted dockworkers reported markedly fewer non-monetary incentives than their permanent counterparts, most notably an absence of formal training and promotion prospects, a pattern consistent with the dual labour-market structure long documented in Douala's port workforce.

6.2. Perceived Adequacy and Fairness

A majority of respondents rated base pay as inadequate relative to the physical demands and safety risks of port work, while perceptions of bonus fairness were more polarized: employees who reported receiving bonuses promptly and in proportion to measurable output rated the scheme favourably, whereas those reporting delayed or arbitrarily determined bonus payments expressed scepticism consistent with the predictions of equity theory (Adams, 1963). Casual workers were significantly more likely than permanent staff to describe existing incentive arrangements as unfair, citing unequal treatment for comparable work.

6.3. Monetary Incentives and Employee Performance

Correlation and regression analysis indicated a statistically significant, positive relationship between monetary incentives and employee performance, leading to rejection of the first null hypothesis (H01). The relationship was strongest among unionized dockworkers and terminal equipment operators, for whom pay and overtime compensation were the incentives most frequently cited as directly influencing effort on shift, a pattern consistent with the hygiene-factor role of pay identified by Herzberg (1966) and with the extrinsic-reward findings reported for Mogadishu Al Port by Hussein and Simba (2017).

6.4. Non-Monetary Incentives and Employee Performance

A statistically significant, positive relationship was also found between non-monetary incentives and employee performance, leading to rejection of the second null hypothesis (H02). This relationship was strongest among administrative and supervisory staff, who more frequently linked recognition, training opportunities, and clear promotion criteria to sustained motivation than to pay alone, echoing

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Mbukwana and Ayandibu's (2023) finding that promotion prospects were a leading predictor of performance among university staff in a comparable institutional, if non-port, setting.

6.5. Constraints on Incentive Effectiveness

Interview data pointed to four recurring constraints: delayed disbursement of productivity bonuses, attributed by management informants to cash-flow and budgetary approval cycles; opaque or inconsistently applied promotion criteria, particularly for casual staff with no defined promotion pathway; limited recognition mechanisms for shift and night-duty workers, whose contribution to cargo-handling continuity was described by several respondents as under-acknowledged; and a persistent perception of unequal treatment between permanent and subcontracted dockworkers performing comparable tasks.

7. Discussion

Taken together, the findings support the theoretical expectation that both monetary and non-monetary incentives are positively associated with employee performance in Cameroon's port sector, but that the relative importance of each incentive type varies by employment cadre, consistent with Herzberg's (1966) distinction between hygiene factors and motivators. The equity-related concerns raised by casual and subcontracted staff further suggest that the performance returns to any given incentive scheme depend not only on its monetary value but on the consistency and perceived fairness with which it is administered, in line with Adams's (1963) equity theory and with the delayed-reward effects documented by Hussein and Simba (2017) in the comparable Mogadishu Al Port setting. For the Port Autonome de Douala and its private terminal partners, these findings suggest that closing the gap between incentive policy and its consistent, equitable implementation may yield larger performance gains than simply increasing the monetary value of existing schemes.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1. Conclusion

The study concludes that employee incentives, both monetary and non-monetary, are significantly and positively related to employee performance within Cameroon's port sector, but that the strength of this relationship is shaped by employment cadre and by the perceived fairness and consistency of incentive administration. Monetary incentives matter most to unionized dockworkers whose base pay functions as a hygiene factor, while non-monetary incentives, recognition, training, and clear promotion pathways, carry greater motivational weight for administrative and supervisory staff. Persistent gaps between incentive policy and practice, particularly for casual workers, currently limit the sector's ability to realize the full performance benefits of its existing incentive schemes.

8.2. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that the Port Autonome de Douala and private terminal operators: (1) review and standardize productivity bonus disbursement timelines to strengthen the reward-effort link central to expectancy theory; (2) extend formal training and defined promotion pathways to casual and subcontracted dockworkers, subject to applicable labour regulations; (3) introduce structured, low-cost recognition mechanisms, such as shift-based performance acknowledgement, for cadres currently underserved by existing schemes; (4) publish clear, uniformly

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applied criteria for bonus allocation and promotion to address equity concerns; and (5) periodically survey employee perceptions of incentive fairness as a standing input to human resource policy review.

9. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The study's cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported performance measures limit causal inference and may be subject to social-desirability bias. Future research should consider a longitudinal design tracking specific incentive reforms over time, incorporate objective cargo-handling performance metrics where available, and extend the comparative analysis to the Kribi deep-water port to test whether the patterns identified here generalize across Cameroon's port infrastructure.

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