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Fostering lifelong learning through recognition of prior learning as an enabler of increased productivity, improved wood product quality and employee motivation- A Case Study of Kubu Crafts LTD in Zambia.

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Zambia has been used as a vehicle through which individual learners with significant experience in a given practical field earn a qualification at any level of education. RPL in this case is an enabler of an individual's empowerment socially and economically. This type of empowerment leads to intrinsic motivation resulting in improved productivity and quality of products. Using a randomized control method, this case study seeks to establish the impact of RPL on productivity and quality of wood products at Kubu Crafts LTD. Six three (63) employees were enrolled in the RPL programme and monitored closely on how their acquired competencies yet to be formalized will lead to improved productivity and wood product furniture quality. Data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. For secondary data collection Company's Order Reports and Delivery Notes served as special instruments for secondary data collection while clients' feedback through questionnaires and interviews formed a basis for primary data collection. Results indicated a production increase of 49% after RPL was introduced confirming the impact of RPL on production. A great improvement in the percentage of rejected furniture from 31.07% previously to 0.23% was noted signifying an improvement on quality of wood products after RPL. Attendance on a monthly basis improved from 17.46% of employees being absent before RPL introduction to only 4.76% after the introduction of RPL hence the environment became motivating. From the findings, the researchers concluded that lifelong learning should be fostered through RPL as an enabler of increased productivity, improved wood product quality and motivated employees.

Key words: *Lifelong learning, recognition of prior learning, enabler, wood quality, productivity, motivation, randomized*

1.0 Introduction

Kubu Crafts Ltd has been in operation for 25 years now. It was started in 1997 as a Zambian company manufacturing high quality household, business and lodge furniture. The currently employs 75 employees. Out of this number only 10 have formal qualifications in furniture making while 65 have learnt the skill on job training. This gap of skills recognition is being address through a lifelong learning strategy using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

The value of RPL to the employees of Kubu will lead to motivation thereby increasing production levels and product quality. This paper will dwell on the following aspects:

- i. Literature review on RPL from the theoretical and empirical point of view
- ii. Significance and applicability of this research topic
- iii. Aim of the Research
- iv. Delimitation
- v. Aim and Objectives
- vi. Methodology
- vii. Research Findings
- viii. Discussion of Results
- ix. Recommendations and Conclusion

2.0 Literature Review

This section of the paper will focus on both the theoretical and empirical background of RPL. Study variables of RPL will form a basis of discussion. The empirical aspect will bring out a systematic review of past but similar studies on RPL. This will help the researcher in identifying a research gap thereby answering the questions.

2.1 Theoretical Background

Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg (2016) stressed the importance of RPL as a special tool that ably encourages and supports adults without formal education in workplaces to acquire vocational skills recognized by awarding bodies. RPL is an alternative pathway towards continuing education sometimes referred to as lifelong learning. In RPL, the basic idea behind it is to consider the all aspects of learning taking place in the workplace at experiential learning experience level. It enables people to acquire knowledge and skills without attending vocational centers thereby increasing access to Technical, Vocational Education and Entrepreneurship Training (TEVET). In another contextual understanding, RPL is said to be learning that manifests itself in unpaid/voluntary work. Lima & Guimarães (2016) postulates that RPL enables non-traditional learner adults, workers and community people appreciate the underlying benefits of learning. Companies and Institutions at large must provide an enabling environment for effective implantation of RPL mechanisms. This resonates well with the revised Zambian TEVET Policy of 2020 which provides for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), including Life-Long Learning (LLL) and Work Based Learning (WBL). Currently, TEVET qualifications range from level 3 (trade test) to level 6 (diploma) of the Zambia Qualifications Framework. In a highly competitive world for scarce competences and rapidly expanding knowledge economy, there is need to have an elaborate policy and objectives regarding training, financing and curriculum development among other critical variables. This policy strengthens constant supply of adequate and appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes, which can be used to harness other resources such as land, minerals and forests.

2.2 Empirical Background

RPL has been practiced widely in developed countries like the UK and Australia even though the existing literature says the mechanism of acknowledging work-based knowledge without formal qualification has been under-utilized. RPL emphasizes lifelong learning, social inclusion, and employment. RPL provides rare opportunities to demonstrate reflective practices in work-based programs with an impact on organizational development (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). However it is worth noting that Policy design and the context of RPL differs from one country to another.

However, the use of RPL as a social policy to offer multiple pathways and widening access to education has been extended to economic policy focusing on employability. Thus, implementing RPL leads to higher economic growth, socioeconomic balance and sociocultural integration. RPL contributes directly to career development, motivation for professional development, mobility of the workforce, and increased productivity, while reflecting the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Singh & Ehlers, 2019). The research conducted by Cheng, Dainty, & Moore (2005), highlighted the integration between micro-competences and macro-competencies within a hybrid approach supported by role-focused measures where the stated that; “Such a holistic managerial performance framework includes a clear description of the work tasks managers should be competent at (i.e., micro-competences), what enables them to complete those tasks effectively (i.e., macro-competencies) and specific role-focused criteria for performance excellence (social context) to assess his/her job performance” It is pertinent to consider the need for tailored performance management practices linking competency with performance enhancement within the context of organizational philosophy and job requirements

Significance and applicability of this Research

RPL is the answer to the skills mismatch currently being experienced in Zambian wood working industries. A skilled labor force has a significant impact on the innovation, performance and long-term competitiveness of the firm. The TEVET educational system has limited training facilities leading to most Zambian firms to face challenges in acquiring the required skilled workforce. It is for this reason that in its Strategic Plan for 2021 – 2026, TEVETA included RPL as an intervention in meeting the industrial demands for relevant skills. Employers can now formalize the work place based training that their employees have received years back. In the case of Kubu Crafts Ltd, with an employee strength of 75 employees out of which only 10 (13.33%) have formal qualifications in furniture making while 65 (86.67%) have learnt the skill on job training. The 86.67% skilled employees have no recognition within the Zambian National Qualification Framework. There is need to formalize and normalize this unrecognized cadre of potential Master crafts persons through RPL. This gap of skills recognition can be addressed through a lifelong learning strategy using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The study was embarked on due to complaints employees had of learning a skill without a paper qualification. This motivated the researchers to enroll 45 employees for RPL with TEVETA. Indeed the value of RPL to these employees of Kubu will lead to motivation thereby increasing production levels and product quality. This paper titled; ***“Fostering lifelong learning through recognition of prior learning as an enabler of increased productivity, improved wood product quality and employee motivation- A Case Study of Kubu Crafts LTD in Zambia”***, is timely in addressing the negative feelings employees have about non-attendance of formal TEVET training from Zambian TEVET Colleges.

3.1 Aim of the Research

This study aims at determining whether RPL is an enabler of:

- i. Increased productivity
- ii. Improved wood product quality
- iii. Employee motivation

In order to achieve the above stated aim a comparative analysis was conducted to establish:

- i. Production trends before placing employees on RPL and after
- ii. Number of rejected item of furniture before RPL was introduced and after
- iii. Motivation of employees before RPL was introduced and after. This will be monitored through daily attendance records

3.2 Delimitation

The study was tied to the following delimitation:

- i. The study was focused on employees at Kubu Crafts Ltd only. It started with only one industry and it will roll out a similar analysis to other wood working industries in Zambia.

- ii. The focus was on fostering long life learning through RPL in wood industries as an enabler of increased production, improved wood product quality and employee motivation.

3.3 Aims and Objectives

This paper's focus was largely on fostering lifelong learning through RPL as an enabler of increased production, improved wood product quality and employee motivation. Therefore the following objectives formed a solid basis for the research under review:

- i. To investigate the effect of RPL on production trends at Kubu Crafts Ltd
- ii. Determining the impact of RPL on wood product quality
- iii. Determining the impact of RPL on employee motivation

3.4 Methodology

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research design to collect data from participants. However much emphasis was placed on qualitative research design. Therefore, a detailed description of participants' opinions, feelings and experiences about RPL was realized. This is in agreement with Atieno (2009) who confirms that qualitative research renders a deeper insight into participants' perceptions and interpretation complexities. Raman (2016) postulates that a qualitative research is not statistical in nature but incorporates multiple realities.

The researchers used both questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to gather data. The tactic of interviews was utilized in preference to other methods like surveys, questionnaires, observations and case studies due to the suitability of interviews for obtaining data for the study topic. Interviews allowed the researcher understand and describe RPL as an enabler of increased production, improved wood product quality and employee motivation at Kubu Crafts LTD and to get attitudes and beliefs about the study topic (Guragain, 2016). Interviews were used to ensure neutrality, technical detail and ensuring that experiential knowledge was transmitted from the interviewees to the interviewer (Guragain, 2016).

3.4.1 Sampling

In any given research, it will be cumbersome to collect data from everyone within the target group. This being the case, the researchers used some form of sampling. Three approaches from different approaches of sampling were used given the nature of the study. These were random, purposive and convenience. Glen (2009) describes the three sampling approaches as follows:

- i. *Random* — “simple or structured to ensure various subgroups in a population are accurately represented. This is sometimes called “probability sampling.” The assumption of randomness is essential if one is to use inferential statistics”.
- ii. *Purposive* — “to determine characteristics of a specific group (e.g., women or young men 18 to 25 years of age, etc.)”.
- iii. *Convenience* — “a sampling process that chooses individuals who are easiest to reach (e.g., visitors to Web site). This is a form of nonprobability sampling that is sometimes called “accidental.” It is not random and therefore is considered biased because it does not represent the entire population.”

3.4.2 Target Population

In this study, the target or theoretical population was 75 employees of Kubu Crafts Ltd. This target group was chosen because of the convenience it afforded the researchers to access the sample in that population. This is referred to as convenience sampling.

3.4.3 Study Population

Kombo (2005) postulates that a population is a group of individuals comprising of samples needed for measurement. In this study, the study population were the 75 Kubu Crafts Ltd employees.

3.4.5 Sample Size

The study considered 75 employees at Kubu Crafts Ltd as a selected population. With regard to the sample size it was neither excessively large nor too small but optimal enough to respond to aspects of efficiency, representativeness, reliability and flexibility (Kothari, 2004). In this regard, the researchers determined desired but acceptable confidence level for purposes of estimate. Quantitatively, the researchers targeted a sample size of participants likely to give 95% (0.95) level of confidence and 5% (0.05) sampling error. Below was the formula used in determining a sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where: **n** = Sample Size

N = Total Population

e = Sampling Error

In line with the formula above, the sample size for 75 employees at Kubu Crafts Ltd was calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{75}{1 + 75 \times 0.05^2} \\ &= \mathbf{63 \text{ employees}} \end{aligned}$$

4.0 Findings

In this section the research findings focused on:

- i. Production quantities before introduction of RPL
- ii. Production quantities after introduction of RPL
- iii. Wood Product Quality before RPL
- iv. Wood Product Quality after RPL
- v. Employee Motivation before RPL
- vi. Employee Motivation after RPL

4.1 Production quantities before introduction of RPL

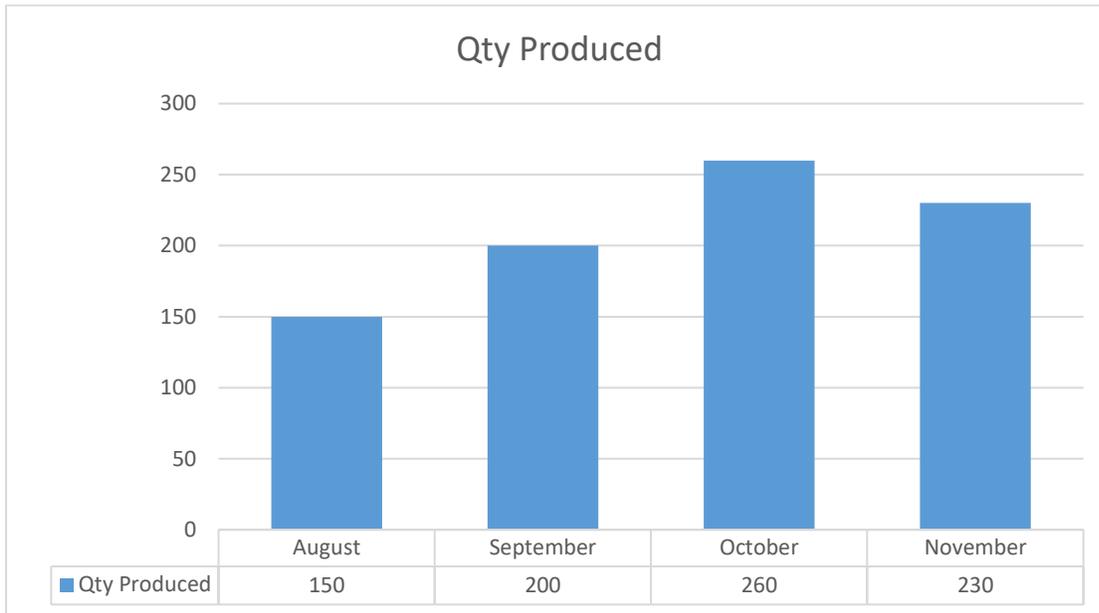


Figure 1: Production levels before introduction of RPL

In figure 1, 150 products were made in August while September saw a production of 200 pieces of furniture representing a production increase of 75%, in October 260 pieces of furniture were produced which was an increase of 76% from September production. There was a production decline of 11.5% in November because only 230 pieces of furniture were produced as compared to a production of 260 pieces in October.

4.2 Production quantities after introduction of RPL

Figure 2 below shows a production increase after the introduction of RPL on a monthly basis. In December 280 pieces of furniture were produced indicating a positive variance of 130 pieces of furniture produced in August before the introduction of RPL. Cumulatively after the introduction of RPL, in summary the production quantity rose from 840 pieces of furniture in a four months period before RPL to 1710 pieces of furniture within the next four months. This represents a production increase of 49% quarterly.

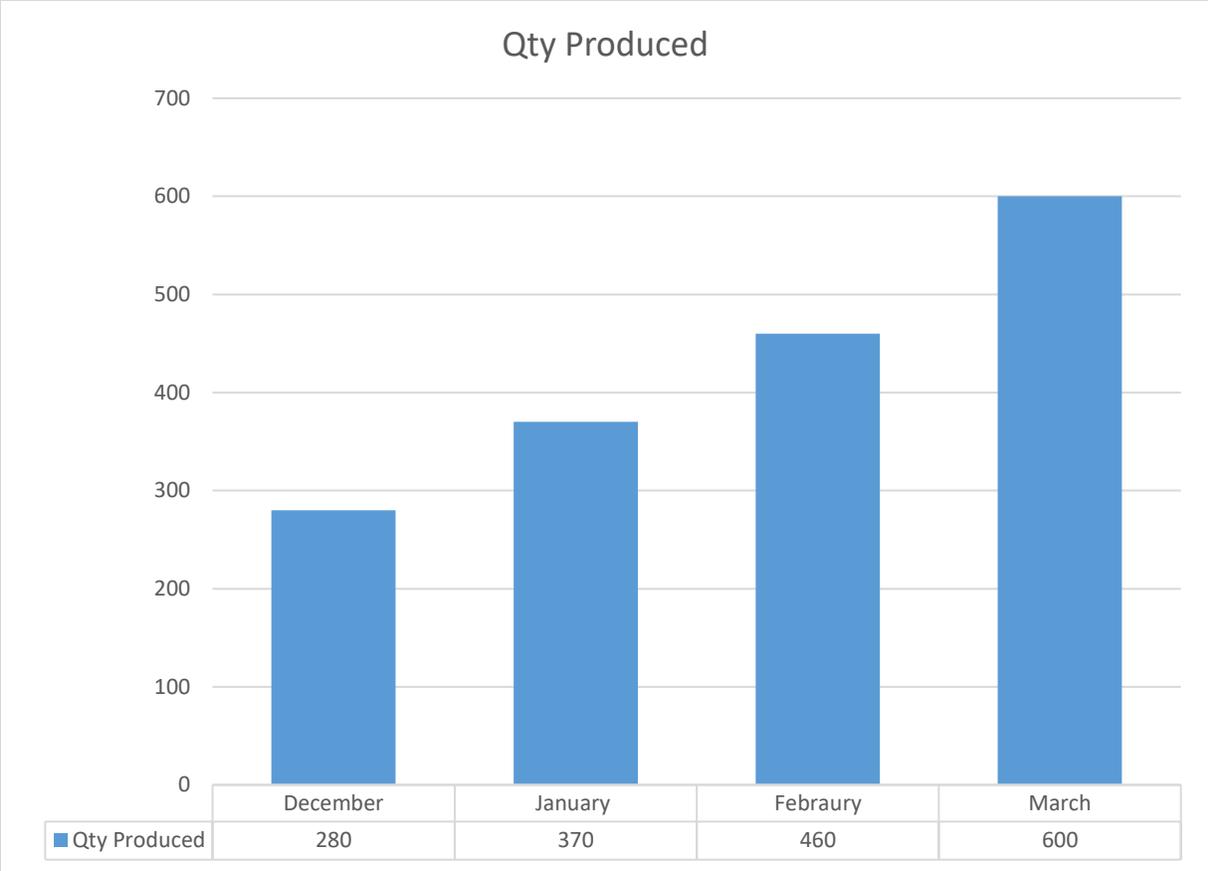


Figure 2: Production levels after RPL

4.3 Wood Product Quality before RPL

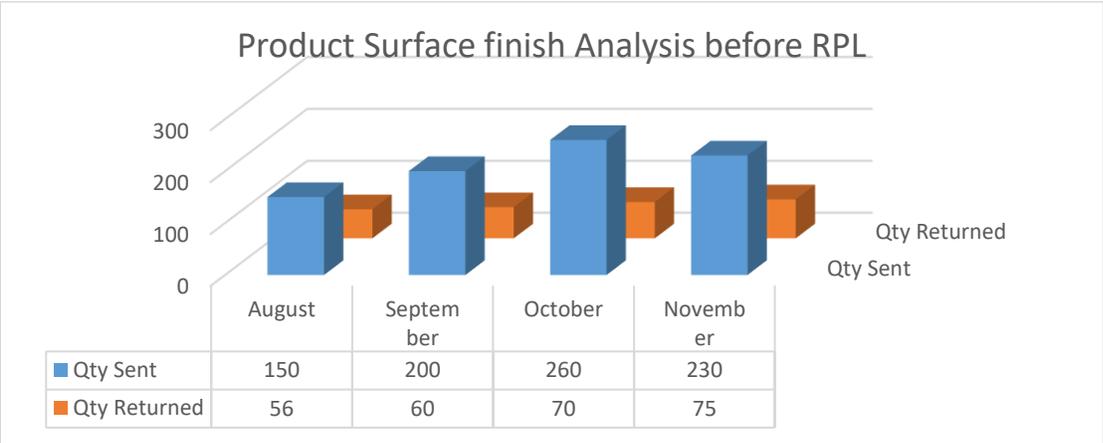


Figure 3: Wood product quality before RPL

In figure 3 a total number of 840 pieces of furniture were produced and sent to clients. Out of this number 261 pieces of furniture were returned due to poor surface finish. This represents a customer dissatisfaction at 31.07% rate.

4.4 Wood Product Quality after RPL

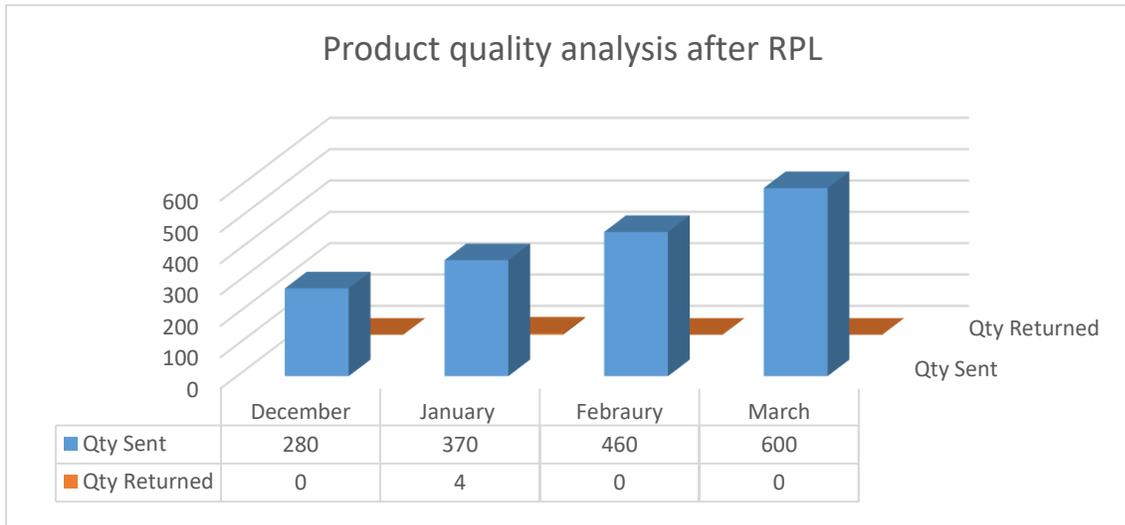


Figure 4: Wood product quality after RPL

In Figure 4, 1710 pieces of furniture were sent to clients after RPL was introduced and out of this number only 4 (0.23%) pieces of furniture were returned for remake/re-polishing. This represents a great improvement in the percentage of rejected furniture from 31.07% previously to 0.23%.

4.5 Employee Motivation before RPL

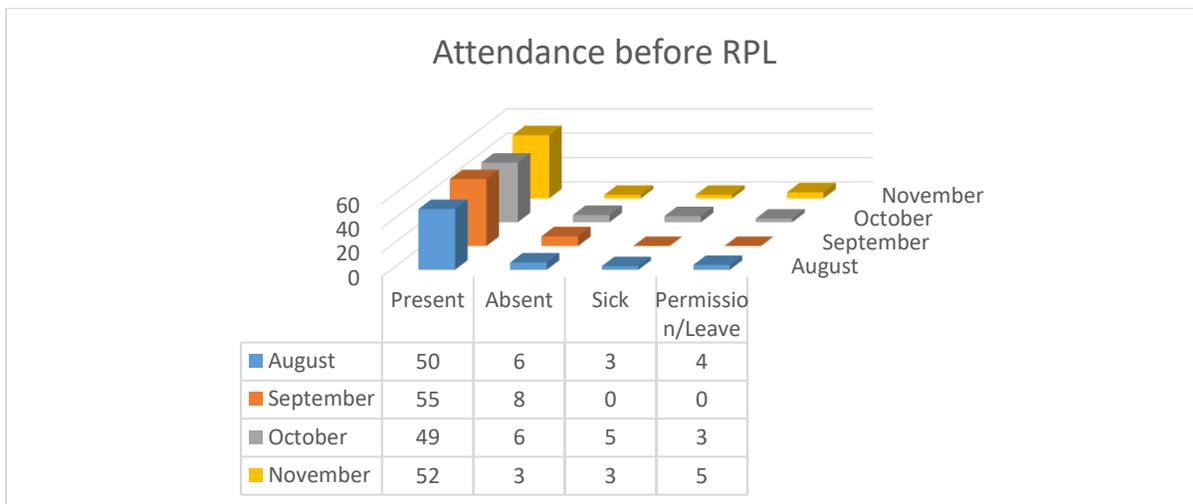


Figure 5: Attendance before RPL

In Figure 5, employee motivation was analyzed through monthly attendance. An average of 52 employees were present on the monthly basis before RPL was introduced, 4 employees were absent, 3 employees were sick and 3 employees went on leave or got permission.

4.6 Employee Motivation after RPL

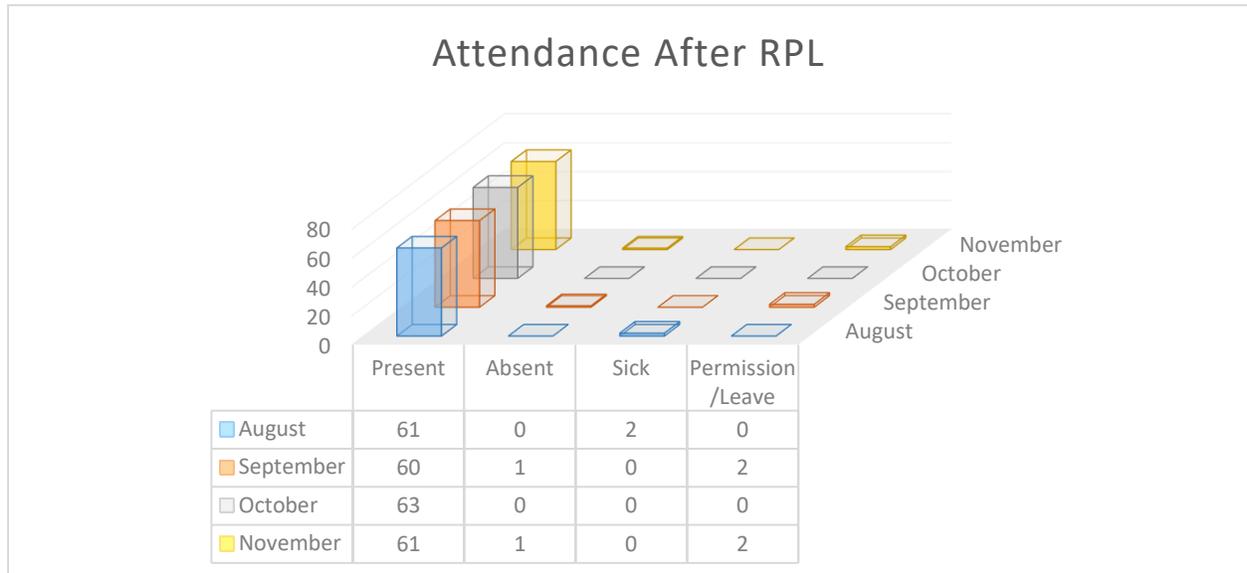


Figure 6: Attendance after RPL

In Figure 6 employee attendance on average monthly was as indicated below:

- i. Present = 60 employees
- ii. Absent = 1 employee
- iii. Sick = 1 employee
- iv. Permission/Leave= 1 employee

5.0 Discussion of Results

In this section, the researchers discuss the results in the following sequence:

- i. Production quantities before introduction of RPL
- ii. Production quantities after introduction of RPL
- iii. Wood Product Quality before RPL
- iv. Wood Product Quality after RPL
- v. Employee Motivation before RPL
- vi. Employee Motivation after RPL

5.1 Production quantities before and after RPL

The cumulative rise in production before the introduction of RPL from 840 pieces of furniture to 1710 pieces of furniture after the introduction of RPL demonstrates clearly the impact of RPL on production increase. This represents a production increase of 49%. This resonates well with the findings of Singh & Ehlers (2019) who concluded that RPL leads to higher economic growth, through increased productivity, while reflecting the acquisition of knowledge and skills

5.2 Wood Product Quality before RPL and after RPL

RPL has an impact on the quality of products produced. This is because the 63 employees placed on RPL programme were taught the best industrial practices applied in any furniture making industry. The emphasis on quality improvement was laid on sanding of components before assembly and following a sequence of sanding from the rough sand paper to the finest sandpaper. In figure 3 a total number of 840 pieces of furniture were produced and sent to clients. Out of this number 261 pieces of furniture were returned due to poor surface finish. This represents a customer dissatisfaction at 31.07% rate. In Figure 4, 1710 pieces of furniture were sent to clients after RPL was introduced and out of this number only 4 (0.23%) pieces of furniture were returned for remake/re-polishing. This represented a great improvement in the percentage of rejected furniture from 31.07% previously to 0.23%.

5.3 Employee motivation before and after the introduction of RPL

Motivation of employees is key in ensuring increased production and improved product quality. In Figure 5 and 6, the motivational response aspect of employees was measured through their attendance. Before the introduction of RPL, the average monthly attendance was 52 out of 63 employees selected purposely for this research. This means that 17.46% of the employees were absent every month. After RPL was introduced, it was discovered that an average of 60 employees were in attendance on a monthly basis reducing the absenteeism percentage from 17.46% before RPL introduction to 4.76% after the introduction of RPL. This is a positive development in as far as the growth of the company was concerned. It is clear that RPL provides opportunities to demonstrate reflective practices in workplace-based programs with an impact on organizational development (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has brought out salient issues regarding lifelong learning and how fostering it through RPL in workplaces will form a basis for inclusiveness and access to TEVET in Zambia. The impact of RPL as an enabler of increased production, improved wood product quality and employee motivation have been highlighted as the positive results. Employers are therefore encouraged to take advantage of the existing legal framework on workplace based learning to continuously improve their profitability. It is hoped that the findings of this research will inform decision making for key stake holders such owners of furniture making industries whose employees require RPL.

6.1 Recommendations

In view of the findings highlighted in this research, the following is being recommended for future research:

- i. Increased access to RPL through the use of online learning platforms
- ii. Design of assessment standards for RPL

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