

Counter-Productive Work Behaviors: The Right Or Misguided Path?

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Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of counter-productive work behaviors in improving the work experiences of non-standard workers at a multinational organization in Zimbabwe. This exploratory qualitative study involved ten research participants who varied in age, sexual category, work experience, and academic qualification. The participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, providing data on the effectiveness of deviant work behaviors to enhance the experiences of non-standard workers. The findings of the current study show that the work experiences of a majority of non-standard workers improved by engaging in counter-productive work behaviors (CWBs). CWBs improved the financial stability, reduced work related stress, and restored distributive justice and equity of most non-standard workers at the case multinational organization in Zimbabwe. Conversely, this study also found that engaging in counter-productive work behaviors amounts to gross misconduct and criminal nuisance, which have negative consequences and can result in dismissal and arrest. The study recommends that to reduce counter-productive work behaviors, organizations should conduct personality-based integrity tests during the recruitment and selection process. Organizations should also understand reasons why non-standard workers engage in deviant work behaviors and develop appropriate intervention strategies to monitor and control them.

Keywords: experiences, counter-productive, work, behavior, worker

JEL Classification: M54, L61, J22, J41

1. Introduction

As a result of economic crises and escalating globalization, non-standard work have become more common in global south labor markets since the 2000s (Hunter, 2020; Fei, 2020; Feder, & Yu, 2020; Otuturu, 2021; Kenny & Webster, 2021). Since 2000, the proportion of atypical forms of employment in African nations has tripled (Ofosu, 2022). Employers welcomed the rapid expansion of non-standard forms of labor as a crucial instrument for them to quickly change the number of their workforce due to shifting macro conditions (Eke & Onuoha, 2020; Agudelo, 2019). In addition, non-standard workers are thought to function as buffers to protect full-time workers from dismissal (Lama, 2019; Willson et al., 2022). For employees, casual work comes at a price (Arcidiacono et al., 2019). Theories of work psychology assume that casual employment increases work-related stresses owing to the ongoing risk of future unemployment, employers' poor investment in casual workers, limited influence over workplace decisions, and a lack of support from trade unions and coworkers (Hünefeld et al., 2020). In addition, Cantrell and Palmer (2019) argue that non-standard employees experience a psychological contract breach owing to the less desirable job qualities of casual work such as less opportunity for training and lower pay. Perceived psychological contract breach sets in when casual workers believe that their employer has broken a pledge by giving them little say in decisions, which affect them (Adewumi & Ogunnubi, 2019; Nickell et al., 2019; Read & Leathwood, 2020). Emotional indignation and revenge may be sparked by such sentiments of injustice or indignity, and they may take the form of counter-productive work behaviours (Van Adrichem & Koster, 2019). The goal is to restore a sense of justice and dignity (Cohen & Diamant, 2019; Wiseman & Stillwell, 2022; Jena & Pattnaik, 2020; Lucas et al., 2017). Although it is well known that temporary employees have more complaints than full-time employees, it is more likely that they have few or no avenues through which to air their issues (Rasaily, 2021; Clibborn, 2021). Similarly, Zahn (2019) asserts that casual workers have less motivations and opportunities to voice their dissatisfaction about working circumstances, despite the fact that doing so carries greater risks. Withholding tenure makes it simple to fire temporary employees who voice their displeasure (Teurlings & van der Velden, 2022; De Cuyper et al., 2019). As a result, complaining about poor working and job

conditions is regarded to be less effective and less appealing for casual workers (Rasaily, 2021). A study by Fabian (2022), dealing with voices at work, shows that employees who do not have legitimate opportunities to express their dissatisfaction are left with no choice but to endure their suffering in silence, or to engage in counter-productive work behaviors. Similarly, Cohen (2019) states that limited opportunity to express displeasure may encourage workers to engage in deviant behaviors as a way to vent their anger, restore justice and dignity, and relieve stress from their jobs (Cohen & Diamant, 2019; Yogasari & Budiasih, 2019; De Clercq et al., 2021; Wallace & Coughlan, 2023). According to Ansari et al. (2013), counter-productive workplace conduct is behavior that is detrimental to organizational advancement and, if unchecked, could lead to a condition of retrogression. Ansari et al. (2013) identify financial cost and social costs as key consequences and costs of counter-productive work behaviors. In Zimbabwe, information about counter-productive work behavior is scarce because of unemployment, which has seen many casual employees suffer and remain silent because they do not have alternatives in the face of growing unemployment (Etodike et al., 2018). As a result, non-standard workers are helpless and mute, with CWBs serving as their only means of self-expression (Striler, 2019, Kundi et al., 2021). A plethora of studies have been conducted to study different perspectives of CWBs world-wide. However, no attempt has yet been made to investigate how well CWBs are in improving the work experiences of non-standard workers in the global south context. Therefore, this research aims to explore the effectiveness of counter-productive work behaviors in improving the work experiences of non-standard workers at a multinational organization in Zimbabwe. The research question is stated as follows: How effective are counter-productive work behaviors as means to improve work experiences?

2. Literature Review

The study's reviewed literature presents theories of counter-productive work behaviours, the CWBs concept, as well as the causes and forms of CWBs.

2.1. Inequality and theft model

Greenberg's (1990) inequality and theft model places special emphasis on how social interaction and perceived unfairness impact workers who steal at work (Greenberg, 1990). The

model assumes that employees may try to improve their financial position or receive appropriate pay for their work output by using CWBs such as stealing when they feel that their wages are distributed unfairly. According to Greenberg (1990), stealing is an emotive response to irritation that results in a direct attempt to correct the system's unfairness. It is significant to note that restoring equality can also be moderated by personal, contextual, informational, and interpersonal aspects (Greenberg, 2002). For instance, the risk of employee theft will increase if a culture that tolerates CWBs and a person with low moral development are present (Greenberg, 2002). The researchers adopted this theory because it helped to unpack the causes and forms of counter-productive work behaviors, relevant to the study.

2.2. Frustration and aggression model

The frustration-aggression model, as modified by Spector (1978), is another model that is intended to show causes and forms of counter-productive work behaviors. A supervisor who interferes with goal maintenance is an example of a frustrating encounter (Breuer & Elson, 2017). The employee responds to this frustrating encounter by leaving the workplace (absenteeism), acting aggressively towards the company (property destruction), or both (Fox & Spector, 1999). While Spector's (1978) frustration and aggression model discusses reasons for committing CWBs (restoring equity and injustice) with a fairly rational perspective, the model admits that the irrational and aberrant behaviors frequently observed are classified as counter-productive work behaviors (Spector, 1978).

2.3. Concept of CWBs

The concept of CWBs has become a topical issue in the field of work and employment relations. Karthikeyan and Thomas (2017) define CWBs as premeditated conduct that violates a firm's norms and beliefs and workers interests. Given the afore-mentioned broad definition, some authors describe CWBs as workplace aggression (Treadway, 2018), employee retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 2017), workplace incivility (Cortina et al., 2022), and anti-social behaviors (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2015). Despite their similarities, counter-productive work behaviors are not incidental; rather, they are voluntary.

2.4. Causes of counter-productive work behaviors

CWBs may result from a wide range of reasons. These spans from personal traits like personality to organizational factors like unequal reward distribution and the workplace's culture (Griep et al., 2020; Brender-Ilan & Sheaffer, 2019). The stressor-emotion model is a useful model, used to explain why people engage in counter-productive work behaviors. The stressor-emotion model is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Stressor-emotion model



Source: Spector and Fox (2005)

According to Spector and Fox (2005), counter-productive work behaviors result from both individual traits and organizational pressures, which are discussed below.

2.4.1. Individual characteristics

According to Spector and Fox (2005), those who engage in CWBs are more prone to committing other counter-productive behaviors. The said authors assert that male workers are more likely to engage in CWBs like theft, alcohol addiction and violence than female workers. Additionally, specific personality factors can affect a person's propensity to participate in CWBs (Brender-Ilan & Sheaffer, 2019). Conscientiousness, Openness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism are the "big five" personality qualities that have been found to predict CWBs in several ways (Rengifo & Laham, 2022).

2.4.2. Organizational stressors

Casual work is characterized by limited training, as well as career development opportunities (Suroso et al., 2020; Ehigie, & Hameed, 2020). In addition, work systems and organizational stressors such as breach of psychological contract may affect the degree to which an employee engages in CWBs (De Clercq et al., 2021). Certain organizational stressors are outlined below.

2.4.3. Breach of psychological contract

Psychological contracts are formed between employees and employers during the recruitment and selection process

(Anderson & Schalk, 1998). Psychological contract agreement is implied and frequently not fully understood by both parties (Ghani et al., 2020). The likelihood that an employee may engage in production deviance, sabotage, theft, or withdrawal, increases when they perceive that a disparity is high in terms of that, which the organization promised them, and that, which they actually received (Cohen & Diamant, 2019, Pradhan et al., 2020).

2.4.4. Working conditions constraints

Working conditions constraints can be things that prevent employees from successfully performing their jobs in spite of their best efforts (Thakur & Sharma, 2019). The absence of training and development opportunities, as well as occupational, health and safety (OHS) training are major challenges that casual workers face (Kura et al., 2019; Adekeye et al., 2019). A lack of OHS training may contribute to the risk of workplace injuries for workers who work in the same production line (Yogasari & Budiasih, 2019).

2.4.5. Unfair reward allocation

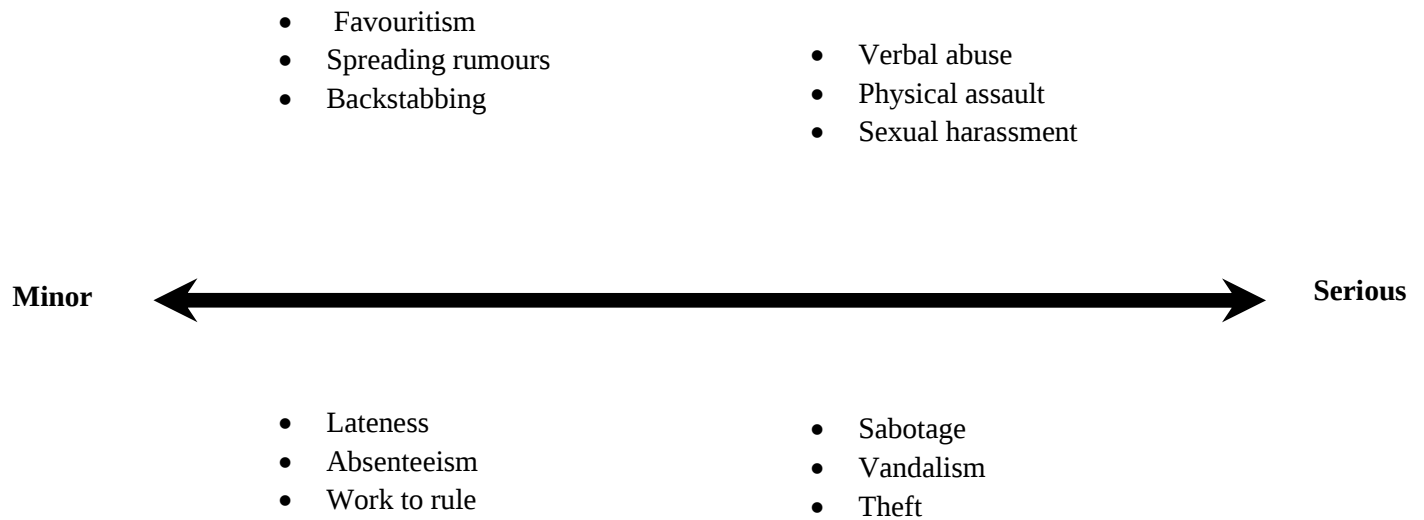
Unfair reward allocation can lead to economic insecurity among workers (Umrani & Salleh, 2019). When employees believe that the company is distributing rewards unfairly, then they are more inclined to engage in CWBs like sabotage (Fox & Spector, 2005). In addition, Kura et al., (2019) state that when rewards are not given consistently to match performance, people are more likely to modify their performances to restore equity through counter-productive acts to match the outcome.

2.5. Dimensions of CWBs

CWBs manifest in different forms and degrees of severity, targeting either the organization or its members. The severity dimension of CWBs can be measured on a scale, which ranges from minor to serious (Piar et al., 2014). Figure 2 below shows a counter-productive behaviors topology.

Figure 2: Counter-productive work behaviors topology





Source: Hollinger & Clark (1986)

Figure 2 above shows that organizationally-directed CWBs such as theft, late-coming and sabotage are directed towards the organization. Conversely, interpersonally-directed CWBs are aimed at co-workers and supervisors and include behaviors such as back-stabbing. Figure 2 also illustrates that personal aggression and property deviance constitute serious CWBs, which harm the organization. Political deviance and production deviance are considered to be minor CWBs.

3. Method

3.1. Research participants

Ten research participants were selected, using the purposive sampling technique. Participants had to have spent at least four months working at the multinational manufacturing company in Zimbabwe to meet the study's inclusion criterion. Key participants comprised managers and union leaders at the multinational organization in Zimbabwe.

3.2. Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. According to Tracy (2019), a qualitative approach facilitates a deeper comprehension of the participants' experiences

through first-hand accounts, narratives and conversation. Qualitative research assisted us to explore the effectiveness of CWBs to enhance the lived experiences of casual workers.

3.3. Data collection

The researchers utilized semi-structured interviews because they provide participants freedom and flexibility when responding to an investigation. When necessary, the researchers posed probing questions to the participants to elicit further details or clarity from them. The same sets of questions were given to each participant.

3.4. Strategies to ensure data quality

The researchers utilized measures of trustworthiness, according to Guba and Lincoln (1988), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to ensure the data's quality. Table 1 below summarizes these techniques that the researchers used in this respect.

Criterion	Technique
Credibility	- prolonged engagement - peer debriefing - member checks
Dependability	- audit trail
Transferability	- thick description
Conformability	- audit trail

Source: Author's fieldwork

3.5. Ethical consideration

Participants were given the option to partake in the study or not once the researchers made sure they understood its objectives. Therefore, their decision to voluntarily engage in the study was made without any form of coercion. Pseudonyms were also utilized by the researchers to conceal the participants' identities. Finally, the researchers made effort to observed the academic honesty and integrity standards by being truthful and forthright about the goals of the study, citing and referencing relevant authors and their works in the list of references.

3.6. Profiles of research participants

The researchers interviewed three managers, one union representative and six non-standard workers. To distinguish between research participants who participated in the

interviews, "A" represents a pseudonym for casual workers, while "KM" and "KU" represent managers and union representatives, respectively. Table 2 below shows research participants' profiles.

Table 2: Profiles for the research participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Sex	Experience	Qualifications	Interview duration
A1	18	F	4months	O level certificate	23minutes
A2	20	M	7months	A level certificate	27minutes
A3	24	F	8months	O level certificate	25minutes
A4	25	M	2year	Bachelor's degree	22minutes
A5	28	F	10months	Diploma	27minutes
A6	23	M	11years	Diploma	25minutes
KM1	33	M	1years	Bachelor's degree	25minutes
KM2	36	M	2years	Bachelor's degree	23minutes
KM3	35	M	2years	Bachelor's degree	20minutes
KU1	38	M	4years	Master's degree	21minutes

Source: Author's fieldwork

The ten research participants' work experience ranged from four months to four years, as shown in Table 2 above. The participants included seven males and three females. The lowest-qualified research participant held an O-level certificate.

4. Findings of the study

The findings of the study relate to the following research question;

- How effective are counter-productive work behaviours to improve your work experience?

The sub-themes that came out during data analysis include financial security, risk of dismissal, risk of being arrested, release work stress, and restore justice and equity. The aforementioned sub-themes were grouped into two themes, namely effective and ineffective. Table 3 below presents the themes and sub-themes that came out during data analysis.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes of the study

Themes	Sub-themes
Effective	-Financial security -Restore justice and equity -Release of work stress
Ineffective	-Risk of dismissal -Risk of being arrested

Source: Field work

4.1. Data frequency

The results of the study show that most participants (n=7) felt that counterproductive work behaviors are useful in enhancing the experiences of casual employees. Nevertheless, three research participants stated that engaging in counterproductive job activities will not improve their experiences. Table 4 below shows participants' response rate.

Table 4: Themes and data frequency

Themes	Frequency
Effective	7
Ineffective	3

Source: Author's fieldwork

4.2. Participants' quotes

Table 5 below shows participant quotes regarding how counterproductive work practices can improve one's work experience, as reported by the majority of participants.

Table 5: Participants' quotes on effectiveness of counter-productive work behaviors as coping mechanisms

Pseudonym	Quotes
A1	<i>"Stealing will obviously improve your financial position. The company offers a meager salary, which cannot buy basic commodities. For me, draining diesel from the company delivery truck and sell(ing) the diesel on the black market, improves my financial situation."</i>
A3	<i>"We connive with security guards when loading (the) delivery truck. In most cases, we load more boxes than those on the dispatch invoice. We then sale (sell) the lot and share it with my squad. In my case, I use the proceeds to pay for my rentals and schools fees for my kid, which is a good deal for me."</i>

A4	<i>"They give us peanuts (meager salaries) and sometimes they do not pay us for overtime work. Given such a background, I steal and sell anything at my disposal to restore justice and equity. It's now one year working here and my coping strategy is effective to be honest, and I am happy."</i>
A5	<i>"My working conditions are dire, no protective clothing, overtime is not paid, no training and unpredictable working hours. To deal with these stressing working conditions, sometimes I come to work late and steal from the company. In short, I am saying deviant work behaviors are effective in reducing my work related stress."</i>
A6	<i>"I engage in deviant work behaviors to restore equity. I work the same job with some permanent employees but my salary is three times lower than those of my permanent workmates. So, to restore equity and ensure distributive justice, I steal from the company."</i>
KM2	<i>"They consider counter-productive work behaviors as effective because they restore equity and improve their financial position."</i>
KM3	<i>"They afford expensive cellphones, clothing and lunch because they do underground deals here, ranging from bribes, kickbacks, fraud, and theft. For them underground deals are effective in improving their financial situations as casual workers."</i>

Source: Author's fieldwork

A number of research participants above expressed that counter-productive work behaviors are effective towards improving casual workers' work experiences. Their sentiments centered on the ability to improve their financial positions, deal with work related stress, and restore justice and equity.

Contrarily, other research participants indicated that deviant work behaviors do not significantly enhance their work experiences as casual workers. Their responses are presented below.

- *"You risk being arrested if you engage in deviant work behaviors at work. For me, I do not consider them as effective in improving my work experiences." (A2)*
- *"Counter-productive work behaviors are dismissible misconduct. They are not effective because once caught engaging in some of the CWBs, then you are gone for good." (KM1)*
- *"They are not effective because you risk arrest and dismissal." (KU1)*

5. Discussion of the findings

Two main themes, effective and ineffective emerged from research participants' responses. The most often mentioned subject was the effective theme, which included financial security, restoring justice and equity, and relieving stress associated with work. A small number of research participants, however, reported that the CWBs are not effective to improve their work related experiences. The sub-

themes that the participants identified under the ineffective theme include risk of dismissal and being arrested. The following section discusses the study's themes and sub-themes.

5.1. Financial security

The study's findings show that CWBs improve casual workers' financial position. Hence, A1 remarked: *"Stealing will obviously improve your financial position. The company offers a meager salary, which cannot buy basic commodities. For me, draining diesel from the company delivery truck and sell(ing) the diesel on the black market, improves my financial situation"*. The inequality theft model seconds the above quotes, and assumes that workers steal to improve their financial position. Striler and Jex (2021) support the above viewpoints, arguing that stealing is a CWB, which appears to improve the financial status of workers if the proceeds are put to beneficial use. Similarly, a study by Sinclair and Cheung (2016) found that counter-productive work behaviors, like theft, reduce perceived financial inequality.

5.2. Restore justice and equity

Some participants indicated that CWBs are effective to restore justice and equity. Hence, A6 said: *"I engage in deviant work behaviors to restore equity. I work the same job with some permanent employees but my salary is three times lower than those of my permanent workmates. So, to restore equity and ensure distributive justice, I steal from the company."*A6's perspectives are in line with Cohen and Diamant (2019), who state that temporary workers engage in CWBs as a way of restoring distributive justice and equity. Similarly, Wiseman and Stillwell (2022) argue that counter-productive work behaviors function as coping mechanisms that temporary workers adopt to restore equity and distributive justice.

5.3. Release work related stress

The results show that CWBs are useful coping strategies to release work related stress. Hence, A5 stated: *"My working conditions are dire; no protective clothing, overtime is not paid, no training and unpredictable working hours. To deal with these stressing working conditions, sometimes I come to work late and steal from the company. In short, I am saying deviant work behaviors are effective in reducing my work related stress."* The stressor emotional model reinforces the afore-mentioned quotes and assumes that workers engage

in CWBs as a way of trying to reduce work related stress. Similarly, the frustration and aggression model assumes that when workers face a stressful situation, they engage in CWBs to reduce work related stress.

5.4. Risk of dismissal and being arrested

Some counter-productive work behaviors are linked to criminal offenses and gross misconduct; hence, some research participants asserted that CWBs are not effective in improving their work experiences. In this regard, KM1 said: *“Counter-productive work behaviors are dismissible misconduct. They are not effective because once caught engaging in some of the CWBs, then you are gone for good.”* Similarly, A2 stated: *“You risk being arrested if you engage in deviant work behaviors at work. For me, I do not consider them as effective in improving my work experience.”* KM1’s quote aligns with Xiao and Liao (2018), who posit that engaging in CWBs amounts to gross misconduct, which leads to direct dismissal. In addition, Bennett and Locklear (2018) argue that some counter-productive work behaviors like fraud and vandalism are criminal offences, which could have detrimental effects such as being arrested.

5.5. Contribution of the study

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution by providing a new stream of innovative knowledge on the effectiveness of counter-productive work behaviors in improving the work experiences of non-standard workers in the global south context. The study would also be beneficial for employers because it would make them aware of counter-productive work behaviors, allowing them to then develop measures to monitor and regulate these.

5.6. Limitations and direction for future studies

The purpose of the study was to evaluate the efficacy of counterproductive work practices at a particular multinational company in Zimbabwe as a way to enhance temporary workers' work experiences. The study's conclusions may not apply universally to Zimbabwe's multinational companies. Semi-structured interviews, with their own limitations, were utilized in this inquiry. The conclusions of the study could have been made clearer through the adoption of a mixed-methods research approach. Due to the small sample size of the study, not all of the casual workers at the multinational company in Zimbabwe were fairly represented. Had the sample size been

larger, additional information would have been revealed, which could have changed the results. Future research on the effectiveness of CWBs to enhance employee work experiences should use a mixed-methods or a quantitative research approach.

5.7. Conclusion

The study's findings demonstrate that CWBs helped many casual employees at the multinational company in Zimbabwe have more positive work experiences. Counterproductive work practices generally alleviate financial insecurity, lower stress levels associated with the workplace, and restore distributive justice and equity. However, a few research participants blamed CWBs for problems related to direct dismissal from work and being arrested. Overall, it can be claimed that counter-productive work behaviors enhance the work experiences of several casual workers at the multinational company in Zimbabwe. Organizations should, therefore, understand the reasons why workers engage in CWBs and develop appropriate intervention strategies to monitor and control these.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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