

**SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE RELATIONSHIP TO  
WORKING TIME AMONG COTONOU AUTONOMOUS PORT AGENTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research work focuses on the analysis of the difficulties that hinder time management among state-owned enterprise employees in Benin, especially those of the Autonomous Port of Cotonou (P.A.C). The aim was to establish the links between the time management by the P.A.C officers and their efficiency. A methodological approach consisting of non-probabilistic sampling techniques (stratified and reasoned choice) and data collection techniques such as interview, observation and the questionnaire was used.

It emerges from this research that the efficiency at work of the agents of the port of Cotonou strongly depends on the management that they make of the constrained time and the chosen time. On the other hand, unforeseen events, inconveniences and professional relaxation ... have been identified as poorly managed situations that lead to the production of stress in the ranks of the agents concerned.

**Keywords:** time- work- optimization

**Introduction**

In the role of business managers, it is increasingly demanding the need for a good negotiation of working time for a provision of services and/or products to users. But how do they implement their mission as leaders? "... To achieve his goals, the manager must know how to organize and motivate his teams, interact with customers, centralize information, redistribute it, evaluate performance, manage budgets, increase sales and profits ..." (Barabel and Meier; 2006). He then assumes much diversified, sometimes conflicting tasks which lead him to orchestrate numerous interlocutors, which puts him at the centre of a large number of interpersonal relationships. It is no longer a matter of managing only people and financial and material resources to grow the business; it is also about managing time. Working time management therefore becomes an important aspect for improving the performance of public and private companies. The Autonomous Port of Cotonou is not on the margins of this reality despite the important role it plays in the Beninese economy.

Indeed, according to the provisions of Law n° 88-005 of April 26, 1988 relating to the creation, organization and operation of public and semi-public enterprises, the port of Cotonou carries out its activities in accordance with the laws and customs governing the operation of private companies in the Republic of Benin. Pursuant to the institutional arrangements of the State of Benin, all staff work for a minimum of eight (08) hours of working time per day. Therefore, the

optimization of this working time is one of the great difficulties that the various state structures encounter.

Thus, the three months immersion in the Human Resources Department of the General Directorate of the Autonomous Port of Cotonou (PAC) made it possible to identify a difficulty in efficiently managing working time.

It is not uncommon to hear PAC officers saying: "I can't receive you"; "Really, at this moment, I don't have a second to grant you!" "... These are the polite but firm words by the Director of Human Resources of the PAC after postponing this meeting for four times. This kind of speech is regularly heard from the majority of the officers of the Autonomous Port of Cotonou. It is not an obstinacy not to listen to the user. They seem really busy. They are cornered. There is still an urgent matter to be resolved. But at the same time, there is a good chance of meeting a vacant agent at the idle limit. In the same vein; Tonongbe (2009) asserts that working time is a "badly exploited resource" in most companies (private or not) and public administrative services in Benin.

It comes to observe two or three agents of the Autonomous Port of Cotonou during a day to realize how they are both occupied or not. Indeed, these agents that we see in offices chatting all day long with each other or via the internet are the same ones who, a few moments later seem very busy and have a thousand things to do at the same time.

Thus, a few main concepts such as management, time, optimization and efficiency are used to clarify this research work. According to Atkinson (1984), management is an art; a smart way to organize, plan, manage to achieve a goal. Managing is therefore knowing how to convert available resources into sources of profit (Julles: 2002). Let's bear in mind that management is the art of organizing and planning activities for a productive purpose. Time is the measurable and graspable basis of life as it unfolds. Better, it is a moment. For Leibnitz, it is the order of successive existences. It is then a duration; that is to say "the duration of things, as it is measured or measurable". Time is then considered as a resource whose consumption must be limited to improve worker efficiency. Here, it should be kept in mind that time is a resource, a means to an end; it is the length of time that can be taken to complete an activity.

Efficiency is a notion that refers to the idea of effectively carrying out a task, of obtaining a result, with the idea of saving means as a corollary (Barabel and Meier: 2006). In short, efficiency is the fact of obtaining at the end of an activity the expected result with the available means.

Optimization is the act of optimizing, that is, transforming a source in order to maximize the speed of operation of the organization and minimize the necessary resources. In clear terms, optimization is the transformation of a given quantity and quality of resources in order to maximize the expected result as much as possible.

It should then be remembered that working time management is the art of organizing, planning activities which allows you to minimize wasted time and quickly improve efficiency at work. Thus, to establish the links between the time management by the workers of the Port of Cotonou and their efficiency at work, it was necessary to describe on the one hand the organization of the working time of the officers of the port of Cotonou and secondly, to identify the sources of pressure on time management at the Autonomous Port of Cotonou.

### **1. Scientific debates on time management**

Managing ones time well is an essential act for an organization manager and for his quisling because of the plurality of missions and objectives to be achieved. Several conceptions of time exist. For instance, we can retain with Barabel and Meier (2006) that we can distinguish time as:

- a finite resource that must be used efficiently and economically;
- a strategic lever that can be used to transform organizational behavior;
- a subjective data which is largely based on our thought patterns, our postulates in relation to the way in which men should be managed, the results obtained and on what is important compared versus what could come next.

Lets' agree with these authors that the sources of pressure can come to exert on the schedule of the manager and his quisling and create additional bottlenecks. For example, we can quote the unforeseen, the intrusive and the rest. According to Loïc, Francis and Frédéric (2007), the optimization of working time must begin with the identification of sources of pressure and the combing of unnecessary idle of time will be added to this.

We also with Tremblay & Perrier (2000) that the extensive use of NTIC leads to a bad use of time because of certain internet programs which workers in the services constantly adore. The manager will, for example, have to express his opinion on the way he organizes the management of information flows or the way he plans the methods of action in an emergency. One also has to manage interruptions and says no to intruders. This means that the question of time is very delicate and it must always be understood in a multidimensional dynamic. In this regard, Elias (1996) said that time is not an objective datum as already advocated by Kant who says "time must be considered as a social symbol". For Ricoeur and al. (1978), it is not possible to dismiss out of time some of these aspects that we would qualify as pathological. He therefore finds it normal that time escapes man. As for us, we can say that the social actor will have to act in a functionalist dynamic to reduce as much as possible the time margin that will escape him.

Finally, let us say with Barabel and Meier (2006) that the consequences for the company of poor time management are so important that it will be necessary to have a strategic watch system to control it as much as possible.

## **2. Research materials**

As stated above, this research work is carried out at the Autonomous Port of Cotonou. All the data produced as part of this work therefore relate to the realities of the port of Cotonou. It spread over several stages, namely: the exploratory interview, documentary research, data collection and analysis. It should be noted that this research is both qualitative and quantitative due to the nature of the sought data.

All agents of P.A.C can be considered as target population for this research work. They are all concerned whether they are permanent, contractual, occasional, technical directors or heads of departments or services. But for the sake of precision and quality, research has opted for two technical departments of the port, namely: Human Resources Department, because being the department that takes care of agents and their mobility and the General Management, because being the structure that has the largest number of managers and is in full contact with all the other departments of the organization. Each of the informants was chosen using the snowball technique. But to correct the inadequacies of group effects that this technique can produce, the technique of the reasoned choice of the respondents was associated with it (the criteria for this choice vary between the socio-professional category, the ethnicity and the age of the agents). Also, the total number of informants met was obtained by saturation of the information obtained during data collection, to 56 actors made up of senior executives, middle managers, supervisors and executing agents.

Three major techniques made it possible to collect the data. The observation technique made it possible to follow differently three categories of port agents randomly chosen in order to have an idea of the day-to-day strategies of time management among them. The questionnaire and the interview made it possible to have information on the perceptions of various agents on working time management. These tools also made it possible to collect data on the elements of time management which are sources of stress for agents. Therefore, the observation grid, the questionnaire form and the interview guide were tools for data collection.

Beyond the content analysis of the data produced in the field, the structural and functional analysis intervened in support to understand each port worker in his positions (spatial and temporal) and in his various attributions. Observation, interview and questionnaire techniques facilitated data collection. Thus, this qualitative and quantitative study offers the possibility of discovering the daily practices of time management at the port of Cotonou as well as their links with the performance of the workers and consequently the organizational performance.

## **3. Organization of time management for PAC workers**

The data resulting from this research show that all the port officials encountered perceive time as a business resource even if they have many difficulties in optimizing it. Indeed, the perception of time and its management are not objective data. They are largely based on the socio-cultural port environment, the ways of thinking and organization of officials at many levels. Thus, many port officers organize their working time according to that of their line manager and more particularly according to the culture of the company.

To understand the mode of organization of time among PAC workers, they were led to choose between five (5) main options for the execution of their tasks, namely: "I undertake as a priority the activity that I enjoy more "; "I delegate as much as possible the activities that I would enjoy undertaking on my own"; "To save time I undertake all urgent activities myself"; "Every morning I gather and undertake all urgent activities"; "I take into account the time needed to perform a task and determine my priorities".

Here, it is noticed that each agent goes there by choice and also by his liking. Provided that it is easy for him to navigate the chosen mode of organization. It should however be noted that the tasks delegation is not a much shared value at the port (40% of the total surveyed resort to it as a last possibility). Rather, agents (50% of respondents) prefer to take care of activities that they enjoy most or rather to undertake urgent activities. Taking into account the time needed to complete a task has never been a priority. Rather, it comes after one has chosen the valued and urgent activities.

We then realize that the lack of delegation, the love of urgency and certain tasks are the major principles that characterize the organization of working time at the Autonomous Port of Cotonou. However, it seems necessary to specify the reasons which govern these choices. The following table summarizes the criteria taken into account by port agents to efficiently sort their daily tasks.

Table I: Synoptic chart of criteria for efficient sorting of tasks at the PAC

criteria sorting activity	chosen workforce	Percentage
The liking (what we prefer to do)	28	50%
Duration (which will take the least or the most time)	9	16,07%
Necessity (which seems more useful)	14	25%
The possibility of delegation	4	0,71%
other (destination of the file)	1	0,018%

Source: field data, 2020.

It emerges from this table that there are four main criteria chosen by the workers of the port of Cotonou to perform a task within a given time. First, the liking that the agent has for the tasks to be performed; then the necessity that he sees in the execution of these tasks, the duration that this execution will take to finally see if it is necessary to delegate or not some of the activities. In addition, one of the interviewed officers (responsible for recording memos and other important administrative document for the organization) said that he also takes into account the destination of the document to be signed. He further explains that if it is a document from the Managing Director or a Technical Director, he stops any other task; then if it is documents going to a department manager or other agent, he takes his time to execute it on a willing time unless it's an agent with whom he has a good relationship.

It should then be noted that there is no founding principle at the port of Cotonou that defines the way of managing working time. Everyone goes as he sees fit according to his own rationality, thus subjecting the organization to wasted time that could be capitalized differently.

Taking into account the time lost by PAC workers, for 56 agents affected, it is noted that the port loses 2825mn per day or an average of about 51 minutes per agent per day. Generalizing this figure to all the staff of the port of Cotonou, we have a total (474 X 51) of 24,174 minutes or 402.9 hours (around 17 days) of work per day for all the staff. At the limit, these alarming figures are nothing more than the expression of the enormous delay that the port of Cotonou has in its development. In other words, the current daily performance of the Port of Cotonou is nothing but the seventeenth of what the organization should have per day if each worker managed to optimize eight (08) statutory working hours per day.

The agent's abnormal relationship with working time at the port of Cotonou is not only visible through the ways in which work is organized but also the obstacles to good management of working time. It is also noticeable through the stress that poor optimization of working time can cause on port workers.

#### **4. Sources of pressure on the port staff schedule**

At the heart of time management among workers at the Port of Cotonou is their schedule. Several sources exert themselves on the schedule of workers, creating bottlenecks or additional stress. During the data collection in some offices of the port of Cotonou, are met some agents overwhelmed with tasks and not knowing which way to turn.

"... It's neither a file nor six that I have to deal with... my head is hot... I can't take it anymore... how to satisfy the chief... it's always me... Oh save me Lord ...".

These are words from various agents surprised in a situation of overflow and deeply stressed because they don't know what to do or where to start solving tons of tasks to achieve. The situation is very easily noticeable within the port. One needs only to take a walk on a working day in certain offices to observe agents in a hurry to quickly finish so as to report to the boss who wants nothing else than the result.

"... The chief doesn't receive any problem... only solutions are presented to him ...".

Agents are thus often forced to return home late in order to catch up with the completion of tasks which should be performed during the day and which the supervisor must receive early in the morning. Remember that these night works are carried out under stress with the possible pressures that could exist at home.

The following chart reports the different sources of pressure on the schedule recorded during data collection

Table II: Different sources of pressure and the associated workforce

Sources of pressure	Workforce concerned	Percentage
The unexpected	06	16,67%
Foreseeable contingencies	11	19,64%
The nuisance	04	07,14%
Professional relaxation	13	23,21%
Time consuming activities	22	39,28%

Source: field data, 2020.

There are therefore five (05) major sources of pressure on the port agents' schedule. It should be noted that the sources cited in the table above are broad categories of pressure sources within which we find several other elements influencing in one way or another the relation to time of port workers. Thus, a category of source of pressure on the port agent's schedule can be distinguished:

- unforeseen

These are unscheduled activities to be carried out and which mainly arise from new requests from customers or from the hierarchy. These unforeseen events are often caused by accidents or incidents, sudden dysfunctions hindering the smooth running of work throughout the organization.

- foreseeable unforeseen events

These are some unanticipated tasks that are wrongly called unforeseen when they are bad anticipations. This is the case for new requests from customers or a ship that spends more time than expected on the Benin coast, or a sudden malfunction of a docking device, or a retirement of an agent. These various situations should be foreseen by the port agents instead of always waiting to act in haste.

- intruders

These are inopportune requests that often capture a large part of the workers' schedule: the personal problems of work teams, interpersonal problems, requests for validation following private initiatives, etc. The main difficulty for workers lies in the need to sort out really important files (a personal problem of a member of a unit quickly has important consequences on performance) and anecdotal files, unnecessary internal controversies;

- professional "relaxation":

It may seem paradoxical to speak of professional relaxation. In fact, it is about the practices, the professional rituals, such as the coffee, the break for eating, the small talks between colleagues, the "cigarette break", the discussions in the corridors.... However, it should be noted that this professional entertainment is also a producer of meaning and social cohesion. These different "entertainments" represent a significant part of the time spent in the workplace.

- time consuming activities

These are traditional activities that include various and varied business meetings, telephone conversations, reading and responding to paper or electronic mail. This category also includes the games and strategies of agents focusing more on internal power issues than on the performance of the port organization. It is also noted that it is not a question of calling into question these activities, especially meetings, telephone conversations or reading/answering paper and electronic mails, but to highlight their impact on the use of time. . Thus, it is not the meetings that must be called into question but the "mania for meetings", it is not the practice of electronic mail that poses a problem but the overabundance of inappropriate emails with their effects on efficiency in the field. It is important to remember at this level that a poor organization of working time is enough to be encumbered and overwhelmed with work.

### **5. Synthesis**

The results from this research work clearly show the links between time management and efficiency in an organization. Thus, it should be noted that by borrowing from Taylorism the perspective of absolute rationality in the organization of work, one sees that working time is immediately optimized and the result is clearly felt on the organization. Because the work is shifted with the support of the principle of one best way, the time necessary for the execution of a task is clearly defined and the worker is paid by the piece, that is to say he is paid in proportion to his performance (which is undoubtedly linked to the way he manages his working time). However, it should be noted that this perspective of scientific organization of work supported by Taylorism and Fordism has favored with many effects the optimization with the corollary of improving the performance of the company. But this leads to a strong production of stress among workers.

Indeed, the worker, the employee, the man at work not being an object, it is very difficult to manage to format him as such in order to derive the greatest benefit from it. For example, time in itself is not a fixed data, it is very flexible and it should be managed with very little rigidity to manage to use it according to the work context and the pursued goal. The effort to analyze working time management from a structural-functionalist perspective has thus made it possible to understand port workers not holistically but rather according to the structural and functional situations in which they perform the work. The analysis thus enabled Barabelet Meier (2006) to establish three different ways of managing time to achieve efficiency.

- **Efficiency and management of "time constraints"**

Here, we must realize that time management is different from that implemented in an emergency (or critical) situation. In fact, in a standard situation, the tasks are carried out in a sequence and in a calm manner which makes it possible to obtain better overall efficiency of the organization. In this case, workers then manage their time in such a way so as to optimize both the organization's time and their personal time. But if tasks are given priority in relation to company goals and delays, it is early noticed that many useful tasks are first neglected. One therefore understands that in an emergency or critical situation, time management is fundamentally changed due to the



sometimes sudden transformation of business priorities. In this case, management revolves mainly around the concepts of carrying out mandatory tasks and the polarization of efforts on urgent priorities.

• **Efficiency and management of "chosen time"**

It is important to know that not all activities can be managed from a time-constrained productivist perspective because the activities of creation, innovation and reform can hardly be managed in a linear fashion. Also in the broader sense, commercial activities (at the one-stop-shop) and more specifically upstream negotiation and customer relationship activities cannot always be approached exclusively from a time constrained perspective.

It should then be noted that the relationship to time is much more complex due to the lack of standards for the time required to complete a task. For example, the implementation of a new reform may take several months or years depending on the case, the performance of the work performed between the two durations not necessarily being linked to the performance of the work performed but to the nature of the studied object and sometimes to the circumstances. In this case, it is necessary to take into account the fact that there is no progressiveness in the result; was the reform successful or not! has the client signed the contract or not! has the technical innovation been achieved or has failed!.... Therefore, the time here is not a variable that can be managed in a productivist approach. Time management is not excluded, but the objectives set cannot be dealt with solely with a view to rationalizing time for each of the tasks performed.

• **Efficiency and strategic time management**

Time is not just a limited resource available to workers. It is also a strategic lever used by port agents to transform their behavior in the organization and develop new competitive advantages for the latter or acquire new strategic resources. It turns out that time is a resource at the disposal of port officials who use it strategically for or against the business. In either case, it should be noted that when it comes to time management, good strategies can achieve both good organizational and personal performance. I then trust Certeau (2000) when he says "... when we put man in an organization as rigid as it is with very inflexible normative provisions, he always finds strategies to establish room for maneuver; this is the wig method ...".

However, the stress that results from poor optimization of working time should not be ruled out.

**6. The hunt for unnecessary pressure**

Good optimization of working time should start with identifying existing sources of pressure and eliminating unnecessary ones. The existence of time management pressure is therefore an obvious phenomenon due to the unforeseeable difficult urgent situations which create stressful situations for officers. However, it should be noted that there are unnecessary pressures that these workers put on themselves which end up giving them stress when it comes to serious work. This is the case of:

- **Extensive use of ICT**

While the internet and other modern means of communication are obviously sources of progress and high-performance tools at the service of businesses and workers, extensive and inappropriate use causes the opposite effects which are particularly time consuming. Thus the extensive use of emails and charts can speed up the flow of information, much of which is unnecessary. In addition, the common practice at the port of immediate response to mail is a major source of idle time. Indeed, this practice encourages the idea of equal importance to all other actions. Moreover, by creating immediate and personalized access to any member of the hierarchy, this means of communication can sometimes cause dysfunctions of the hierarchical line and a bottleneck in communication at a specific level of the hierarchy. It is therefore essential for all workers to clearly clarify their relationship to ICT, the frequency of their consultation of emails and their response policy (especially in terms of speed).

- **Unnecessary overloads**

Even if the major principle of any organization is the division of tasks, one of the roles of team leaders (department heads, central directors) is to organize the work within their team, to define the levels of delegation and to set the rules in terms of autonomy and control. One of the most important sources of pressure for port officials is the emergence of dysfunction at this level. These dysfunctions are expressed in the form of a multiplication of controls, a duplication of tasks with a view to overlapping responsibilities which require permanent time consuming arbitration on the part of managers. Thus, many sources of pressure have their origin in organizational problems upstream. The role of managers is to identify them and provide solutions at this level.

- **Hidden commitments**

These are non-explicit commitments which nevertheless, have a strong influence on workers' use of time. Among these hidden commitments are the organization's representation activities in other structures such as (Ministry of Maritime Transport and Port Reform, SOBEMAP, CNCB, etc.), the hidden personal commitments of workers and the time taken to assimilate internal documentation (procedures, notes, various information). In these cases, each worker must try to distinguish between things and identify those which really fall within his mission and those from which he can escape.

### **Conclusion**

Managing time well is an essential act for any worker because of the plurality of their missions and the objectives to be achieved. The agents of the Autonomous Port of Cotonou are truly aware of this and do whatever they can to manage to make time a resource in the service of the performance of the port organization and their own development. The present research work has made it possible to realize that the latter encounter many difficulties including procrastination behaviors, permanent overload, the continuous absence of room for maneuver, confinement/feeling of loneliness, the impossibility of get help, fatigue stress. This shows that their schedule escapes them to the great disadvantage of the port.

Data collection thus made it possible to establish links between the management of working time by port agents and the performance of the port of Cotonou. The notion of efficiency at work was therefore examined in relation to time. This made it possible to develop the links between efficiency and "time constraint", then efficiency and "chosen time" and finally efficiency and "strategic time management". On the other hand, the study found that several sources of pressure exerted on workers' schedules and created bottlenecks or additional stress. We can mainly cite the unforeseen, intrusive and professional relaxation.

In short, time management is a dynamic process which is built up as time progresses, and which the worker must constantly keep in mind in order to make the necessary adjustments according to events.

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