

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF WORK ETHICS IN NIGERIA'S PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract

The Nigerian public service is crucial to the country's economic development. This is because a vibrant public service sector is able to harness effectively overhead taxes and also account for public expenditure at all levels. The objective of this study is to investigate how public servants perceive work ethics to positively influence organizational success and productivity in Nigeria's public sector. In this study, the researcher used qualitative methods to analyze the response of 15 individuals from the public who have visited a typical public office at least 3 times within the last years. An interview form containing 7 items was administered, and the results were analyzed from themes that give a true picture of the perception of respondents. It was observed that workers in public service are not professional enough, taking their jobs with levity. As a result, this study recommends public service reforms.

Keywords: government, Nigerian, public service, qualitative analyze, work ethics

JEL Classification: M19

Introduction

For any nation to develop, it must effectively harness the contributions of its public sector in order to spur growth and development. This is because the public sector is the medium through which developmental efforts of the government can be implemented. Imhonopi and Ugochukwu (2013) agree to this idea, noting that the government can drive economic growth, and increase the level of trust between them and the citizenry by acting through the public sector, i.e., the various government-owned departments and agencies. Thus, the growth of any nation hangs largely on the government and the public servants that are employed to work in these organizations.

In many nations of the world, there are established codes of conduct for carrying out work in the public sector. This is also applicable to Nigeria. The constitution of the country has made prescriptions of codes of ethics in workplaces that public servants must adhere to. According to Bem (2014), code of conducts help to make workers in the public sector carry out their obligations dutifully to society. The author further notes that a breach of these codes would result in an unfavorable economic condition in the country, manifested in a high level of corruption, instability, lack of trust in government establishments, and an impeded national economic development.

Public servants in Nigeria's civil service are largely perceived to show a *laissez-faire* attitude to work, causing workers in a typical government office in Nigeria look short of what to do (Anazodo & Okoye, 2012). This is because excessive delegation of jobs and negligence of duty are the order of the day, a situation that has caused many to demand the popular "civil service reforms" (Anazodo & Okoye, 2012). Ogbonnaya (2018) explained that Nigeria is faced with tremendous of ethical backwardness and a severely weak value system. Some researchers further pointed that these unfavorable conditions resulting from breaching of codes of work ethics are being experienced in Nigeria due to low quality output and a high level of corruption in the public sector of the country (Okechukwu & Jide, 2018). This notion is in agreement with early ideas by Balci et al. (2012) who gave the opinion that lack of good ethical codes in the culture of an organization would increase the chances of destructive policies and violence, causing disappointment of some employees and others adopting the behaviour of placing personal benefits over that of the public, in other words, corruption. Bem (2014) opined that the citizens are often at the receiving end of poor and widespread increase in the decay of work ethics among workers in public sector.

Massoudi and Hamdi (2017) explained work ethics as the basis for hard work and assiduousness, with the belief that there is a benefit to be derived from being diligent with work. Tripathi (2014) further stated that in every organization, the employees' work ethics contributes to, and determine the overall success of the organization. For an organization to record high performance, it has to maintain a high standard of ethics and work values (Gould, 2014). This opinion is in line with the ideas of Bernard and Oyende (2015), who noted that since human contributions in any organization comes first in the order of important, how well each member of the organization performs his duty determines the overall performance, and, of course, success of the organization. It is on this premise that the current study tries to look at how public servants themselves perceive their own work ethics, and whether it is enough to positively influence organization success and productivity.

Objective of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate on how public servants perceive work ethics to positively influence organization success and productivity in Nigeria public sector.

Literature Review

The abysmal state of work performance in Nigeria's public sector has been an issue of concern to several scholars and professionals (Vambe, 2013). The government in the bid to put a stop to this introduced SERVICOM and the Code of Conduct Bureau. However, this seem to be inadequate as only a few public servants with the right work ethics and integrity always seem to be scarce (Vambe, 2013). In this section, we shall look at how literature of work ethics in Nigeria has developed over time.

History of Nigeria's public sector

Nigeria's economic sector is divided into three distinct groups; the private sector, public sector and non-government organizations. While the private sector is out to provide goods and services in exchange for money, the public sector is government-owned (comprising of all government parastatals, Nigerian civil service, the military and the police), and is out to provide services for the general public. According to Haque (2001) the function of the public sector to provide goods and services to the citizens is because the public sector represents the interest of the citizens. Hence, it is safe to trace the history of the public sector to the civil service.

History of Nigeria's public sector history can be traced back to the era of British colonialism, the time of amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates

in 1914 (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019). At this time, the public sector was made of mostly Europeans, with traditional rulers settling for lower positions in the political structure so that the colonial political system will have some sense of legitimacy (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019). This also counts for the reason why the system of indirect rule enjoyed a lot of success; it leveraged on the traditional rulers as part of the administration body in various small towns and villages. These traditional rulers were highly revered by the people who they ruled over. Their powers were seen to be spiritual and political, especially in the Northern and Western regions (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019). Hence, the citizens had no choice but to accept the rule of the Brits. The Nigerian civil service began to take shape in in 1954 on the introduction of three regional political structure. This became more visible and organized in 1960 on gaining independence from colonial rule with the constitution at that time providing for parliamentary system of government and a significant level of independence for the regions, each region having its own government but with exclusive power in commercial and fiscal policies, defense and foreign relations reserved to the government (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019; Okekeocha, 2013).

Since independence, several committees and panels has been assigned with the responsibility of studying and making recommendations for the reformation of the civil service. Some of these panels includes Margan Commission (1963), Adebo Commission (1971) and Udoji Commission (1979). The public sector, comprising gained greater visibility and became more active as more policies on developments and programs where actively carried (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019). In the 1970s, Nigeria experienced an oil boom which boosted the country's economy. This, coupled with the commitment to succor the effects of the civil war led to the creation of more states in place of the regional system that was in operation (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019). Over the next two decades, 36 states were created in total. Consequently, it led to the expansion of the civil service, with the federal civil service and those of the states witnessing tremendous growth, and more responsibilities (Igbokwe-Ibeto, Nwobi, & Nnaji, 2019). Unfortunately, this was not sustained. By the 2000s, the civil service was already witnessing a high degree of ineffectiveness, lack of work ethics among workers, and an alarming rate of mismanagement of the nation's resources (Abdullah, 2007).

The meaning of work ethics

Work ethics is a branch of Philosophy known as Ethics. In the opinion of Aniele (2002), ethics involve studying systematically moral laws, either as a fundamental principle, or a study of human behavior. One can infer from this definition that

ethics is a science of evaluation, and not empirical or descriptive. Thus, in the study of ethics, the aim of the study is usually to evaluate and contrast with what ought to be, and not just describing or making empirical findings. Ethics consists of the study of moral principles that guides the way people ought to conduct themselves concerning work, teamwork, self-discipline, self-worth, and integrity (Aniele, 2002). According to Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright (2004), ethics studies the principles of right and wrong in their fundamental state and the behavior that consistently obeys those principles. Ananti and Umeifekwem (2012) opined that the purpose of ethics is to address the issue of moral standards. Furthermore, the researchers noted that studying ethics in the premise of the duty of a worker in the public sector considers the job a service to the public. In other words, ethics in the public sector evaluates the right or wrong of the actions taken by workers in the public sector while carrying out their daily duties. It can also be explained as the standard with which workers in the public sector will be scrutinized by the public (Ananti & Umeifekwem, 2012).

The accounting dictionary of 2019 described work ethics as being able to maintain the right and proper moral value at workplace. This attitude, in the opinion of determines how a worker will carry out his job in a workplace. Cascio (2013) noted that work ethics is the set standard of morals acceptable in an average work place as concerning the welfare of the employees, their attitude to work, self-discipline, and how committed they are to their tasks at their workplace. Velasquez (2002) sees work ethics as the principle guiding the conducts of individuals and groups in at workplace, which makes them adhere to the ethical codes in their organization. This influences the level of productivity and profitability of the organization. Adams and Danny (2007) posited that one of the most important benefits an organization derives from work ethics is that it helps keep organizational integrity as it helps all members of the organizational maintain professional norms. The pair also explained that work ethics help workers avoid mistakes that makes the public lose trust in them. Some of such mistakes or misdeeds are corruption and nepotism (Adams & Danny, 2007). Hence, work ethics make workers in the public sector accountable to the general public whom they serve (Adams & Danny, 2007). In the opinion of Friedrich (1940), ethics can be likened to a moral compass guiding an individual in public administration in the midst of widespread ethical bankruptcy.

Work ethics in the Nigerian public sector

The workers' attitudes, integrity, self-discipline, teamwork, emphasis on quality, commitment and productivity of the Nigerian workers have painted a

rather negative picture of apathetic, uncommitted men and women, who are unresponsive to motivational techniques. The Nigerian workers have been described as indolent, apathetic and unresponsive to motivation and generally, not willing to put forth maximum productive efforts (Ugwu et al., 2019). Whichever way we look at it, the Nigerian workers are what we have, hence we must encourage them to make meaningful contribution to the development of the nation by becoming more productive. Given this outside perception of Nigeria workers in relation to ethics, the current study tries to examine the public perception of staffs of the Nigerian civil service. To do this, this study tries to answer the research question below;

- What perception does the average Nigerian hold concerning the Nigerian civil service?

Methodology

The researcher conducted an open-ended interview using an interview form (see table 1) containing 7 items all relating to the research questions in section 2. The responses of the respondents were recorded and transcribed from which researcher derived themes and codes were qualitatively analyzed. Two coders were used in order to arrive at a robust result. Furthermore, inter-coder reliability was calculated using Kohen Kappa technique. This was necessary to ascertain whether the results only happened by chance or not. Respondents were recruited from the public but were narrowed down to only those who have had at least 3 encounter with public offices in the last one year. Overall, 15 persons made the requirement for the study, and were grouped based on the number of visits.

Table 1. Interview questions

S/N	Question
1.	On scale 1-5 (5 been the highest), how would you rate the civil service in terms of work ethics?
2.	Have you ever had an encounter at any public office, describe the service you received?
3.	How professional are workers within the civil service?
4.	In terms of punctuality to work, how would you describe public servants?
5.	How would you describe dedication to the job by public sector workers?
6.	How would you describe regularity of workers in public service?
7.	Do you think the civil service needs reform?

Results

Coding was done in twice; firstly, across individual groups, i.e. one, two or three visits to a public office within the last 365 days, and secondly there was a recoding that cuts across all three groups. A theme was developed from the transcript using the coding relationship, bearing in mind the research question. The themes were grouped for easy identification. Furthermore, respondents mostly gave additional information as regards work ethics in the public sector, which formed a part of the discussion. Table 2 shows the coded transcript for this study.

Table 2. Coded transcript

S/N	Three visit	Four visits	Five visits	Code
1	Rating of 1	If possible 0 rating, very poor rating nevertheless	Low rating of 1	Poor rating due to poor impression
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Laissez-faire attitude to work
	Unprofessional	Lazy response	Very poor	
3	Unprofessional at all	Unprofessional	They do not care approach professionalism	Unprofessional
4	80% arrive after 9a.m	Civil servants are never early to work	The government job is never taken seriously	Lack of punctuality
5	Most bring personal jobs to do at the place of work	Poor dedication	Many only do it as it is the only available option for them	Very low commitment and dedication
6	Government workers skip work at will	Bosses in the government parastatals are rarely at work	Only junior staffs are regular at work	Many come to work at will as there are rarely queries
7	Yes	Very importantly	Yes, and very urgently too	Quick fix of the problem through reforms

For testing how trustworthy the codes (table 2) are, an intercoder-reliability test was adopted through the comparison of results of the coding schemes of both coders (table 3). Cohen Kappa coefficient was calculated as 0.86, implying a close-to-perfect agreement coding results. “X” means that the participant provided a

response that is okay for a particular question. This is coded as 1, while “S” implies that the response is not okay, coded 0. Kappa accounts for the

Table 3. Consistency of coding scheme

Question	First coder (researcher)	Second coder (coding expert)
1	X	S
2	S	S
3	X	X
4	S	X
5	X	X
6	X	S
7	X	X

Table 4. Interrater-reliability

Second coder	First coder			
		X	S	
X	3	2	5	71%
S	1	1	2	29%
	4	3	7	
	57%	43%		

$$\text{Kappa is given as; } K = \frac{Pr_a - Pr_e}{1 - Pr_e};$$

Where, Pr_a is summation of probability of relative observed agreement (addition of sufficient and insufficient response) and division by all possible response) = $3+1/7= 57\%$

Pr_e is probability of agreement which is based on chance; (% insufficient responses for first coder × % insufficient responses for second coder) + (% sufficient responses for first coder × % sufficient responses for second coder) = $(0.57 \times 0.71) + (0.43 \times 0.29) = (0.4047 + 0.1247) = 0.52$

$$K = \frac{Pr_a - Pr_e}{1 - Pr_e} = \frac{0.57 - 0.52}{1 - 0.52}$$

$$K = 0.10$$

A low consistency implies that coding does not converge mainly due to few number of interview questions. Hence, study results is then solely based on the interpretation of themes. From table 2, the following group of themes can be determined (see table 5).

Table 5. Themes for the current study

Theme	Codes
Attitude	Laissez-faire attitude to work
	Low commitment and dedication
	Lack of punctuality
	Irregular attendance (no queries)
Problems	Poor rating
	Unprofessionalism
Solution	Quick fix (reforms)

Discussion

Work ethics in Nigerian public service has gone bad mainly due to way workers carry out their jobs. The codes developed from the transcript of interview shows that workers rarely care about their work and hence do not take it seriously. Low commitment, lateness to work and even skipping work for personal programs are some of the poor attitudes that result in serious problem for the civil service. This habit cause problem such as poor rating of the public service by citizens as well as a tag of unprofessionalism for which the workers are known for. Some respondents even reported that many public servants are not even qualified for the roles for which they have been employed. These problems tend to affect the Nigerian economy as the labour force is not living up to expectations. While there are so much negativity about public servants and their work ethics, an aspect of the themes of this study showed that it is important that the public sector undergoes yet another batch of reforms that should be aimed at repositioning it in the right direction.

The results of this study is in line with the research of Ananti and Umeifekwem (2012) who noted poor attitude to work by local government staffs in some parts of Nigeria. It is also in line with the study of Vambe (2013), who opined that the provision of more work incentives, improved salaries and the enthronement of the culture of ethics and professionalism can be very useful to revamp public sector in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Poor ethical standard has found its way to all aspects of the Nigerian system, especially within the Nigerian Public Service. A new value system has to be introduced and instilled into persons attached to the Public service. Departmental heads of public institutions need to begin to take steps into re-establishing the practices. It may be rather difficult to reach the Millennium Development Goals and all other policies with a wrong public service attitude. Hence, a value system that can shape the Nigerian society is needed. When there is no added value by the public service, it impacts negatively on the economy

Policy recommendation

Based on information gathered from this study, it may be very important for policy makers to look into the following areas

1. Enactment of new public service laws that will clamp down on civil servants that do not take their jobs seriously.
2. Furthermore, there is a need for a revisiting of the issue of salary and wages of public servants (minimum wage). This may serve as a new source of motivation for better performance
3. Rejuvenation of the entire mindset of new employees coming into the public service, so that they have a new perspective towards work, and are able to give in their best to the job.

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