





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 can harness overhead taxes effectively and account for public expenditure at all levels. In this study, we qualitatively analyze the response of 15 individuals from the public who have visited a typical public office at least 3 times within the last year. An interview form containing seven items was administered, and the results were analysed 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. The level of unprofessionalism in the public workforce calls for urgent attention, as the study finds. Public service workers make up the more significant part of the nation's workforce, and as such they represent the face of the nation to the committee of nations. Government at all levels, that is, the federal, the state, and the local council level, as well as the various government agencies, departments, and ministries, are called upon to cooperate and synergize to foster rapid transformation in public service. As a result, this study recommends reforms to public service.

Keywords

Nigeria; public perception; public sector; qualitative analysis; work ethics

Citation: Afolayan, M. A., Aderibigbe, A. E., & Okanlawon, T. (2023). Qualitative Analysis of Public Perception of Work Ethics in Nigeria's Public Sector. *Unisia*, 41(1), 103-116. <https://doi.org/10.20885/unisia.vol41.iss1.art5>

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: February 22, 2022

Revised: December 29, 2022

Accepted: May 5, 2023

Published: June 30, 2023

Publisher's Note: Universitas Islam Indonesia stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



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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 (Ijewereme & Dunmade, 2014). Imhonopi & 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 et al., 2012; Okoye et al., 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 et al., 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 (Ikeanyibe & Ibieta, 2018). This notion is in agreement with early ideas (Balci et al., 2012; Enciso et al., 2017; Tastan, 2019) 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. Previous findings suggest 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 (Bem, 2014; Sanda & Ibrahim, 2023; Wook et al., 2023).

Massoudi & 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 (2012) 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 (Benedicto & Caelian, 2021; Goebel & Weißenberger, 2017; Khaltar & Moon, 2020). This opinion is in line with the findings noting 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 (Gallardo, 2020; Omisore & Adeleke A., 2015; Siddiqui, 2014). 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. This remainder of the paper is divided thus; section 2 covers relevant literature related to work ethics. In section 3, we describe the qualitative method applied within the study, section 4 shows study results and discusses what has been observed. The final section concludes the study and draws policy implication therefrom.

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 a bid to put a stop to this, introduced SERVICOM and the Code of Conduct Bureau. However, this seems 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 the literature on 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, the 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 (Justine et al., 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 would have some sense of legitimacy (Justine et al., 2019). This

also counts as the reason why the system of indirect rule enjoyed a lot of success; it leveraged 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 (Justine et al., 2019). Hence, the citizens had no choice but to accept the rule of the Brits. The Nigerian civil service began to take shape in 1954 with the introduction of three regional political structures. This became more visible and organized in 1960 on gaining independence from colonial rule with the constitution at that time providing for a 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 (Justine et al., 2019; Okekeocha, 2013).

Since independence, several committees and panels have been assigned with the responsibility of studying and making recommendations for the reformation of the civil service. Some of these panels include the Margan Commission (1963), the Adebo Commission (1971), and the Udoji Commission (1979). The public sector, comprising gained greater visibility and became more active as more policies on developments and programs were actively carried (Justine et al., 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 (Justine et al., 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 (Justine et al., 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; Ezeajughu, 2021; Onyekwulunne, 2020).

The Meaning of Work Ethics

Work ethics is a branch of Philosophy known as ethics. Ethics involve studying systematically moral laws, either as a fundamental principle, or a study of human behavior (Aniele, 2002; Li, 2018; Szalados, 2021; Tzafestas, 2016). 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; Li,

2018; Szalados, 2021; Tzafestas, 2016). Furthermore, ethics studies the principles of right and wrong in their fundamental state and the behavior that consistently obeys those principles (Mujtaba, 1997; Noe et al., 2019; Recker, 2012). The purpose of ethics is to address the issue of moral standards (Ananti & Umeifekwem, 2012; Borah & Hazarika, 2015; Handy & Russell, 2018). Furthermore, the researchers noted that studying ethics on 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 evaluate 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). From this submission, it can be inferred that the eyes of the public can go a long way to providing a template that can be used to define what is acceptable ethics and what is not acceptable ethics in the public service.

The accounting dictionary of 2019 described work ethics as being able to maintain the right and proper moral values in the workplace. This attitude determines how a worker will carry out his job in a workplace. Cascio (2015) noted that work ethics is the set standard of morals acceptable in an average workplace concerning the welfare of the employees, their attitude to work, self-discipline, and how committed they are to their tasks at their workplace. Therefore, work ethics can be viewed as a template that considers what the responsibilities of the employer should be to the employee and on the flip side, it also shows what the responsibilities of the employee should be in relation to the employer. Velasquez (2011) saw work ethics as the principle guiding the conducts of individuals and groups in the workplace, which makes them adhere to the ethical codes in their organization. With the right guiding principle, both the organization and the workers in the organization can have a common and mutual playing ground. This influences the level of productivity and profitability of the organization. Adams & Danny (2017) 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. Hence, work ethics make workers in the public sector accountable to the general public whom they serve (Adams & Danny, 2017). This submission makes it clear that the general public can be seen as a veritable tool that can go a long way to serve as check and balance mechanism that will help to shape and finetune the understanding of the public servants. 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 (Nurudeen et al., 2021). The Nigerian workers have been described as indolent, apathetic and unresponsive to motivation and generally, not willing to put forth maximum productive efforts. 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 (Adeyeye et al., 2015). 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?

METHOD

We 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 we derived themes and codes were qualitatively analyzed. Two coders were used to arrive at a robust result. Furthermore, inter-coder reliability was calculated using the 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 encounters with public offices in the last year. Overall, 15 people made the requirement for the study and were grouped based on the number of visits.

Table 1

Interview Questions

S/N	Question
1.	On a scale of 1-5 (5 being 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 public sector workers' dedication to the job?
6.	How would you describe the regularity of workers in public service?
7.	Do you think the civil service needs reform?

Source: Primary data.

RESULTS

Coding was done 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 recording 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 visits	Four visits	Five visits	Code
1	Rating of 1	If possible 0 rating, a very poor rating nevertheless	The low rating of 1	Poor rating due to poor impression
2	Yes Unprofessional	Yes Lazy response	Yes Very poor	Laissez-faire attitude to work
3	Unprofessional at all	Unprofessional	They do not care about approaching 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 staff are regularly 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

Source: Primary data.

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 result. "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

Source: Primary data. Authors’ estimation.

Table 4

Interrater Reliability

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

Source: Primary data. Authors’ estimation.

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

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 the number of interview questions. Hence, study results are 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)

Source: Primary data. Authors' estimation.

DISCUSSION

Work ethics in Nigerian public service has gone bad mainly due to the way workers carry out their jobs. The codes developed from the transcript of the interview show 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 problems for the civil service. This habit causes problems such as poor rating of public service by citizens as well as a tag of unprofessionalism for which the workers are known. 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 labor force is not living up to expectations. While there is 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 result of this study is in line with the research of Ananti & Umeifekwem (2012), who noted poor attitudes toward work by local government staff 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 the public sector in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Poor ethical standards have found their way to all aspects of the Nigerian system, especially within the Nigerian Public Service. A new value system must be introduced and instilled into people attached to the public service. Departmental heads of public institutions need to begin to take steps to re-establish 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 policymakers to investigate the following areas

- a. Enact new public service laws that will clamp down on civil servants who do not take their jobs seriously.
- b. 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
- c. Rejuvenating the entire mindset of new employees entering the public service so that they have a new perspective on work and can give their best to the job.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Data curation: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Formal analysis: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Funding acquisition: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Investigation: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Methodology: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Project administration: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Resources: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Software: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Supervision: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Validation: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Visualization: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Writing – original draft: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O.; Writing – review & editing: M.A.A., A.E.A., & T.O. All the authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This study received no direct funding from any of the institutions.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was approved by the Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Social and Management Science, Anchor University Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because of the institution's policies.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Social and Management Science, Anchor University Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria, for administrative support for the research on which this article was based.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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