

Work Ethics And Organizational Performance In Nigeria's Public Service

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the connection between work ethics and organizational performance within the public service sector, with a particular emphasis on Nigeria's public service. A qualitative approach was used for the study. The findings indicate that ethical practices create a foundation of trust, motivation, and collaboration, all of which contribute to enhanced service delivery and productivity. The study concludes that work ethics are essential for achieving long-term organizational success and recommends that public service organizations prioritize ethical training, set up ethics advisory boards, and reward ethical behavior to ensure high performance. The study underscores the importance of consistently focusing on workplace ethics to foster a positive work culture, minimize inefficiencies, and improve public sector service delivery

Keyword : Work ethics, Organizational performance, public service, workplace discipline, qualitative study

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1. INTRODUCTION

The hypothesized value of ethical behavior in enhancing employee performance and commitment suggests that Nigerian public service can achieve higher performance by adopting strong work ethics. Organizations that embrace ethical practices optimize employee satisfaction and loyalty. An ethical working environment depends on employees' perceptions of how their organization handles ethical conduct through established practices and procedures. Today, many organizations create their ethical codes to guide employees in demonstrating ethical behaviors, ultimately leading to improved organizational performance. In a globalized economy, organizations committed to effective governance frameworks must integrate work ethics and positive values into their organizational culture to achieve higher performance.

Work ethics directly influence an organization's performance, as human resources are the most valuable asset in any organization. An organization's performance is linked to the individual performance of its staff members. Proper execution of ethics not only motivates employees but also significantly impacts the organization's image and overall performance. Positive attitudes and goodwill are essential for the long-term survival of an organization, whereas unethical behavior and resource wastage can harm both organizational image and performance. This underscores the need

for ethical norms to be upheld by both employers and employees for organizational success and development.

Studies have shown that public organizations' performance is determined by various factors such as accountability, civic engagement, and efficient service delivery. Ethical practices in the workplace are crucial, as they shape public sector organizations' ability to deliver services efficiently and maintain a positive reputation. In countries like the Philippines, public officials are required to adhere to high ethical standards, reflecting the global importance of work ethics in improving public sector performance.

Work ethics in the public service sector are critical to the success of organizations. Employees who are strongly committed to their organization's work ethic tend to work toward improving its goals and values, thereby benefiting the organization. Conversely, employees who do not support work ethics negatively impact the organization. Furthermore, organizations must regulate practices to reduce unethical behaviors such as corruption, fraud, and discrimination, all of which hinder performance. In Nigeria, however, a significant number of public service employees engage in unethical practices, contributing to the low performance observed within the sector. This study highlights the critical importance of work ethics in improving organizational performance in Nigeria's public service.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is suitable for exploring perceptions, experiences, and contextual factors influencing work ethics and performance. Data was sourced from journal articles, textbooks, and internet sources. The data collected were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis allows for systematic examination of textual data (e.g., policy documents, internal memos, reports) to identify patterns, themes, and trends in ethical discourse and organizational behavior.

Conceptual Framework

Bratton and Gold (2007) define work as the physical and mental tasks performed at a designated location and time, based on instructions, in exchange for a wage or salary. This definition highlights essential aspects of work. First, the inclusion of both 'physical and mental' activities suggests that roles ranging from computer system analysts to construction workers qualify as work. Moreover, 'mental activity' can also encompass the commercialization of emotions or feelings. Second, work is typically performed away from home during set hours, positioning it within a broader social context. Lastly, the social context also refers to the relationships through which work is carried out (Bratton & Gold, 2007). This aligns with Okolie, Mukoro, and Otite's (2024) assertion that the classification of an activity as 'work' depends not solely on its nature but on the social relations involved in its execution.

Ethics, stemming from the Greek word "ethos," refers to character or custom. Fajana (2006) describes ethics as a collection of values and norms that act as standards for evaluating the integrity of individual behavior. It establishes what is right or wrong, dictating acceptable conduct within a given context. Petty and Hill (2005) outline four areas of ethics: Actions (right, wrong, permissive), Consequences (good, bad, indifferent), Character (virtuous, vicious), and Motive (goodwill, evil will). Essentially, ethics involves studying human behavior about societal expectations. It provides principles that guide actions, although it does not prescribe a single "moral" course of action but offers a framework for evaluating competing options.

Work ethics can be defined as principles related to morals, particularly those governing human behavior. Specifically, work ethics concerns what is morally acceptable, honorable, and appropriate within an organization, society, or group. It represents the rules of conduct that have become societal or organizational norms, dealing with what is right and wrong, as well as duties and obligations. Work ethics include values like the right attitude, respectful behavior, and effective communication in the workplace. These ethics regulate how employees behave in various

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organizational situations, and the habit of adhering to them comes from within (Yatichi & Musebe, 2016). Lessnoff (1994) views work ethics as a complete and relentless dedication to one's economic role. His definition ties work to the fulfillment of the "homo economicus" concept, where human beings are seen as rational entities pursuing wealth for self-interest (Efeoğlu & Çalışkan, 2018). This theory suggests that economic production is the foundation of human and societal development. Despite potential contradictions, this concept emphasizes human creativity and activity as a means for self-perfection (Cholbi, 2022; Etinagbedia & Okolie, 2024).

Omisore and Adeleke (2015) define work ethics as a set of principles concerning morals, especially regarding human conduct. It addresses what is morally right, honorable, and acceptable to the majority within an organization or society. Work ethics dictate appropriate conduct and include values like respect, responsibility, and effective communication. Employees with strong work ethics are considered valuable assets to their organizations because they consistently perform their duties with dedication and integrity, often requiring minimal supervision. They understand the impact of their actions on others and demonstrate self-motivation (Esekhagbe, Osueke & Chiabuotu, 2022). Historically, the concept of work ethics emerged from religious origins, particularly within the Protestant work ethic, and was initially implemented in industries to help organizations comply with post-scandal regulations. Over time, the notion of work as a religious and moral obligation spread, particularly in the United States and Western Europe, influencing organizational performance (Fajana, 2006). However, in some parts of the world, the search for developmental pathways led to lower ethical standards and higher rates of fraudulent behavior (Osibanjo et al., 2015).

Various perspectives on ethical behavior, including utilitarianism, individualism, moral rights, and justice views, provide different lenses through which workplace ethics can be understood. These frameworks assess the implications of decisions based on their consequences, self-interest, respect for fundamental rights, and fairness. Each perspective offers valuable insights into how ethical behavior can be encouraged within organizations (Anstett & Guest, 2007). Work ethics, as described by Shahrul et al. (2016), is a cultural norm advocating responsibility and accountability in one's work, emphasizing the intrinsic value of work to individuals within an organization. An organizational code of ethics provides a framework for employees to follow, ensuring sound decision-making aligned with the organization's values and principles (Umar & Sha'awa, 2020). In the context of organizational performance, the definition is nuanced, involving multiple performance indicators like productivity, customer satisfaction, and financial outcomes. Organizational performance is the ability of a company to achieve its objectives efficiently and effectively, focusing on both financial and non-financial aspects (Fatile, 2013; Kibugi et al., 2023). The integration of work ethics into organizational practices directly impacts performance by fostering responsibility, efficiency, and fair treatment, ultimately improving service delivery and organizational outcomes (Haynes, 2015).

The Public Service

The concept of public service and its proper execution is central to many of today's key debates. Some view public service as primarily the responsibility of the government to its citizens, while others adopt a broader definition, encompassing any service provided to the public, whether by government or private organizations (Zhang et al., 2022). Public service refers to a government body or department tasked with supporting the planning and implementation of policies, to deliver essential services to the public without pursuing profit. It includes ministries, agencies, parastatals, and other government institutions (Arowolo, 2012). Hartini, Zainal, and Hakim (2023) argue that public service includes any service offered to the public by either public or private organizations and that these services must be delivered effectively and efficiently. According to Sokoh and Okolie (2023), the Nigerian public service is working to improve governance by developing more effective systems for delivering public services and boosting foreign investment. It functions as the mechanism for implementing policies and programs and also provides services through various government bodies.

The Nigerian public service consists of the civil service, ministries, extra-ministerial agencies, and other entities such as the judiciary, armed forces, police, security agencies, and parastatals. It plays

a significant role in government policy by offering professional and technical advice based on experience and expertise. Additionally, it is responsible for developing government programs, executing projects, and ensuring their alignment with available resources (Omisore & Adeleke, 2015). The Nigerian public service also monitors and evaluates government projects to ensure their proper implementation, supports the development of an efficient and performance-oriented administrative system, and fosters the growth of a socially responsible private sector in alignment with national economic goals (Esekhagbe et al., 2022). Despite ongoing efforts by successive Nigerian governments to improve public service standards, the sector faces several challenges, which hinder its recognition as one of the best globally. These challenges include:

1. Unethical behavior and lack of accountability (Esekhagbe et al., 2022).
2. Fraud, embezzlement, bribery, and favoritism (Ayanda, 2012).
3. Corruption, such as the solicitation or acceptance of gifts, bribes, or other benefits by public officials (Esekhagbe et al., 2022).
4. Gross indiscipline, with unethical conduct and corruption becoming ingrained as societal norms, leads to a crisis of ethics within the Nigerian public service (Esekhagbe et al., 2022).

These unethical practices are often viewed as normal and even acceptable in Nigeria today. Omisore and Adeleke (2015) attribute these challenges to the legacy of colonialism when acts such as stealing government property were seen as acts of defiance against colonial authorities and even viewed as patriotic by the public.

Factors that can Enhance Public Service Performance

- i. Provision of Work Facilities: Employees should be provided with all necessary tools and resources to carry out their tasks effectively, which will significantly improve their performance.
- ii. Conducive Work Environment: Performance thrives in a positive and supportive atmosphere. A friendly and harmonious environment fosters cooperation, leading to better performance (Arowolo, 2012).
- iii. Capacity Building: Capacity building refers to the processes organizations use to enhance employees' capabilities. It involves training, offering developmental opportunities, and other methods aimed at improving employee performance (Esekhagbe et al., 2022).
- iv. Informal Group/Team Building: It's important to create informal settings within formal structures. This allows employees and employers, as well as subordinates and superiors, to interact outside the usual work environment, discuss concerns, and offer suggestions for improving performance (Omisore & Adeleke, 2015).
- v. Performance Appraisal: Knowing that their performance will be evaluated encourages employees to improve their efforts, as they are aware that their work will be assessed and may lead to rewards or consequences depending on their contributions (Arowolo, 2012).

Code of Conduct in Public Service

The Nigerian public service is governed by ethical standards established by the Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunal Act, Civil Service Rules, and Financial Regulations. These include:

1. Discipline: Leaders should exemplify discipline, with leadership requiring character, hard work, and integrity. Good conduct is a key factor in promotion, and officers must be well-versed in government rules on proper conduct.
2. Loyalty: Leaders must demonstrate unwavering loyalty to their superiors and the government, placing loyalty to moral principles and the country above allegiance to individuals, parties, or departments.

3. Honesty: Civil servants must be honest in their duties and interactions with the public, recognizing that their salaries are compensation for their work and they should not accept any gifts or benefits outside their standard entitlements.
4. Courage: Civil servants must carry out their duties with courage, avoiding favoritism or discriminatory actions, and rejecting any benefits that could be seen as influencing their performance.
5. Courtesy: Civil servants should always be polite in their work, as courteous interactions lead to smoother operations and greater public satisfaction. Courtesy is essential, regardless of work pressure.
6. Cooperation: Collaboration is essential for achieving organizational goals. Staff must work together as a team to accomplish the objectives of the ministry or department.
7. Tact: Tact involves handling delicate situations skillfully and without offending others. Civil servants should demonstrate a willingness to assist, which boosts office efficiency and enhances public satisfaction. It is crucial to uphold these principles, recognizing that public office is a public trust (Omisore & Adeleke, 2015).

Managing Unethical Behaviour for Organizational Performance

Employees' unethical behaviors are common in organizations lacking a strong ethical framework (Schwepker & Schultz, 2013). The unethical conduct of managers has led to the creation of laws regulating behavior in various areas such as competition, consumer protection, intellectual property, and environmental protection. In academic settings, unethical practices include actions like publishing the same paper in multiple journals, failing to credit contributors, listing authors who had no role in the research, exploiting graduate students, offering better grades in exchange for sexual favors, rejecting manuscripts without review, plagiarizing data, and mistreating animals during research (Ezenwakwelu et al., 2020).

Anti-trust laws are designed to maintain fair competition among businesses and prevent unfair practices. Key regulations in this area include laws against mergers and acquisitions that reduce competition or create monopolies, as well as public notification requirements for mergers (Rue & Byars, 2000). Consumer protection laws, such as those enforced by the National Agency for Foods and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC) in Nigeria, safeguard consumers from unsafe products. These laws also cover areas like credit protection, warranty enforcement, and misbranding. The Consumer Protection Council (CPC) in Nigeria works to defend consumer rights.

Environmental protection laws, including the U.S. National Environmental Policy Act, aim to promote a healthy environment, with many regulations affecting business operations. The U.S. government, committed to ecological preservation, established the Council on Environmental Quality to advise the president on environmental policies (Rue & Byars, 2000). Organizational ethics are influenced by these regulations and policies (Tuan, 2012). Magil & Prybil (2004) noted that ethics influence daily behaviors and decision-making at all levels of an organization. Studies have shown that organizational ethics can help sustain employee commitment (Wesarat et al., 2017). Therefore, it is hypothesized that managing unethical practices can positively impact organizational performance.

Work Ethics and Organizational Performance

Numerous studies suggest that individuals with strong ethical principles tend to perform better (Zaim, 2013; Omisore & Adeleke, 2015; Sunanda, 2018). Key ethical qualities that influence organizational outcomes include honesty, reliability, fairness, objectivity, responsibility, adherence to laws, and independence (Zaim, 2013). Organizations that uphold ethical standards contribute to the well-being of stakeholders, drive organizational performance, and support national economic growth.

Efficiency in the workplace is influenced by how well employees are managed, which includes adhering to ethical standards. Work plays a central role in shaping society, improving organizations, and advancing nations. The performance of an organization, driven by its workforce, can contribute significantly to national development (Sunanda, 2018).

Work ethics, a cultural norm that emphasizes the intrinsic value of doing a good job, is influenced by socialization during childhood and adolescence (Akonti, 2013). Through interactions with family, peers, and adults, individuals learn the value of work, which becomes internalized over time. The work ethic, shaped by occupational culture and colleague influence, forms part of an individual's belief system (Omisore & Adeleke, 2015). Unethical work behavior, or weak work ethics, often leads to counterproductive work behavior (CWB), which negatively impacts the organization and its employees (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). CWB includes actions like production deviance, sabotage, theft, and withdrawal (Ispas & Borman, 2015). For workgroups, CWB may involve neglecting supervision, violating norms, or creating conflict within teams (Braun & Hentschel, 2015). The goal of CWB is often to undermine organizational objectives.

Ethical practices that improve organizational quality include ensuring employee safety, creating a healthy work environment, offering fair wages, respecting union activities, safeguarding privacy, and promoting merit-based selection and promotion. Avoiding sexual harassment, discrimination, exploitation, and abuse also contributes to a more reliable and productive organization (Mehves et al., 2015). An ethical environment fosters trust and integrity, which help prevent ethical failures. Studies confirm that ethical environments are crucial for organizational excellence by building trust, promoting positive leadership, and developing a skilled workforce, all of which enhance performance. Ethical workplaces improve productivity, creativity, quality, and employee well-being while reducing corruption and power abuse. As a result, workplace ethics significantly impact organizational effectiveness (Baaba, 2021; Egbon, Okereka & Sokoh, 2023). Mulugeta (2020) views workplace ethics as central to workers' commitment to the principles and values of their organization.

Workplace ethics also includes work attitudes, commitment, teamwork, and discipline. A workplace code reflects a company's values, ethical standards, and responsibilities to stakeholders (Baaba, 2021). Ethics in the workplace is broadly defined as the guidelines that organizations and their leaders follow in making decisions. This includes laws, rules, policies, and operational manuals. Workplace ethics require honesty, integrity, respect, and fairness from both employees and customers in delivering quality services and products (AlShehhi et al., 2020)

3. CONCLUSION

The link between work ethics and organizational performance in the public service sector is essential for improving the effectiveness and overall productivity of public institutions. This study explored the impact of work ethics on organizational performance in the public service sectors of Delta and Rivers states, Nigeria. Using a qualitative research approach, the study provided valuable insights into the role of work ethics in the functioning of public service organizations and how work ethics influence employees' attitudes, commitment, teamwork, and discipline. The findings emphasize that when work ethics are effectively implemented, they can lead to positive changes within organizations and enhance service delivery in the public sector.

The study highlights that work ethics represented by work attitude, commitment, teamwork, and discipline have a profound effect on organizational performance in public service. Positive work attitudes, such as accountability, responsibility, and dedication, significantly contribute to improving both individual and collective productivity. Employees who adopt a strong ethical approach to their work are more likely to complete tasks efficiently, thus enhancing the overall performance of the organization. Additionally, workplace commitment, which reflects the level of employees' dedication, is crucial for high organizational performance. Committed employees not only perform their duties

effectively but also align with the organization's goals, fostering a culture conducive to achieving performance targets.

Teamwork is another critical factor identified in the study. When grounded in ethical values like respect, collaboration, and trust, teamwork creates an environment where employees are motivated to work toward common objectives. This collaborative spirit not only boosts individual contributions but also helps overcome challenges, contributing to the overall success of the organization. In public service, where the goal is to serve the public efficiently, effective teamwork is even more essential. The study demonstrates that when employees work together harmoniously, organizational performance improves, and negative individualistic attitudes that can impede service delivery are minimized.

Workplace discipline, another key element of work ethics, was found to positively influence organizational performance. Discipline ensures that employees follow established rules, guidelines, and ethical standards, which maintain the integrity of the organization. It also promotes a culture of accountability, reducing the likelihood of misconduct or neglect. In the public service, where service delivery impacts citizens' lives, maintaining high levels of discipline is crucial to prevent inefficiencies, corruption, and unethical behaviors that could undermine the credibility and effectiveness of public institutions. The study suggests that enforcing policies and procedures consistently leads to better employee conduct, increased efficiency, and improved organizational performance.

The study's findings have significant implications for the public service sector in Nigeria. Since work ethics play a vital role in organizational performance, public service leaders and policymakers should prioritize the implementation of ethical frameworks and training programs that cultivate a culture of integrity and excellence. As demonstrated by the study, public service employees who uphold ethical standards are more likely to be productive, committed, and effective in their roles. On the other hand, a lack of strong work ethics can lead to inefficiencies, low morale, and poor service delivery, which ultimately affect the quality of public services.

The study also recommends that public service leaders in Nigeria adopt a systematic approach to promoting work ethics at all levels. This could include establishing ethics advisory boards, conducting regular ethics audits, offering ethics training, and implementing mechanisms to reward ethical behavior while penalizing unethical actions. By fostering a culture that values strong work ethics, public service organizations can ensure the long-term sustainability of their performance. Additionally, work ethics are not only crucial for organizational performance but also essential for shaping a positive image of public service organizations. When employees demonstrate ethical behavior, they contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of the institution. This trust is vital as it influences public perception and helps build a positive reputation for government agencies. Therefore, public service leaders should invest in initiatives that promote ethical behavior among employees to enhance the organization's reputation and boost public confidence and support.

In conclusion, work ethics encompassing work attitude, commitment, teamwork, and discipline play a key role in improving organizational performance in the public service sector. The study emphasizes the importance of fostering a strong ethical culture within public service organizations to ensure optimal service delivery, organizational growth, and the achievement of performance goals. Public service leaders should implement comprehensive ethical policies, provide training, and create mechanisms to promote ethical behavior, ensuring sustained high performance and service quality. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how ethical practices can enhance organizational performance and drive the success of public service organizations in Nigeria.

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