

ASSESSING CLIENT'S CONFIDENCE AND SATISFACTION IN CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Public interest is the main stay of the existence of any profession because of the continued recourse to and demand for such professional service(s). Construction projects have suffered under-achievement in the recent past because professionals' misconduct have been on the increase, only a fraction of which are reported to the professional bodies. This research looks into professional ethics in construction and the anecdotal relationship with public confidence and clients satisfaction. Questionnaire survey and interviews were conducted, while simple percentile tools validated by data triangulation were appropriated in the study. It was discovered that the image of professionalism in the Nigerian construction industry is not enterprising and needs timely intervention to prevent it from circumstantial extinction otherwise, an irreparable collapse of the system is imminent.

Keywords: client's satisfaction, ethics, Nigeria, professional ethics, services

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional ethics is the justification of abstract standards of behaviour against practical tasks, not necessarily limited to technologies, transactions, activities, pursuits and assessment of institutions, but it involves more of the rhapsody of practical conceptualization of public expectations in the interest of responsibilities, willingness to serve public interest and compliant competencies (Fan et al., 2003; Carey, 1968; HKEDC, 1996; Chalkley, 1990; Poon, 2003; Poon, 2004a, 2004b). The strength of the link between the construction industry and the public sustains its existence through overwhelming recourse to and demand for the services of its practitioners and unique products such that the relationship is a function of the pride of professionalism. Interestingly, the pride of professionalism is a function of core technical skills of professionals and, not less important; the ethical consciousness of professionals. (Chalkley, 1968; Olatunji et al., 2006a).

For centuries, the construction industry reserves the uncompromised pride as the gateway provider and facilitator of global physical development through the provision of infrastructures, manpower development, resource employment, fixed capital formation and improvement of the gross domestic product (Omole, 2000; Hillebrandt, 2000). However, one unfortunate threat to this harmonious relationship between the public and the construction industry is the cultural misalignment between public

expectations and the professional conducts of construction practitioners (Pollington, 1999).

Conversely, construction client is getting wiser by the day; knowing more of his rights and kingly sovereignty in the industry. Popular studies refer to construction client as the only party whose opinion matters at the end of the day (Latham, 1994; Egan, 1998; Poon, 2003). As the industry gets more dynamic (complex, uncertain and volatile) (Lam et al., 2001) it is imperative for the industry to sustain public interest, trust and confidence repose in her with time. Therefore, the construction world requires fixed, reliable, flexible, timely and better proactive re-orientation and re-appraisal of her practitioners' technical and ethical strategy in the phase of innovation with respect to client satisfaction and harmonious co-relationship (Doree 2004).

2. CONSTRUCTION PROJECT PERFORMANCE

Principally, construction project performance milestones are commonly indicated in cardinal tangibles like cost, time, quality and health and safety risks (Drew and Skitmore, 1992; Olatunji and Aje, 2005c). Poon (2003) opines that construction project performance is best defined as the absolute realization of value for client's money through the satisfactory technical performance of the product as predefined in preliminary outlines and whole life cycle performance as intended for use by client or prescribed end-user, without failing client's or user's anticipated returns all through the project life. Male and Mitrovic (2005) define of project performance as the achievement of fitness-for-purpose in construction and the absolute realization client's satisfaction of all his requirements.

Overtly, clients create the market for the construction industry (Langford & Male 2001), and so should be placed at the center of the construction process (Latham, 1994). Male and Mitrovic (2005) classify construction clients based on knowledgeability, organizational type and size and purpose of ownership. Some clients are knowledgeable, others are not. For instance, some client's firms are small, some are medium sized, others are large. Also, there are individual construction clients, some are corporate clients while others are public clients. Ultimately, Consumer clients/owners require a built physical asset as an important strategic resource, while commercial/developer clients trade physical assets to make a profit.

Male (2003a, 2003b) identifies factors that affect construction client requirement in terms of volume; frequency and regularity, and standardization; components, elements, processes and design. Consequently, Croner's (1999) argues that the characteristics of the construction client's demands in the industry give rise to distinct types of demand and supply chain systems,

Conspicuously, clients' views, opinions, decisions and desires are the most important aspect of project success that must be achieved by the project team (Latham, 1994). Sequel to the complex nature of construction clients' requirements, which at times might be crude and ambiguous, construction professionals reserve the absolute responsibility, trust and expectation of the clients to indemnify clients' rights against certain sensitive negative indicators with respect to project success. This may have to do with variables like cost, time, quality and health and safety risks. This inherent

indemnifying trust is one of the delineating factors explicating the strength of public expectations in the construction industry: more from construction professionals than non-professionals (RICS, 1998b; 2000).

Regrettably, like many parts of world (Latham, 1994), the Nigerian construction industry is yet to recover from the avalanche of its wicked perpetual failures to salvage the economic resources often wasted in overruns of time and cost, substandard work and shoddy workmanship, client-contractor-practitioner's acrimonious relationships and non-performance of projects as envisaged by client or end-users in term of health and safety to juxtapose or commensurate huge resources, expectation, interest and respect invested in the industry by the public. Innovative researches in the construction world has attributed the systemic failure to be largely as a result of people issue; professional misconducts, workmanship and organization's conceptualizations of work processes rather than relational arrangements and fundamental logistics imperative to value sharing in the supply chain (Poon, 2003; Fan et al., 2003; Olatunji et al., 2006a; Pollington, 1999; Ridout, 1999).

3. THE IMAGE OF PROFESSIONALISM IN THE NIGERIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The image of professionalism in the Nigerian construction industry is not better than most parts of the world where the menace have its ugly head raised. Therefore, popular opinions from literature resources from all over the world are reliable. Chalkley (1990) opines that professionalism is pivoted by the cardinal duo of technical core skills and acceptable moral standard in practice. However, it seems construction professionals are not in the good books of the clients; whether as private, corporate organizations or public clients and this unfortunate scenario has been in serious topical discourses than any other sector (HKEDC, 1996; CIRC, 2001; HKHA, 2000; Ho and Ng, 2003). Many noble professional bodies are aware that some of their members are unwittingly prone to damaging client's interest both on technical ethical grounds (RICS, 1998b, 2000; Vee and Skitmore, 2003). Thus, professional services and opinions are under chronic criticism; they are mostly unnecessary and unsatisfactory (Yakub, 2005; Latham, 1994; Masidah and Khairuddin, 2005).

From this vantage point, it is imperative to establish the relationship between the poor image of professionalism, apart from core technical skill deficiency, through ethical impropriety and project failure. Although, this is one of the pioneering studies on professional ethics vis a vis client's requirements in the Nigerian construction industry, there are outstanding reports that correspondingly describe the involvement of Nigerian construction professionals in indecent acts as a relationship to project failure.

Pearl et al (2005) present one of such pilot studies in South Africa. The authors discover fraud, bribery, conflict of interest, negligence and collusion as some of the commonest unfair conducts of professionals. Olatunji and Ogunsemi (2006a) explore the ethical perceptions of various levels of quantity surveying staff in Nigeria. Albratt et al (1992) claim that most construction professionals always indulge in vulnerable acts like trading official secrets for unscrupulous contingent reward, abuse of office, patronising despicable level of honesty, refusal to whistle-blow against colleagues or

superior indulging in unethical habits and falsification of trade figures and official reports. Dolecheck and Dolecheck (1987) add practitioners' compromise of personal professional instincts in favour of employer's selfish interest against public interest as well as the cover-up of fundamental breaches like copyright and patent rights.

Common phenomena in Nigeria are similar to Hong Kong's situation where Ho et al (2004) condemn salt water scam and short pilling malpractices for which two barely completed 34-storey buildings worth HK\$600, 000, 000 were demolished for irredeemable structural defects. In fact, over 100 major building collapses have been witnessed in Nigerian major cities in the last two decades. In like manner, Fan et al (2001) condemn professionals' failure to maintain Professional Indemnity run-off cover, while Ho and Ng (2003) identify irresponsible service attitude, stern denial of fault and poor service quality as unfair practices that degenerate into failure to achieve client's value for money in the construction industry.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The empirical bases for this research is pivoted on questionnaire survey and direct interviews administered to construction clients randomly chosen from southwestern Nigeria. The respondents are private individuals, corporate organizations and public establishments to assess the level of satisfaction in the performance of construction professionals operating in Nigeria. A total of 67 questionnaires (to represent 82% of the target responses) were received out of the 83 administered at three different times and places in Southwestern Nigeria.. Table 1 shows the analysis of the responses.

Table 1: The analysis of the responses

Clientship	Responses	Percentage
Private individuals	23	34%
Corporate organizations	21	31%
Public establishments	24	35%
Total	68	100%

From the analysis in Table 1, 35% of the respondents are Public establishment clients, 34% are Private individual clients, while 31% are Corporate organizations clients. Table 2 shows the analysis of the respondents' demographic variables.

Table 2: The analysis of the respondents' demographic background and level involvement in the construction industry in the past 5 years

Clientship	Academic and professional qualifications		Average number of construction contracts administered in the past 5 years	
	< first degree	≥ first degree + professional qualifications	Group Average	Overall Average
Private individuals	6	17	5.00	1.70
Corporate organizations	1	20	8.81	2.70
Pubic establishments	0	24	10.20	3.60
Total {percentages}	7 {10%}	61 {90%}	8.00	8.00

From Table 2, only 10% of the respondents possess less than first degree but they possess considerable quantum of demonstrable understanding of the industry, having patronized the construction professionals operating in Nigeria for an average of 18 years. 90% of the respondents possess at least first degree, 78% of which are in construction related disciplines, while 37% of them possess recognized professional certificates, 35% of which are from construction related disciplines.

Moreover, further analysis reveals that Individual Client respondents have been involved in an average of 5 construction projects in the past five years, while Corporate Client respondents have been actively involved in an average of about 9 construction projects in the past five years. Pubic Client respondents have been actively involved in an average of about 10 construction projects in the past five years. Overall, an average of 8 projects in the past 5 years was considered reliable for respondents' experience which imperative in the quality of the study.

Correspondingly, respondents identified the recent surge in unfair practices involving construction professionals in the recent past. The resultant effect on project performance is regrettably debilitating. 68% of the respondents ranked contracting practitioners as being highly fraudulent, while 78% assert that contracting practitioners are not trustworthy based on their susceptibility to despicable level of honesty. 48% of the clients (made up of 65% corporate organization clients) have witnessed collusion of contractor on their projects, while 45% (52% of which are corporate clients) claim that they were not encouraged by the site condition and service quality of 60% of contractors that worked for them in recent years.

Moreover, 72% client respondents claim that they have experienced unfair conducts of consulting professionals. About 70% claim to have witnessed consultants receiving undue contingent rewards and unethical inducements from contractors, while 58% have witnessed collusion between the contractors and the consultants. Regrettably, 78% of public client respondents have lamentable records of professionals falsifying

trade figures and official reports, while 65% have indicted their employee professionals for trading official secrets with contractors. 58% of the respondent clients strongly agree that most consulting practitioners are corrupt and thus, can be negligent, fraudulent, take and give bribe, refuse to whistle-blow when others default at the detriment of client or public interest, cover fundamental breaches having to do with copyright and patent rights and intentionally fail to provide for Professional Indemnity run-off cover as and when due, while 65% (85% of which public client respondent) assert that they have witnessed consulting professionals despondent relegation of personal professional instincts to favour clients interest against public interest.

In order to establish standard comparative basis for the qualitative study, the foregoing data were triangulated with existing established standards in the construction industry. Although, there are very few research efforts in this area – quantifying the level of satisfaction of clients in the construction industry. For instance, Egan (1998) says 37% of construction clients (in the UK) are dissatisfied with contractors and consultants. Reporting a survey conducted by Construction Client Forum (UK) Poon (2003) reports that 58% of the respondents that participated in a client-survey conducted program overrun with an average of 48 days delay in anticipated delivery, while 32% experience cost overrun. Ridout (1999) reports that 58% of (UK) clients experience defects on their projects.

Despite the pride of technological advantage flaunted by the UK construction industry, the revelations made from data provided above are certainly not too good (Latham, 1994, Egan, 1998). Colin Gray (1996) claims that the UK construction industry has over 64 available cost saving techniques and the construction costs in the UK represents two-third of other countries of equal standard, thus an adoptable level of standard could be appropriated for developing countries as possible benchmark to achieve, if not surpass.

Although, the number of respondents that participated in the survey is too small to represent the interest of construction clients all over Nigeria, but the data proffered are reliable bases to correlate subsequent researches. Consequently, respondents were requested to assess project performance on percentage based on recent personal experiences with contracting and consulting practitioners. Table 3 shows the analysis of respondents' assessment of the level of construction Clients' satisfaction in Nigeria experienced in the last 5 years.

Table 3: Respondents' Assessment of level of client satisfaction on construction project executed in Nigeria in the recent past.

Project Performance Milestones	Satisfaction achieved with Contracting practitioners				Satisfaction achieved with Consultant Practitioners				Overall Average
	Clientship			Average (%)	Clientship			Average	
	Private individuals	Corporate organizations	Pubic establishments		Private individuals	Corporate organizations	Pubic establishments		
Quality Performance	51.75	55.25	61.45	56.15	50.15	71.65	64.35	62.05	59.10
Time Performance	54.25	80.65	48.85	61.25	46.10	54.58	38.19	46.29	53.77
Cost Performance	52.55	68.17	83.85	68.19	58.55	67.36	58.14	61.35	64.77
Health and Safety Performance	34.14	61.57	51.65	49.12	46.32	59.72	66.10	57.38	53.25
Total Average	48.17	66.41	61.45	58.68	50.28	63.33	56.70	56.77	57.72

From the analysis presented in Table 3, only 58.68% of Client's satisfaction is achieved by the respondents in the past 5 years through contracting professionals' assiduity, while 56.77% satisfaction is the best consulting practitioners could offer. In the opinion of the respondents, with the overall satisfaction level of 57.72%, Quality Performance is assessed to have achieved 59.10%; Time Performance 53.77%, Cost Performance 64.77%; and Health and Safety risk Performance 53.25%.

The variation in the level of satisfaction experienced in the assessment of the respondents is explicated in the availability of resources and their corresponding disposition to systemic principles inherent in the industry. For instance, the public procurement system in Nigeria governed by the Due Process policy keenly monitored by the Presidency's Budget Monitoring and Price intelligence Unit. The policy proffers stern adherence to firm price principles which is lowest bid based. Unfortunately, Time Performance has not been very encouraging in the system, which suggests that Quality Performance in the public procurement system governed under

Due Process Policy may be at risk. The analysis also shows that there is little improvement in the level of awareness and provisions for health and safety risks by construction contracting and consulting professionals in the Nigerian construction both in design and construction stages. Further analysis reveals that 41.32% of the respondents are dissatisfied with contracting practitioners (Main contractors, sub-contractors and suppliers), 43.33% are dissatisfied with consulting practitioners (Architects, Surveyors, Engineers, Managers and Planners). Conspicuously, clients are dissatisfied because of contemporary dynamism in client requirement through which it is evident that construction practitioners are lacking both on technical and ethical grounds. Compared with the UK figures earlier retrieved from previous studies, it is worrisome that over a period of one decade, the Nigerian construction industry's practitioners are still about 7 - 10% less enterprising in professionalism.

5. CONCLUSION

Public interest is the single largest factor sustaining the existence of profession in construction and it is largely dependent on client's satisfaction encapsulated in the image of professionalism in the industry. However, it is established in the survey that technical and ethncial dispositions of most construction professionals do not commensurate with the dynamism of client requirements.

Regrettably, the survey reports in the study reveals that only 57.72% level satisfaction is achieved in the Nigerian construction industry. About 41% construction clients are dissatisfied with contracting practitioners, while 43% are dissatisfied with consulting practitioners. Many of the respondents still experiences cost and time over-runs (64.77% and 53.77% respectively) on the their projects in the recent past, while quality performance is still lacking behind expectation. It is recommended that construction professionals should be re-oriented to face modern challenges through innovation and development towards maximizing client value for money and ultimately public interest in construction projects.

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