

Sustaining Ethical Standard among Building Contractors in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Building contractors play important role in the implementation of public building projects for the benefit and growth of the country. These contractors usually performed below expectations due to many challenges they encountered while performing their roles in the industry. The aim of this study is to identify the strategies that will sustain ethical standard among building contractors in Nigeria. This study used quantitative research method and questionnaires were used to obtain relevant information from the contractors and professionals involved directly in the implementation of public construction projects in the country. 231 respondents from the client organization, consultancy firms and contractors participated in the study. The results showed that transparency and accountability in contract administration, hiring right personnel and adhering to legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice are the three main strategies that could ensure ethical standard among the building contractors. It is recommended that the participants in the public building projects should implement these measures for better government projects development and delivery.

Keywords: Building contractors, Stakeholders, Ethical misconduct, Project Delivery, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

Building contractors achieve the objectives of the client by using the design and other project documents produced by the consultants. The contributions of contractors to the development of the construction industry as the key sector serve as an important enhancer of the nation's economic development. Accordingly, Ebekozen (2019) affirmed that construction industry is very important to the growth of developing and developed countries' wealth. Studies (Adeyemo and Amade, 2016; Ojoko et al., 2018 and Ebekozen, 2019) revealed that the level of infrastructural development and services in any nation directly influence the rate of job and wealth creation in such domain. As such the construction sector is crucial to determining the level of development and economic wellbeing of a nation. However, developing countries have fewer shares of these construction activities. Whereas, these developments are being affected by the unethical practices by the contractors who are the major stakeholders in the construction industry. Construction Industry is one of the largest, challenging and demanding business environments that play vital role in the growth of nations' economies and is considered to be the most susceptible to unethical practices because it involves big capital investments (Wankhade and Bhirud, 2021). If this sector is faced with some unethical issues, it can lead to 'confidence reduction in stakeholders, continuous insecure practices that risk lives and property, loss of income by clients and governments, needless and baseless expenditure that raise the level of poverty and reduce the quality of life amongst other things' (Wankhade and Bhirud, 2021).

The development of the economy and social services is negatively affected by the unethical practices in building projects procurement (Ebekozen, 2019). Also, the delivery of good quality infrastructure projects in some emerging economies is continuously disrupted because of unethical practices (Maseko, 2017). Nigeria has the largest population in sub-Saharan Africa and a member of countries being regarded as emerging world economies. The unethical activities of Nigerian contractors had contributed to the problems of the construction business environment

and other sectors of the economy (Ayuba & Aliyu, 2018). Since, contractors play the important role in the implementation of the clients' intentions and ideas for developmental purposes. Also, the unethical performance by some contractors acts as a kind of hindrance towards for economic development and good governance (Oyewobi et al., 2011). Since, every stage of the procurement of building projects could be affected by unethical practices, from planning and design, award of contracts, the construction process, post construction stage and the maintenance of completed projects (Ameh and Odusami, 2010) and adequate measures need be put in place to forestall such.

Corruption is one of the many unethical practices that is experienced within the construction industry (Maseko, 2017). Corruption attracts undesirable publicity to the sector with negative effects on the concerned individuals in particular, the industry, the society, and the nation in general (Maseko, 2017). The disorganized and uncontrolled nature of the Nigerian construction industry is regarded as the cause of the many acts of corrupt practices being witnessed in all aspects of the industry, more so that most contractors are solely in business to make profit (Adeyemo and Amade, 2016). Even a recent study by Sanni et al., (2023) identified the unethical practices of building contractors in Jos Metropolis and the causes of most corrupt practices in the project implementation processes. Therefore, there is need to find ways the building contractors in the industry can perform better for the good of the economy and nation's development. The objective of this study is to identify the strategies that could ensure ethical standard among building contractors in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethics is defined by Anikwe et al. (2021) as the 'process of questioning, discovering and defending our values, principles and purpose'. These ethics serve as natural guide for human beings in doing the right things at the right time. However, early ethics which was founded on a belief in Natural Law is doing the right thing (Amoah and Steyn, 2022). It is believed that once things are done right at the required time, no stakeholder will feel manipulated or offended by the actions of others in business cum social engagement thereby creating peaceful human relationships and comfortable future engagements. Having realised that, ethics are moral principles that direct or influence peoples' attitude and conduct and also has an incontrovertible impact on legitimacy and value standard of any profession (Akinrata et al., 2020). Any profession desired of being seen as a profession that wants patronage from the people must take issue of ethics as very important. Ethics is a very important issue to the professions within the construction industry (Enshassi and Al Sweity, 2014).

Contemporary ethics is 'modern ethics that will let you realise how ethics is handled in the construction trade' (Amoah and Steyn, 2022). Professional ethics also ascribes moral responsibility not to an individual, but to all professionals practicing in a particular profession. Codes of ethics guide an organisation, individual or even profession to help them conduct their business in accordance with acceptable values of the society and integrity. Even with the presence of ethical principal codes and unethical practices still flourish in the construction industry (Hafeez and Ugbor, 2016).

Odukoya et al. (2020) identified three main aspects of ethical practices in construction industry, these are simply: management/business ethics; professional ethics and personal ethics. These ethics are the guiding principles for the stakeholders to do the right in the delivery of constructed facilities and services for the satisfaction of the clients and external stakeholders. Also,

organizations with different objectives have different ethical standards purposely for the improvement of performance (Odukoya et al., 2020). Then, participating organisations have roles in the training and instilling disciplines among their employees that are directly or indirectly carrying out the construction activities. The large and complex nature of the construction industry give room for corrupt tendencies that manifest in many ways in various segments of the sector (Olasunkanmi & Ujene, 2019). A study examined the effect of unethical practices on procurement performance of public building projects using the governmental institutions, contracting and consultancy firms in Abuja, Nigeria and the results showed that lack of leadership, weak law, fear of unknown and greed were the leading causes of unethical practices (Ebekozen, 2019).

Another study x-rayed the determinants of unethical performance in Nigerian construction industry with a view to identifying the causes in all the stages of building project and it was observed that the building construction industry is perceived to be more susceptible to ethical problems because of several features and that corruption has effect on all stages of construction right from Planning, Tender stage to Completion stage (Oyewobi et al., 2011). A study revealed that project related factors and ethical standard practices positively influence building performance in Lagos State, Nigeria (Odukoya et al., 2020) while there is no relationship between ethical honesty and accountability and building performance in the same study. A similar study in South East Nigeria revealed that the absence of punishment for unethical practices, collusion between officials, consultants and contractors, availability of loopholes in project monitoring, weak law enforcement institution and greed for money are the major causes of unethical professional practices which have serious effects on the construction industry (Anikwe et al., 2021).

In South Africa, study showed that construction professionals experience many unethical issues in their work duties such as inflated tender prices, overpricing the rates, tender-based kickbacks, bribes for projects, unethical methods of project execution, use of lower grade materials than specified and discrimination (Amoah and Steyn, 2022). Akinrata et al. (2020) concluded that excessive love for money, delayed salaries of workers and economic downturn were the main factors contributing to unethical conduct by professionals in the construction industry. However, Ameh and Odusami (2010) concluded that the dominant ethical ideology of building industry professionals is situationism.

The conflict-of-interest factors were found to have large negative effects on procurement of construction and infrastructural project, and ethical procurement practices identified and introduced as mediating variables were tested and verified to possibly mitigate the effects of conflict-of-interest factors affecting the procurement of construction and infrastructural projects in Nigerian federal universities (Abdullahi, et al., 2019). The more common form of bribery is financial bribery among the professionals in the Nigerian construction industry (Ameh and Odusami, 2010a). Another study showed that corruptions in Nigerian Construction Industry are caused by: poverty level, excessive love for money/greed, politics in award of contract/God-fatherism, professional indiscipline, profit maximization by Contractors, quackery, fall-out of endemic societal corruption and favouritism (Ayodele et al., 2011).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A quantitative approach was used to obtain the necessary information from the construction professionals involved in public building construction in Nigeria. It is designed based on a five-point Likert scale in which 1 = very low and 5 = very high. Table 1 shows the profile of the respondents that participated in the survey. The survey was carried out using both physical and online questionnaire. Data obtained were analysed using SPSS 20 version to determine the mean and standard deviation. The variables in study carried out by Aigbavboa et al. (2016) were adopted in preparing questionnaire for this study. Purposeful sampling was used through physical and online questionnaire distribution. 231 respondents participated in the study and they were from client organisations (123), consultancy firms (58) and contracting companies (50). These professionals are architects (36), quantity surveyors (112), builders (30), engineers (15) and estate managers (28). Quantity surveyors participated more than other professionals in the survey with 48.5%. Their academic qualifications are Higher Diploma (65), First Degree (138), Masters (10) and Doctoral (18). All the respondents had post-secondary education. 56.7% of the respondents had more than 10 years' experience in the construction industry. This confirmed that the respondents have enough experience for them to participate constructively in the study.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Category	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Field of Specialization	Architect	36	15.6
	Quantity Surveyor	112	48.5
	Builder	30	13.2
	Engineer	15	11.4
	Estate Surveyor	28	12.1
	Total	231	100.0
Academic Qualification	Higher Diploma	65	28.1
	First Degree	138	59.7
	Masters	10	4.3
	Doctoral	18	7.8
	Total	231	100.0
Experience in Construction Industry	0 – 5 years	28	12.1
	6 - 10 years	72	31.2
	11 – 15 years	73	31.6
	16 – 20 years	47	20.3
	Over 20 years	11	4.8
	Total	132	100.0
Organization	Client	123	53.2
	Consultant	58	25.1
	Contractor	50	21.6
	Total	231	100.0

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data obtained from the questionnaire survey carried out to identify the measures that should be taken to maintain ethical standard among the building contractors in this section. Table 2 shows the information obtained from the client organisations on the strategies that could maintain ethical standard among building contractors. The result shows that legislative laws that

spell out punishment for any unethical practice (mean: 3.3333), benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the construction industry (mean: 3.3171), transparency and accountability in contract administration (mean: 3.2927), constant supervision of ethics (mean: 3.2358), and good whistle-blowing mechanism (mean: 3.2276) are the five leading strategies for sustaining ethical standards among contractors in Nigeria for building projects to be delivered successfully. Other strategies in descending order of importance are: hiring right personnel (mean: 3.2114), effective communication (mean: 3.1951), take action on ethical violation (mean: 3.1870), development of honest and ethical construction culture (mean: 3.1870), implementation of ethical guidelines and policy (mean: 3.1870), punish offenders (mean: 3.0976), initiation of regular and random ethics checks (mean: 3.0325), review, monitor and report ethics behaviour (mean: 3.0163), verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly (mean: 2.9756) and establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers (mean: 2.9268).

Table 2: Client's Strategies for Maintaining Ethical Standard

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice	3.3333	1.81824	1 st
Benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the construction industry	3.3171	1.73827	2 nd
Transparency and accountability in contract administration	3.2927	1.76826	3 rd
Constant supervision of ethics	3.2358	1.70862	4 th
Good whistle-blowing mechanism	3.2276	1.72642	5 th
Hiring right personnel	3.2114	1.74737	6 th
Effective communication	3.1951	1.71138	7 th
Development of honest and ethical construction culture	3.1870	1.67111	8 th
Implementation of ethical guidelines and policy	3.1870	1.70029	8 th
Take action on ethical violation	3.1870	1.82581	8 th
Punish offenders	3.0976	1.62670	11 th
Initiation of regular and random ethics checks	3.0325	1.67887	12 th
Review, monitor and report ethics behaviour	3.0163	1.71772	12 th
Verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly	2.9756	1.76702	14 th
Establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers	2.9268	1.62042	15 th

Table 3 showed the information obtained from the consultants on the strategies that could maintain ethical standard among building contractors. The result shows that transparency and accountability in contract administration (mean: 4.2759), hiring right personnel (mean: 4.2414), take action on ethical violation (mean: 3.9828), constant supervision of ethics (mean: 3.9138) and punish offenders (mean: 3.8966) are the five major ways of ensuring ethical standard among building contractors. They are followed by implementation of ethical guidelines and policy (mean: 3.8966), effective communication (mean: 3.8276), verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly (mean: 3.8276), legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice (mean: 3.7931), development of honest and ethical construction culture (mean: 3.7759), establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers (mean: 3.7759), initiation of regular and random ethics checks (mean: 3.7586), review, monitor and report ethics behaviour (mean: 3.7414), good whistle-blowing mechanism (mean: 3.7414) and benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the construction industry (mean: 3.7414).

Table 3: Consultant's Strategies for Maintaining Ethical Standard

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Transparency and accountability in contract administration	4.2759	1.36103	1 st
Hiring right personnel	4.2414	1.40563	2 nd
Take action on ethical violation	3.9828	1.44479	3 rd
Constant supervision of ethics	3.9138	1.49014	4 th
Punish offenders	3.8966	1.44720	5 th
Implementation of ethical guidelines and policy	3.8966	1.44720	5 th
Effective communication	3.8276	1.36546	7 th
Verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly	3.8276	1.41592	7 th
Legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice	3.7931	1.39873	9 th
Development of honest and ethical construction culture	3.7759	1.35135	10 th
Establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers	3.7759	1.35132	10 th
Initiation of regular and random ethics checks	3.7586	1.47862	12 th
Review, monitor and report ethics behaviour	3.7414	1.40875	13 th
Good whistle-blowing mechanism	3.7414	1.55101	13 th
Benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the CI	3.7414	1.55101	13 th

Table 4 showed the information obtained from the contractors on the strategies that could maintain ethical standard among building contractors. The result shows the five leading strategies for ensuring ethical standard among building contractors are take action on ethical violation (mean: 3.5000), transparency and accountability in contract administration (mean: 3.4600), hiring right personnel (mean: 3.4600), punish offenders (mean: 3.4200) and implementation of ethical guidelines and policy (mean: 3.4200). They are followed by effective communication (mean: 3.3800), legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice (mean: 3.3800), constant supervision of ethics (mean: 3.3800), review, monitor and report ethics behaviour (mean: 3.1800), development of honest and ethical construction culture (mean: 3.1800), establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers (mean: 3.1800), initiation of regular and random ethics checks (mean: 3.1800), good whistle-blowing mechanism (mean: 3.1400), benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the construction industry (mean: 3.1400) and verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly (mean: 2.9800).

Table 5 showed the information obtained from the client, consultants and contractors combined on the strategies that could maintain ethical standard among building contractors. The result shows that transparency and accountability in contract administration (mean: 3.5758), hiring right personnel (mean: 3.5238), legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice (mean: 3.4589), take action on ethical violation (mean: 3.4545) and constant supervision of ethics (mean: 3.4372) are the five major ways of ensuring ethical standard among building contractors.

Table 4: Contractor's Strategies for Maintaining Ethical Standard

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Take action on ethical violation	3.5000	1.84336	1 st
Transparency and accountability in contract administration	3.4600	1.95051	2 nd
Hiring right personnel	3.4600	1.95051	2 nd
Punish offenders	3.4200	1.72721	4 th
Implementation of ethical guidelines and policy	3.4200	1.72721	4 th
Effective communication	3.3800	1.83937	6 th
Legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice	3.3800	1.83937	6 th
Constant supervision of ethics	3.3800	1.77154	6 th
Review, monitor and report ethics behaviour	3.1800	1.69862	9 th
Development of honest and ethical construction culture	3.1800	1.69862	9 th
Establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers	3.1800	1.69862	9 th
Initiation of regular and random ethics checks	3.1800	1.69862	9 th
Good whistle-blowing mechanism	3.1400	1.73805	13 th
Benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the CI	3.1400	1.73805	13 th
Verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly	2.9800	1.74368	15 th

They are followed by the implementation of ethical guidelines and policy (mean: 3.4156), effective communication (mean: 3.3939), benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the construction industry (mean: 3.3853), punish offenders (mean: 3.3680), good whistle-blowing mechanism (mean: 3.3377), development of honest and ethical construction culture (mean: 3.3333), initiation of regular and random ethics checks (mean: 3.2468), review, monitor and report ethics behaviour (mean: 3.2338), establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers (mean: 3.1948) and verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly (mean: 3.1905).

Table 5: Overall Strategies for Maintaining Ethical Standard

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Transparency and accountability in contract administration	3.5758	1.75997	1 st
Hiring right personnel	3.5238	1.76145	2 nd
Legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice	3.4589	1.73125	3 rd
Take action on ethical violation	3.4545	1.76595	4 th
Constant supervision of ethics	3.4372	1.68734	5 th
Implementation of ethical guidelines and policy	3.4156	1.66564	6 th
Effective communication	3.3939	1.67482	7 th
Benchmark of effective ways of improving adherence to ethics in the CI	3.3853	1.70001	8 th
Punish offenders	3.3680	1.63351	9 th
Good whistle-blowing mechanism	3.3377	1.69611	10 th
Development of honest and ethical construction culture	3.3333	1.61694	11 th
Initiation of regular and random ethics checks	3.2468	1.65626	12 th
Review, monitor and report ethics behaviour	3.2338	1.66208	13 th
Establishment of annual business ethics training for employees and employers	3.1948	1.60737	14 th
Verbally promote ethical environment and relentlessly	3.1905	1.71391	15 th

'Transparency and accountability in contract administration' is ranked first on the strategies for maintaining ethical standard among the building contractors in the country. This shows that transparency is very important and key to the industry. If stakeholders are transparent and accountable in the implementation of public building projects, projects would be delivered to achieve the stated objectives. Such projects are likely to be delivered to time, cost and quality.

Those projects would be able to meet the expectation of the external stakeholders and facilitate the growth of the industry and the nation in general. However, the hiring right personnel is ranked second on the strategies to be adopted for maintaining ethical standard among building contractors. This goes in line with the first strategy that shows that transparency will encourage employing right people for the job. This means that the right people on the job will help deliver the public building projects to satisfy the objectives of the development. 'Legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice' is ranked third on the strategies that could be adopted to maintain ethical standard among building contractors. This means that the earlier strategies, transparency and right personnel, must be backed and protect by the laws to sustain those earlier suggested strategies.

'Take action on ethical violation' is ranked fourth as the strategies that could be adopted to maintain ethical standard among building contractors. This action is expected to be backed by the laws that was suggested in the third strategies. 'Constant supervision of ethics' is ranked fifth as the strategies to maintain the ethical standard among the building contractors. This indicated that the action on the ethical violation must be supervised to maintain and sustain the standard among the public building contractors. Constant supervision is the key to achieving the goals and objectives of maintaining ethical standard in the implementation of the public building projects. This must be followed by the 'implementation of ethical guidelines and policy' and 'effective communication' by the internal stakeholders on the public building projects. Ayuba and Aliyu (2018) suggested that 'business regulatory bodies and other stakeholder organizations' must be ready to help in monitoring the sector so that the Nigeria society is protected from the unethical practices by the players. This is in agreement with the outcome of this study that suggested that the participants must 'take action on ethical violation' and make sure that there is 'constant supervision of ethics' by the regulatory bodies in the industry. Ebekozi (2019) also suggested that the 'leadership by example' and 'enforcement and upholding the rule of law' as the two major ways to mitigate unethical practices in the construction in Nigeria. This previous study has confirmed the outcome of this study that indicated that the participants must 'take action on ethical violation' to protect the sector from negative influence.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to identify the strategies that could ensure the maintenance of ethical standard among building contractors in Nigeria implementing the public building projects. This study was conducted to contribute to elimination of challenges in the delivery of public projects in the country through the maintenance of ethical standard among building contractors. The stakeholders could understand the process more and improve on their participations and contributions. The public building development implementation processes can be improved for project's delivery to expectations of both internal and external stakeholders. The study was able to identify transparency and accountability in contract administration, hiring right personnel and legislative laws that spell out punishment for any unethical practice as the three main strategies that could ensure ethical standard among the building contractors. It is recommended that the stakeholders in the building construction industry especially those participating in the public projects could use these strategies to maintain the ethical standard for better projects development.

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