

Professionalism in Practices: A Preliminary Study on Malaysian Public Universities

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Abstract

Despite the revolution of the management aspect worldwide, many changes have been noticed to give an impact to work outcomes which is associated with quality workers. Changes in technology, political unrest and financial uncertainties become the facts of life. These factors and other elements make conflict unavoidable for individuals as well as an organization. Towards that, most of the occupational groups are engage in an ongoing professionalization process. However, the efforts are always met with only limited success. By focusing on the public university in Malaysia, this study contributes to the minimal research on professionalism that exists in the context of public sector employees. Attempts are made to explore the practice of professionalism dimensions using a modification of Hall's Professionalism scale. The dimensions include professional community affiliation, social obligation, belief in self regulation, dedication to the profession and demands for autonomy. There were 239 participants from public universities in the east coast of Malaysia involved in the study. The findings revealed that a demand for autonomy is the essential need among academicians in practicing their professionalism at the workplace. In addition, participants scored relatively high on two other dimensions including professional community affiliation and social obligation. Contrary to expectations, the lowest rating scored was dedications to profession. Finally, it is hope that results of the findings will be able to assist a university and related authorities in regard with employment relation especially to avoid dysfunctional work outcomes among employees. Perhaps, it may be wise to take it into account in order to manage the negative impact of the job attitudes that may influence the quality of human capital in the public sector.

Keywords: Professionalism, Public university, Employment relation

1. Introduction

Recently, most research on job attitude has focused on private sector employees (Nayak, 2002). However, the impact on job attitudes has hurt the public sector as well. The evidence in United States shows a dramatic downturn in the number of talented young people choosing public service as a career and it resulted with the difficulties in attracting and retaining highly qualified people that are able to give the same service equal to the best in business (Nayak, 2002). In addition, nearly half of the federal workforce is expected to be eligible to retire and take an early out by 2005. It also caused the unemployment rate in the United States especially in fields critical to success of government services (Nayak, 2002). Unfortunately, the in-depth research analysis that is important and necessary to better understand the attitudes of public servants especially as it relates to organizational commitment and turnover intention, is noticeably absent.

As Malaysia is moving towards knowledge-based economy and the consensus on importance of quality assurance in education is evident to benefited country as well as nation, it may reflects the occupational groups particularly academicians to engage in an ongoing professionalization process. Towards that, those group especially professionals are commit in developing and maintaining their level of expertise. However, the professionalization efforts are always met with only limited success (Shafer et al., 2002). Due to that, there is a need to address the behavioral implications on professionalism towards the commitment of employees in an organization especially within the public sector. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the level

of practices of professionalism characteristics among public servants in order to improve a quality as well as increase efficiency at work. At the same time, attempts are also made to explore the rank of importance among the five dimensions as it may be important for employment relation especially to avoid dysfunctional work outcomes among employees.

1.1 Professionals

The literature on professionals in organizations has focused on the compatibility of professional values and organizational role demands as well as on the adaptation and commitment of professionals to their employing organizations. The incongruity thesis maintains that professionals face a commitment dilemma or an inter-role conflict since organizational and professional role requirements are always incompatible (Sorensen and Sorensen, 1974; Schroeder and Imdieke, 1997; Tubre and Collins, 2000). Moreover, it has been shown that role conflict leads to many negative consequences for professionals and their employing organizations (Jackson and Schuler, 1985; Van Sell *et al.*, 1981).

As society became more economically and socially complex through industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization, the study of professions shifted from the rigid, static concept of essential components towards recognizing professionalization as a dynamic process in which an occupation could strive towards the ideal of a profession. Thus, professionals are valued by people and society with a good reputation. This is in line with the literature by Maister (1997) that describes professionals as those who take pride in their work and show a personal commitment to quality. Moreover, professionals also seek for responsibility, anticipate the needs of others and initiate action. Therefore, professionals always viewed as people who are honest, trustworthy, loyal, eager to learn and also a team players (ITiCSE Reports, 1999). With that, professionals were given respect and trust for many years. However, with the growing number of cases involving lack of responsibility, many professionals are begun to regain such respect (Maister, 1997).

At one time, the ambiguity of the term professional is further complicated by the sheer volume and diversity of related literature spanning several centuries. Not only that, the situation also influenced by the changing focus of scholarship about the professions. While early research emphasized on the common characteristics or attributes to define professions, more recent work however has focused on the sociopolitical process to professionalization (Shafer *et al.*, 2002). This is in keeping with the literature that differentiate between the comments of Massey that examined the attributes of the profession, whereas Worthingham's observations is related to the steps of the emerging profession address the process of professionalization.

1.2 Professionalism

In conjunction with the above matter, most of the previous researchers tend to define professionalism according to the scope of profession that they chose to be studied. However, the serving ideals that receive attention about professionalism is due to the viewpoint that it can represent a variety of different concerns, ranging from demonstrable workplace competence to a set of conditions that enable market dominance (Reamer, 2009). Despite much of the sociological literature focuses on the characteristics common to all professions, Bellner (1999) noted that there are differences between professions and individual professionals regarding the concepts of professionalism. As cited from Shafer *et al.* (2002), some researchers define professionalism as the conceptualization of obligations, attributes, interactions, attitudes and role behaviors required of professionals in relationship to individual patients or clients and to society as a whole since they used a sample of physical therapists. Studies of professionalism in accounting have been no exception, which similarly adopted an occupational and institutional focus (Shafer *et al.*, 2002). As such, other researchers modified Halls's professionalism scale in order to match the attributes with the profession of pharmacy practitioners. In short, past researcher suggests that the concept of professionalism may refer to the profession as a whole or to individual members of a profession. Therefore, Merriam-Webster (2009) defined professionalism as the conduct or qualities that characterize a profession or professional. Moreover, it link the professional role concepts to the internalized beliefs of an individual professional regarding professional obligations, attributes, interactions, attitudes and role behaviors.

Based on classic functional theories of professionalism, the abstract knowledge and complex skills possessed by professionals make it difficult for the layman to judge the quality of their services (Shafer *et al.*, 2002). However, most of the researcher often based on the early sociological concept which emphasis on autonomy as the defining mark of a professional. The most common instrument used in the field of study is Hall's professionalism scale that assess 5 attitudinal attributes namely, use of professional organization as reference, belief in public service, belief in self-regulation, sense of calling and perceived autonomy in work. Indeed, the scale have been used among a variety of professions including physicians, attorneys, engineers (Snizek, 1972;

Hall, 1968), public accountants (Goetz et al., 1991) and internal auditors (Kalbers and Fogarty, 1995). Besides, Moore (1970) also proposed continuum ranked professional attributes in ascending order of importance that includes motivation, established professional organization, specialized body of knowledge, evaluative skills and autonomy of judgment. Bebeau et al., (1993) however developed an instrument according to philosophers or ethicists' description that guide professional relationships and decision making. It is known as Professional Role Orientation Inventory (PROI) which measure 4 dimensions of professionalism; authority, responsibility, autonomy and agency.

1.3 Public sector identities

Available evidence cited from Mulinge (2000) suggests that employees in public and private sector organizations do not operate under identical work environments and, therefore they should be evaluated in different manner. Apparently, public sector jobs are determined by several factors such as autonomy, participation in decision making, job variety/interesting work, role clarity, task significance, feedback and quality social relations. Moreover, public servants often have been associated with external and internal controls that influenced employee autonomy and flexibility in decision making. In addition, people also viewed public sector jobs by a deficiency in goal clarity and poor quality social relations (Mulinge, 2000). Indeed, workers in public sector have been found to be less likely to consider their superiors as helpful, their coworkers as interested in them and to see the results of their work.

Despite having an advantage in term of job security and well-developed benefit programs, practitioners found that public sector jobs do not offer large financial gains compared to employees in private sector (Rainey, 1991). In fact, prior research reported that there are significance differences in terms of compensation, the working environment and career development schemes between public and private organizations (Mulinge, 2000). According to Ozgediz (1986), the compensations systems offered to public servants may be adequate for lower level staff but not for qualified high level professionals. Differences such as those cited shows that it gives impact to employee's satisfaction and commitment to the organizations where by it may caused employee frustration and interfere with the individual's perception of his/her role (Mulinge, 2000).

2. Methodology

The study had been conducted at the public universities located in the east coast of Malaysia. It involved academicians as a professional group, whereby the data was gathered using a questionnaire. In order to get relevant information, the questionnaire had been divided into two sections. Section A involved the information about demographic profile while responses to the professional inventory were asked in Section B. All responses for Section B was provided by using a five-point Likert scale anchored on "strongly disagree" (1) and "strongly agree" (5). For the purpose to explain the information on demographic profile of the respondents, descriptive analysis had been run for Section A. The professional inventory used includes 19 items from the Hall Professionalism Scale which have been modified to the context of academicians. These items are measures according to the five dimensions of professionalism by Hall (1968). It includes professional community affiliation, social obligation, belief in self regulation, dedication to the profession and demands for autonomy. Each of the dimensions is potentially applicable to the profession of a lecturer.

Applicable for an academician, professional community affiliation in the study refers to the extent to which a person is actively involved in the professional community and uses professional institutions as a major referent (Hall, 1968). An individual who stays closely affiliated with this dimension is believed to engage in activities such as reading journals and attending conferences (Snizek, 1972), which is important to ensure their achievement in the career as well as contribution to the community as a whole. For instance, other than educational outcomes, student's intellectual and personality development will depend largely on the commitment of the lecturer.

Social obligation or commitment to serve the public interest is the expectation towards professional group to subordinate personal gain to public service when conflict arise (Wilensky, 1964; Parsons, 1954). Moreover, this obligation requires an individual to recognize the importance of their work to society, and the fact that their work benefits not only the organization and individuals, but the public as well (Hall, 1968). On the other hand, self regulation is the belief that laypersons are not qualified to judge the quality of the professional's work, thus they should be judged by their colleagues (Abbott, 1988; Hall, 1968).

The next dimension known as professional dedication reflects a sense of calling to one's field and the belief that professional would want to do work even if fewer extrinsic rewards were available (Hall, 1968). Lastly, demands for autonomy refer to the professionals who have a desire to be free to make decisions about their work.

Professionals who are strongly influenced by this characteristic found that external pressures that conflict with professional judgment are the obstacles of autonomy (Snizek, 1972).

3. Result and discussion

3.1 Profile of the respondents

Questionnaires were distributed to a group of lecturers at three selected public universities as mentioned earlier. A total of 239 usable responses were received that indicates a response rate of approximately 80 percent.

A demographic profile of the participants is provided in Table I. As the data indicates more than half of the respondents are male which shows just a slight difference compared to a female respondents. In term of ethnic groups, Malay form the largest group of lecturer participated in the study. In addition, the study shows that other ethnic groups were also working at the public universities including Chinese, Indian and others which contribute 7.5% and 1.7%, respectively to the data gathered. Besides that, almost 80% of the respondents are married. It appears that more than half of the lecturers have a master degree as their higher achievement in academic. At the second place are those with PhD representing approximately 36 percent.

Considering that universities involved in the study are limited, these reflect the number of respondents in regard with their area of specialization. Participants from the field of pure sciences are higher compare to those in social sciences. Lastly, the study revealed that respondents had been servicing public sector for quite some time as there were only 12.1 % of them have less than a year experience while the remainder represented those who have been working between 1 year to more than 10 years with the universities. This reflect the loyalty among public servants that may be influenced by the advantage to gain job security and well-developed benefit programs even though at the same time they do not gain the higher financial gains like usually offered by some of the private organizations (Rainey, 1991).

3.2 Responses to professional inventory

The findings on professional inventory are summarized in Table II. As the summary result shows, the dimension of professionalism that received the highest rating was demands for autonomy. It reflects the need among academicians in public universities towards practicing their professionalism at the workplace. In fact, it is found that organizational setting and hierarchical structure gives a significant impact on professionalism (Wong and Chan, 2010). Besides, rising education levels and opportunity to access to unlimited information on the rights as an employee may be other forces that increase expectation among the group. As they perceived their contribution is a major business for a university, their voice should therefore be seriously taken into consideration by the management. Apart from that, a number of major changes in the Malaysian economic and social environment have also resulted with the changing attitudes among workers towards being more vocal and aware of their rights. However, public universities that being categorized as the heteronomous professional organization in which professional employees are subject to external control is often provided with the least autonomy (Hall, 1968). Therefore, it is important to make a thorough investigation on job analysis in order to tailor it with the employee's effort. The finding may possibly guide human resource practitioners to create a more precise job description as it is difficult to attain especially in regard with managerial and professional positions like an academician. It will consequently help increase organizational efficiency and effectiveness in recruitment process. In addition, it may reduce frustration on the workers part. As previous studies found that demands for autonomy is one dimensions of professionalism that positively associated with perceptions of organizational-professional conflict (Shafer et al., 2002), it is therefore important for a management in a university to address the behavioral implications that may influenced by this situation.

Participants scored relatively high on two other dimensions including professional community affiliation and social obligation. In regard with professional community affiliation, this was attributable to the nature of being an academician in public universities who are responsible to continuously enhance their knowledge and expertise especially from reading and attending national as well as international conferences. Indeed, it was one of the requirements that will be evaluated by the management in performance evaluation process for an academician. Meanwhile, the finding on social obligation was similar with the prior research on accountants (Shafer, 2002). Participants in the study also felt that academician is essential to the welfare of society and therefore any weakening of the role and practice of academician would give harm to the public. Clearly, it proved that the level of professionalism cannot be achieved with the implementation of one aspect of the overall professionalization effort, but it has to come altogether at the same time. Monitoring this at the workplace possibly can bring a new solution for organization when dealing with performance among professionals. Realizing that there is no such thing as a perfect system, changing an existing practice according to the situation however should be encouraged as long as it is still aligned with organizational goals.

Contrary to expectations, the lowest rating scored was dedications to profession. It appears that economic considerations are currently influencing the dedication of professional group to make a contribution. As changes in technology, global shifting of power, political unrest and financial uncertainties becomes the facts of life, this probably one of the potential impacts that influenced the behavior among employees at the workplace. Besides, while professionals are valued by people and society with a good reputation, the quality of work for that particular occupational group often being assessed by the external rewards which eventually switch the perception among employees on the perceived rewards that they deserved to gain. Even though professionals understand their roles and responsibilities, but they possibly still low in areas of ethics and social responsibility as reported in the previous study (Gupta, 2007). In addition, some researchers also suggests that professional work is increasingly mediated by an organization that leads to the situations where the professional service is delivered to organization rather than the individual (Suddaby et. al, 2009). Thus, it gives the impact on the level of dedication among employees.

Finally, the result also shows that loyalty among public servants in Malaysia, particularly in public universities has not appeared to present a severe problem unlike the situation in some western societies. It is believed that public employees with these characteristics will contribute to organizational performance and may be able to improve the quality of human capital in the public sector.

4. Conclusion

The study provides a preliminary finding on professionalism among academicians at public universities in Malaysia. The findings suggest that there are elements that need to be emphasized by related authorities in regard to produce a quality worker. Regardless of the type of organization as described by Hall (1968), management of a university or leaders should consider employee's needs to guarantee the positive work outcomes will be produced. Consistent with the nature of the work, academicians are one of the occupational groups in the public sector that perceived autonomy in decision making as the important aspect to become professional.

Since workers are becoming more aware of their employment rights, a more understanding is hoped from the management towards formulating a strategic plan for the whole organization including academicians. A new method of work may be introduced that carefully separated academic and non-academic group of employees. Due to that, the human resource department may think of developing a well-designed system that can motivate employees to perform to the best of their abilities and therefore the chances of organizational success are vastly improved.

As the list of potentially unethical situations is endless, future research should explore the role of professionalism in contributing to the positive work outcomes. The discussion will be more beneficial as the working environment is becoming more challenging through times. For instance, the impact of global economic downturn in recent years shows that organizations need to make a careful deliberation and planning for implementation. Therefore, it is important for the management to give priority on activities that give the best in return without neglecting employee's satisfaction. It is also suggested that further research attempts to investigate professional attitudes at the individual and occupational level before concentrating on the other perspective such as institutional focus. Gaining a better understanding of the individual, group and organizational processes that are related to organizational commitment will consequently give a significant impact for employees, organizations as well as society. Besides, the potential impacts of undesirable job attitudes at the workplace is hoped to be decreased. Eventually, employees will offer a tremendous opportunity for organizations as they are looking for ways to respond in a rapid shift of working environment which will enable an organization to overcome mutual problems and to achieve common goals.

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Table I. Profile of Respondents (n = 239)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	139	58.2
Female	100	41.8
Total	239	100.0
Race		
Malay	213	89.1
Chinese	18	7.5
India	4	1.7
Others	4	1.7
Total	239	100.0
Marital status		
Single	50	20.9
Married	189	79.1
Total	239	100.0
Academic background		
Degree	24	10.0
Master	123	51.5
Doctoral	85	35.6
Others	7	2.9
Total	239	100.0
Specialization		
Accounting/finance	16	6.7
Economics	13	5.4
Management/marketing	20	8.4
Science and technology	152	63.6
Others	38	15.9
Total	239	100.0
Tenure		
Less than a year	29	12.1
1 – 3 years	61	25.5
3 – 5 years	59	24.7
5 – 10 years	46	19.2
More than 10 years	44	18.4
Total	239	100.0

Table II. Responses to Professional Inventory

Professionalism inventory		Mean	Standard deviation
Community affiliation	CA1	4.05	0.895
	CA2	3.86	0.993
	CA3	4.21	0.698
Social obligation	SO4	4.18	0.813
	SO5	3.61	0.928
	SO6	3.97	0.911
	S07	4.37	0.744
Self regulation	SR8	4.11	0.845
	SR9	3.29	1.107
	SR10	4.01	0.919
	SR11	3.95	0.909
Dedications to profession	DP12	4.29	0.666
	DP13	4.39	0.605
	DP14	3.05	1.242
	DP15	3.61	0.998
Demands for autonomy	DA16	4.49	0.641
	DA17	3.80	0.800
	DA18	3.74	0.868
	DA19	4.24	0.772

Table III. Rank of Professionalism Dimensions

Rank	Dimension	Mean average
1	Demands for autonomy	4.07
2	Community affiliation	4.04
3	Social obligation	4.03
4	Self regulation	3.84
5	Dedications to profession	3.83