

Professionalism among employees in Lebanon: the Lebanese University

Professionalism
among
employees

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Abstract

Purpose – The present paper tries to assess empirically the level of professionalism. In addition, this paper tries to analyze the factors affecting professionalism. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to provide an empirical assessment of professionalism in a bureaucracy, and second, to assess the relationship of age and education, on the one hand, and bureaucratic professionalism, on the other hand. Because whims make a poor basis for change, an objective empirical assessment of the level of professionalism is provided and that is where the strength of this paper lies.

Design/methodology/approach – The data for this study are obtained from a survey administered to employees.

Findings – The findings of this paper are as follows: low professionalism among civil servants in Lebanon, no relationship between professionalism and age of employees and the direct relationship between professionalism and education of employees.

Practical implications – It is true that the woes of the administration lie in the confessional political system of the country; however, concentrating on contextual and behavioral variables that can be controlled could alleviate the problem.

Social implications – Recruiting educated employees based on their competency levels may alleviate the behavioral problem and may lead to improved professionalism.

Originality/value – No previous work was done in this regard.

Keywords Professionalism, Ethics, Management, Social responsibility, Values, Bureaucracy in Lebanon

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Organizational professionalism has been discussed in the literature; however, professionalism of public servants in Lebanon has not been systematically studied. Defining organizational professionalism is important because the behavior of a public agency may affect the behavior of employees inside this organization and behavior of the community at large. This paper will try to assess the level of professionalism in a public agency, the Lebanese University, by discussing the following competencies of organizational professionalism derived from ethical values: integrity and service. Moreover, this paper will try to determine whether age and education of employees are associated with higher levels of professionalism. Because whims make a poor basis for change, an objective empirical assessment of the level of professionalism was provided and that is where the strength of this paper lies.

2. Literature review

Professionalism is a basic element of bureaucracy that requires a full-time corps of officials whose attention is devoted exclusively to its managerial responsibilities. In the public sector, professionalism is vested in the cadre of civil servants whose positions have generally been obtained through the passage of merit tests (Rockman, 2014). The type of bureaucracy as well as the type of the political system, whether democratic or autocratic, influence the level of professionalism among employees and hence the level of bureaucratic efficiency.

Adler and Borys characterized two distinct types of bureaucracies: Enabling and coercive. It depends on the way bureaucracies are operated that lead to different result. In coercive ones,



managers do not trust professionals and they keep a close eye on them. There is no room for innovative decision making as it depends on penalties. In enabling bureaucracies, professionals are given more freedom to assume responsibilities and hence to engage in decision making that is sometimes considered outside the box (Adler and Borys, 1996). As Max Weber states, "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity [...] are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic environment" (Weber, 1958, p. 214). Thus, the speed and precision in the delivery of activities is one of the most important prerequisites of efficient bureaucratic functioning. This accuracy in delivery cannot be carried out without the presence of sufficient drive or energy to execute assigned tasks. Lethargic bureaucracies find themselves unable to keep up with outgoing demands required to maintain the status quo and hence to play a role in the social and economic development.

In democratic political systems, the civil service is considered a permanent entity, distinct from the transient politicians who serve only for a limited time and whose decisions depend on the electorate and other hidden agenda. It is a fact that professionalism increases expertise and continuity within the organization. The professional cadre at the top of the organization is the safe net for the organization stability. Usually, when the organization experience turmoil or rapid change, the professional cadre helps to maintain an organizational equilibrium. Without a professional cadre, organizations would suffer from crises induced by incompetency. It is no wonder that Max Weber laid professionalism among the main instigators of organizational efficiency as it contributes to a superior technical proficiency. Professionals behave predictably in uncertain and complex situations (Hall, 2015, p. 114). There have been moves in the past to increase the level of bureaucratic flexibility by increasing the level of professionalism among front line employees. As relayed by Clark, the culture of professionals has been characterized as performance and efficiency based, formal, and competitive (Clark, 2008). However, this is not always the case as bureaucratic rules have been used to decrease professional discretion by limiting the options and decisions to be made as bureaucratic rules and policies can be binding and do not include provisions to cater special situations. Moreover, maintaining a high level of professionalism helps the employee to keep up to work standards, but it may decrease bureaucratic flexibility. Administrators are often faced with the dilemma of risk avoidance and innovation and of employee acceptance. On the one hand, decision makers may choose innovative operation, which entails greater risk. On the other hand, they can choose control-oriented operations, which are inflexible. There should be a balance between the application of rules, the level of innovation applied and the acceptance of employees.

In democratic countries, professionalism is mainly concerned with professional responsibility and accountability. Professional responsibility in its earliest forms entailed the avoidance of wrongdoing. Later on, Woodrow Wilson's dichotomy between policy making (politics) and policy implementation (administration) gave professional responsibility another dimension, which involved discretionary judgment related to both technical matters and values. Modern governments required administrators to be alert to public opinion as well as to the use of professional knowledge and ethics in the interpretation of legislative orders (Plant, 2011, p. 472). According to Friedrich, those practices are in conformity with the American traditions, constitutional arrangements and federalism (Plant, 2011, p. 473). A truly responsible bureaucracy depends on its own code of civic and professional ethics as it does on external controls. Therefore, bureaucrats should have an ethical (moral) obligation toward the public and toward their actions (Gulyas, 2003, p. 232). Harmon observes that a professional sense of loyalty, discipline, and responsibility emerged in some sectors of the public service in the USA, which led to honesty and loyalty to high standards of competence including technical competence. Equally important, is the responsibility of the public servant to know and respect the wishes of the community he serves, not because of external or internal organizational pressures but because of a determined devotion to the basic policies of the state (Harmon, 1990, p. 164).

Despite its virtues, professionalism also carries potential risks. Often the professional cadre of managerial experts itself becomes a covert source of power because it has superior knowledge compared to those who are its nominal but temporary superiors. By virtue of greater experience, professional bureaucrats may exercise strong influence over decisions made by their leaders through mastering the details of organizational and substantive knowledge. In addition, although a permanent apparatus of officials brings expertise to decision making, it also deepens the innate conservatism of a bureaucracy (Rockman, 2014). The permanent cadre is usually skeptical of innovation and creativity because the essence of bureaucratic organization is to turn innovations into routines. Professional bureaucrats also tend to favor the organizational status quo because their status is tied to it. Consequently, the more professional the cadre becomes, the more likely it is to resist change. However, other studies suggest that bureaucracies where professionals feel more secure (by supplying professionals with needed funds, equipment, technical personnel, among others) may tend to be more productive and efficient (Engel, 1976).

A definition of the term professionalism is very hard to find in the literature. There is a general agreement that professionals have some characteristics that are representative of the professional status: first, expertise: engaging in prolonged specialized training in a body of abstract knowledge. Second, ethics: rendering service without concern with oneself or without becoming emotionally involved with the client (Clark, 2008). Moreover, professionals behave predictably in uncertain and complex situations (Beneviste, 1987). Therefore, the culture of professionals has been characterized as performance and efficiency based, formal, and competitive. Therefore, professionalism increases the level of efficiency by reducing nepotism and increasing individual skills (Raelin, 1986). Moreover, maintaining a high level of professionalism helps the employee to keep up to work standards. Expertise is closely related to maintaining skills (frequency of training sessions and advancement on the job). In Lebanon, public institutions are considered the “welfare” institutions by which political parties assign their supporters. This made competencies and hard work seem oblivious to the public sector, which justifies Question 1 related to nepotism. The perception of nepotism is important and it was measured by how Lebanese civil servants view employment of relatives in the public service as well as their perception in the fairness of merit procedures (Palmer and Nakib, 1976).

3. Methodology

A questionnaire was devised to measure the level of professionalism among the Lebanese public services. The subjects captured in the database used for this study consisted of 500 employees. The number of collected questionnaires reached 283, which is around 60 percent from the sample. Subjects were chosen from all job levels, different education backgrounds, and different age levels and from different location of Lebanon. The questionnaire was administered by hand to subjects. The population surveyed included employees from a public agency, the Lebanese University, which included all departments. Subjects were chosen from all category levels ranging from full timers, to contractors to long-term contractors. In total, 30 percent are full timers, 24 percent are long-term contractors and 46 percent are contractors. This is representative of the population as literature related to the Lebanese University is always criticizing the high rise in the number of contractors vs full timers. Moreover, the subjects interviewed covered all branches of the Lebanese University from South Lebanon, to North Lebanon, to the Beqaa and Greater Beirut.

From the definitions of professionalism, we can infer that maintaining skills and low nepotism are distinctive factors that characterize professionals. Maintaining skills is an important component of maintaining performance since decreasing skills would definitely affect the organization’s efficiency (Hall, 2015).

Maintaining skills

- Question 1: I believe that training sessions help me in updating my skills:
 - Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree.
- Question 2: How many training sessions have you attended this year?
- Question 3: How many Computer training sessions have you attended this year?
- Question 4: How often do you have a chance to read about the latest innovations in your field:
 - Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree.

Nepotism

- Question 1: It is better to work in a public institution than in a private institution:
 - Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree.
- Question 2: I think that the recruitment policies should be more flexible in terms of giving extra credit for relatives:
 - Strongly Agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neutral 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly Disagree.
- Question 3: I think that promotion is based primarily on:
 - Individual skills.
 - Seniority.
 - Wasta.
 - Other.

4. Results

Seven questions were used as measures of professionalism. The tests and percentage distributions are shown in Table I. The data show that employees are aware of the importance of training sessions as an effective way to maintaining skills; around 94 percent of employees said that training sessions are very important for updating their skills. However, a large

Question	SA	A	D	SD	NR	
1. I believe that training sessions help me in updating my skills	55.5	39.2	2.5	0	2.8	Maintaining skills
2. It is better to work in a public institution than in a private institution	42.8	29.7	9.2	2.1	16.3	Nepotism N
3. I think that the recruitment public policies should be more flexible in terms of giving extra credit for relatives	16.6	24	20.1	16.3	23	
<i>Maintaining skills</i>						
Question	1	2	3	4	5	
4. How many training sessions have you attended this year?	81.3	7.1	8.8	2.1	0.7	Maintaining Skills
5. How many Computer training sessions have you attended this year?	68.9	13.8	8.8	6.0	2.5	
Question	Always	Often	Rarely	Never		
6. How many training sessions have you attended this year?	19.4	28.3	35.3	17.0		
<i>Nepotism</i>						
Question	Ind. skills	Wasta	Seniority	I don't know	Other	
7. I think that promotion is based primarily on	13.4	66.4	18.7	1.1	0.4	

Table I.
Professionalism

percentage of the respondents, more than 75 percent, indicated that they have not attended any training session – whether administrative or technical – during the past year. Only 3 percent indicated that they have engaged more than two times in administrative training sessions, and around 6 percent indicated that they have undergone computer-based workshops, which is a very low percentage. Question 4 of Table I assesses the chance of employees to read about the latest innovations in their fields. Around 60 percent of the respondents said that they rarely or never have a chance to read about the latest innovations in their field, which is typical in a bureaucratic environment in Lebanon (Jabbara and Jabbara, 2005). However, more than 70 percent of employees said that they are allowed to use their skills at work, which means that employees practice their skills at work and they should be motivated to engage in any task that increases their efficiency. Civil servants do not have a chance to maintain their skills through attending workshops and sessions and they never have the chance to read about innovations in their work. However, they use the skills that they know in their work even if those skills are outdated.

Question 2 of Table I assesses the tendency toward nepotism by looking at to the intensity of paternal ties. The latter constitutes an obstacle to professionalism. Around 72 percent of the respondents affirmed that they prefer to work in a public institution instead of working in a private institution. Around 16 percent were indifferent to where they work, which is a low percentage. Number 7 in Table I assesses the opinion of civil servants toward nepotism. Around 40 percent of the respondents said that recruitment should be more flexible in terms of helping relatives. Only 35 percent said that there should be no favoritism in terms of recruitment of relatives. It seems that most of the respondents agree that recruitment policies should take into consideration relatives of employees. On the same note, question 3 proves that 70 percent of the employees think that *wasta* is the main motivator for promotion. Only 14 percent of the respondents said that promotion is based on individual skills, which is a very low percentage. Respondents answered this question with confidence because the idea of helping relatives or traditional community members is an embedded value in our society.

In conclusion, civil servants do not maintain and update their skills. The problem is not in the individual solely but it extends to the system. In response to number 3 in Table I, around 70 percent of the Lebanese University employees said that promotion is based on *wasta*. This means that the system is demotivating employees to maintain and update their skills as they would not be rewarded accordingly. As to nepotism, civil servants are influenced very much by the Lebanese culture that stresses nepotism, favoritism and traditionalism.

5. Explanations

Many organizational and cultural explanations can be given to the apathy and lack of professionalism among civil servants in Lebanon. Practitioner and scholarly explanations will be given based on interviews done by senior officials in the administration. Scholarly explanations will be referred to as explanations provided by previous scholars in this field.

One explanation to apathy is organizational related to the system of public promotions. There is no system for promotion related to the merit of employees. As such, employees are not motivated to work more in order to get the proper credit as performance and reward are not related. In addition to the problem of low salary that does not motivate employees to work, people who feel under rewarded will, in most cases, attempt to reduce the quality and quantity of their work. Moreover, contractors are not affected by promotions and hence have no motivation or drive to work better as there is no compensation[1].

Explanation of nepotism and low skills can be attributed to the nature of the Lebanese public service. The neglect of the Lebanese government in terms of increasing the budget of many public agencies and the neglect to specify a certain percentage of the budget to be used for workshops, training and buying necessary technical hardware in order to be able to be up to date. This neglect is influencing employees from the top down the hierarchy in a negative way.

Furthermore, the procedure for recruitment is not clear and inconsistent. In most cases, the ministry or office concerned is responsible for the vacant position recruits employees based on their files without consulting with the Human Resources Unit in the first place. The recruitment procedure is subject to many flaws, which promotes nepotism and favoritism (see footnote 1).

The culture prevailing in all public service institutions is that of favoritism and patronage. The public employee is recruited based on political influence, outside the scope of the civil service board, where no competitive exams are carried since the appointment is temporary. This indicates the influence of direct political factors in the recruitment and not competence and professionalism. The fact that the employee is recruited based on favoritism will make him/her act in the same way. Loyalty is to the political party or zaim responsible for the recruitment and not to the administration (Jabbara and Jabbara, 2005).

Another cultural impediment to professionalism is the feeling that favoritism and nepotism in terms of giving extra credits for recruitment of relatives are very normal procedure. We can say that this culture of nepotism is embedded in the public servants mind and this is hindering professionalism by all means.

6. Age and professionalism

The two indicators of professionalism (maintaining skills and lowering nepotism) will be correlated with the age component. Correlation coefficients that meet the criteria for significance and strength are presented in Table II. The table shows that there is an inverse relationship between the age and the recruitment procedures as well as between the age and the attendance of training sessions. Meaning that as age increases, the number of training sessions decrease, and as age increases, employees who think that rules should be bent to allow relative appointment decrease. Furthermore, running an ANOVA test for significance between professionalism and age indicates that there is no significant difference between professionalism and the different age levels as the significance level was greater than 0.05. As such, we can safely conclude that the hypothesis that as age increases, professionalism increases also does not hold. It seems that the level of professionalism is independent of age. So, recruiting younger employees will not improve professionalism.

7. Education and professionalism

The hypothesis that the higher the educational level, the higher the level of professionalism among the civil servants was sustained. The ANOVA test proved that there was a significant relationship between the educational level and the level of professionalism as the significance value was lower than 0.05. There was a strong correlation between the number of training sessions and the education of the employee ($\chi^2:0.01$), the predisposition to read

Preference of:	Age	Education
Pearson correlation		
<i>Maintaining skills</i>		
Administrative training	–	–
Computer workshops	0.04	–
Innovation	–	0.02
<i>Nepotism</i>		
Recruitment procedures	0.02	0.01
Work in a public institution vs private	–	–
Promotion	–	–

Table II.
Age and education vs
professionalism

about latest innovations at work (χ^2 : 0.02) as well as between the favoritism in the recruitment procedures and the educational level (χ^2 : 0.01), as shown in Table II. The hypothesis between professionalism and education was maintained, as there was a significant relationship between the two indicators. This proves that the Lebanese bureaucracy should recruit more educated employees in order to increase the level of professionalism on the job. Moreover, educated employees tend to have a high tendency to maintain their skills, attend frequent training sessions and have a relatively professional view of the recruitment procedure. Therefore, education plays a key role in increasing professionalism in the bureaucracy.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

A first conclusion to be drawn is that professionalism in the Lebanese public service is not high. Professionalism is central to the development and performance of employees and should be strengthened.

A second conclusion is that recruiting educated employees based on their competency levels may alleviate the behavioral problem and may lead to improved professionalism.

It is true that the woes of the administration lie in the confessional political system of the country; however, concentrating on contextual and behavioral variables that can be controlled could alleviate the problem. Recommendations can be divided into four main areas.

Wages and salaries

Wages and salary levels should be increased to the point of providing an adequate standard of living as well as to recruit competent employees for the job. Once adequate salaries have been achieved, adding incentives such as promotions and merit increases to differentiate lazy from working employees and should be related to the performance of employees through an administrative evaluation system.

Recruitment

Bureaucratic recruitment should stress quality. Recruiting people with high growth needs is an important factor for good performance. In any way, recruitment should be done through tests. The tests should be under the umbrella of the office with inspection from the civil service board in terms of applying standards. Therefore, the Human Resources Unit should be the link between the faculties and branches from one side and the civil service board from the other side.

Job assignments

Some civil servants are willing to take responsibility, some are creative and some scored high on creative decision making. Hence, it was shown that such individuals are high on performance and professionalism. So, such individuals should be placed according to their level of competence. It is important to associate the needs of the employee with job assignments. For instance, employees willing to take responsibility should be given tasks and job assignments to match their level of aspirations in order to keep them satisfied with their jobs. Moreover, employees should be allowed to use their skills more at work. All efforts should be made to place employees in the geographical area of their preference. The burdens of commuting with the absence of an efficient public transportation system cause stress and anxiety. Therefore, staffing decentralized units with individuals from the region in which they are located would reduce productivity.

Maximizing the use of productive individuals

A productive employee is an updated employee. That's why training sessions are very important elements in updating skills. Civil servants acknowledge the positive impact of training sessions on their work; however, a large percent of them did not attend training

sessions during the year 2015. Increasing the training sessions and making them a requirement would allow employees to get a grip on new skills and help in work. Workshops on management skills should be done to managers in addition to employees. It is important that managers of the various units understand the importance of creative decisions making and flexibility over work procedures and optimize the flow of work. Controls can be by drafting semi-annual reports to the higher administration on the work accomplished during a certain period. This would be linked to promotions or appraisals of competent managers. On another note, creating an appraisal system of employees based on the quantity of work done and linking the merit increase to the appraisal system is a must to make employees work. Moreover, limiting the number of overtime hours that employees are allowed to make and compensating by increasing the merit increase would help in this regard.

Note

1. Interview with the Director of Human Resources at the Lebanese University on November 30, 2016.

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