

CLIENT SATISFACTION FROM THE SERVICES OF ARCHITECTS ON BUILDING PROJECTS

ALUKO OLUSOLA RAPHAEL and OMONIYI SUNDAY SAMUEL

Dept of Design and Architecture, College of Engineering and Environmental Studies, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ibojun Campus, Ogun State, Nigeria

The concept of satisfaction in the building industry is important, as the industry's future depends on clients' satisfaction with their investments. The purpose of this study is to assess the satisfaction levels towards architects who, as the originator of building design, has a lot of responsibility in managing the project to a successful completion. Data are obtained through qualitative and quantitative surveys of a target population of clients and project managers from the clients' representatives. The variables are ranked with a mean score for both importance and satisfaction feedback regarding architect services. Results indicate higher scores for importance variables. However, many important variables were ranked lower on the satisfaction scale than they were on the importance scale. This research is an ongoing study as part of the authors' doctoral work. The final outcome is expected to improve the understating of client needs and satisfaction in Nigerian building industry.

Keywords: Professional Service, Performance criteria, Building industry, Nigeria.

1 INTRODUCTION

The level of project performance in the construction industry depends on the quality of the managerial, financial, technical, and organizational performance of different stakeholders. As construction becomes more complex, a more pragmatic approach is necessary to deal with issues of initiating, planning, designing, approving, financing implementing, and completing a project. An efficient construction is a prerequisite to effective national development, since civil and industrial engineering works are usually a major contributor to Gross Fixed Capital Formation, Gross Domestic Product and National Employment (Oyewobi et al. 2010).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The professional service of architects is the design arm of the building industry. It is a knowledge-intensive industry, operating by providing design related technical services. The decisions made during the design process exert significant impact on the success or failure of a construction project (Chien-Hui et al. 2009). Building projects involve architectural and engineering designs with distinct stages in the design process. These begin with outline of schematic designs, and progress through detailed designs and component specifications. Design is a multilevel and hierarchical activity, while quality in design is a key component in determining competitiveness.

Client satisfaction enables service providers in the industry to differentiate themselves from their competitors and therefore create sustainable advantage (Yasamis et al. 2002). Client satisfaction is viewed as a predictor for loyalty and purchase intentions. It is the key to securing customer loyalty and generating superior economic returns. Customer satisfaction leads to a stronger relationship and a deep sense of collaboration. In construction, the completed facility refers to the physical product achieved at the end of the work. Maloney (2002) says that quality in construction includes mixture of product and service quality dimensions. The satisfaction of the customer with the constructed facility, the contracting facility, and the constructing services define project-level quality in construction (Karna 2009).

Customer satisfaction in construction can then be determined by the extent to which a physical facility (product) and a construction process (service) meet and/or exceed the expectations of the customer. Therefore the importance of understanding, evaluating, defining, and managing expectations of the customers' requirements becomes crucial.

2.1 Client Needs and Satisfaction

Needs refer to an identifiable state of deprivation of or desire for some basic satisfaction, which the procurement of a building project and/or service can fulfill, assuming client ability and willingness to buy or commission the procurement process (Nkado et al. 2001). Nkado defines satisfaction as the client's feelings of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product's (building or service) performance (or outcome) in relation to his or her expectations.

The measurement of project success is often indicated by the satisfaction of the clients, i.e., it is essential to fulfill their needs. According to Mbachu (2003), latent needs are the real needs in the mind of the client that are consciously or unconsciously concealed. Stated needs are the client's perceived solution for realizing the real latent needs. The satisfaction is a measure to which the needs, requirements and expectation of the clients for service are met. Continuous investment in the construction sector by the client depends upon having his satisfaction met (Nzekwe-Excel et al. 2008). Satisfaction represents the bottom line of successful project implementation, and performance improvement is essential for the survival of service providers in the industry (Cheng et al. 2004). According to Nkado et al. (2001), fulfillment of these needs leads to satisfaction if the stated needs can address the concealed needs sufficiently.

From the literature and the study of Cheng et al. (2006), the main criteria for measuring client satisfaction are identified. These are divided into categories of service delivery, people (consultants' personnel), communication, and client perceptions. These are further subdivided into performance attributes or criteria. Performance criteria are defined as those used to measure the overall performance of architects' services based on the views of clients.

3 METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out using a questionnaire survey administered by a random sampling of a target population of the client organizations (both public and private) and clients' representatives. The questionnaire consisted of four main categories of client background information, service delivery, people (personnel of the architects), and

communication. A five-point Likert scale was adopted, having 1 as the least and 5 as the most important and/or highest satisfaction level.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are three different types of respondents that participated in the study, namely client representatives, client organizations (public) and client organizations (private). A significant proportion, up to 75.9%, were client organizations from the private sector, while only 13.8% were from public sector. The distribution of the respondents across the sectors is represented in the tables below.

4.1 Levels of Importance and Satisfaction for Architects' Services

In Table 1 below, the study presents the importance and satisfaction variables of professional architects' services as rated by the respondents. The variables are grouped under three headings: quality of service and advice, people, and communication. The variables are ranked with a mean score for both importance and satisfaction feedback regarding architects' services. A cursory glance on the items indicates higher scores for importance variables. On a second note, many important variables were ranked lower on the satisfaction scale than they were on the importance scale. For instance, "problem solving" skills, which the respondents considered as most important (with 4.48), is ranked fifth (with 3.75) on satisfaction level.

The same applied to "technical accuracy", "meeting your expectations", "innovation in methods and approach" and "speeds of response". These are ranked second to fifth, with respective scores of 4.42, 4.36, 4.15 and 4.12 on an importance basis, but with lower satisfaction score. "Regular dialogue on the progress of the project", "accessibility of people" and "how good the consultants are at listening" were the first, second and fourth-ranked satisfaction variables, with respective scores of 3.83, 3.82 and 3.77. "Quality of corporate entertainment" and "quality of corporate literature" were the least-satisfaction variables with 3.19 and 3.39 scores respectively.

Table 1. Ranking of level of importance and satisfaction on the services of professional architects in building project.

	Level of Importance			Level of Satisfaction		
	Std. Dev.	Mean	Rank	Std. Dev.	Mean	Rank
Quality of Service and Advice						
How it compares with other consultants you use	0.675	3.93	12	0.722	3.50	17
Understanding your business	0.940	4.04	8	0.924	3.63	12
Problem solving	0.653	4.48	1	0.794	3.75	5
Speeds of response	0.711	4.12	5	0.963	3.67	10
Technical accuracy	0.758	4.42	2	0.690	3.71	6
Innovation in methods and approach	0.864	4.15	4	0.875	3.63	12
Meeting your expectations	0.638	4.36	3	0.830	3.58	15
Delivery value for money	0.759	4.08	7	0.926	3.70	7

People (of Consultants)

Quality of people	0.637	3.62	19	0.654	3.42	20
Providing right level of staffing	0.717	3.92	13	0.717	3.42	20
Level of commitment of team/central management	0.816	4.12	5	0.600	3.78	3
Working with your staff another consultants	0.572	3.92	13	0.647	3.63	12
Friendliness of people	0.898	3.38	20	0.730	3.52	16
Accessibility of people	0.784	4.00	10	0.853	3.82	2

Communication

Quality and timing of consultant report	0.518	4.04	8	0.728	3.43	18
Regular dialogue on progress of the project	0.456	3.85	16	0.834	3.83	1
Regular dialogue to establish dynamics of your business	0.844	3.75	17	0.788	3.43	18
How good are the consultant at listening	0.816	4.00	10	0.813	3.77	4
Informing you on commercial issues which may affect your business	0.751	3.89	15	0.974	3.70	7
Value of regular mailings advising you of our latest news	1.062	3.64	18	1.020	3.70	7
Quality of corporate entertainment	0.932	2.54	23	0.814	3.19	23
Quality of corporate literature	0.844	3.25	21	0.722	3.39	22
Quality of corporate websites	1.056	3.18	22	0.832	3.65	11

4.2 Comparison Analysis of Components of Importance and Satisfaction

The overall comparison analysis of importance and satisfaction variables is given in Table 3. The “overall service and advice” variable ranked as the most important as well as the most rewarding variable to the respondents, although the variable scored 4.24 on the importance scale and 3.61 on the satisfaction scale, meaning a 0.62 gap. Meanwhile, “People” and “Communication” scored 3.88 and 3.54 based on (expectation) importance, and 3.54 and 3.56 based on (perception) satisfaction. These differences also resulted in a 0.34 gap in “People” and only a 0.02 gap in “Communication”. The overall level of importance and satisfaction scores (reported in the last row) are 3.85 and 3.53 respectively, with only a 0.32 difference. A variance test may not necessarily indicate these figures as having a statistically-significant difference.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

A spearman correlation test was conducted to identify if a relationship exists between the respondents’ expectations and perceptions regarding professional architects’ services in a building project. The shaded diagonal reports correlation coefficients between the importance-factor variable and corresponding satisfaction-factor variable.

The reported coefficient, $r = 0.576$, for “People” implies a positive and moderately strong relationship between respondents’ expectations and perceptions within this variable. On the other hand, the 0.812 coefficient reported for “Communication” implies a positive and very strong correlation between expectation and perception of the respondents. While no relationship exists in expectation and perception for “Service and Advice” (because, $p > 0.05$), in general the overall correlation coefficient, $r = 0.767$, indicates a positive and strong relationship between respondents’ expectations and perceptions for professional architects’ services in building projects.

Table 2. Comparison analysis of components of importance and satisfaction.

	Level of Importance			Level of Satisfaction		
	Std. Dev.	Mean	Rank	Std. Dev.	Mean	Rank
Service and Advice	0.484	4.24	1	0.648	3.61	1
People	0.463	3.88	2	0.570	3.54	3
Communication	0.532	3.54	3	0.617	3.56	2
Overall	0.462	3.85		0.618	3.53	

Table 3. Correlation analysis between level of expectation and perception on the services of professional architects in building project.

LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE	LEVEL OF SATISFACTION			
	Service and Advice	People	Communication	Overall
Service and Advice	0.417	0.576**	0.605**	0.507
People	0.372	0.576***	0.557**	0.544**
Communication	0.549**	0.641***	0.812***	0.679***
Overall	0.670**	0.718***	0.819***	0.767***

Note: ** (***) correlation is significant at the 5% (1%) level, respectively.

5 CONCLUSION

The results revealed that “problem solving” skills, which the respondents considered as most important (with 4.48), ranked fifth (with 3.75) on satisfaction level, followed by “technical accuracy”, “meeting your expectations”, “innovation in methods and approach” and “speeds of response”. These were ranked second to fifth on an importance basis but with a lower satisfaction score. “Regular dialogue on progress of the project”, “accessibility of people” and “how good are the consultant at listening” ranked first, second and third in terms of satisfaction variables, with respective scores of 3.83, 3.82 and 3.77. “Quality of corporate entertainment” and “quality of corporate literature” are the lowest of the satisfaction variables, with 3.19 and 3.39 scores.

This research is an ongoing study as part of the authors’ doctoral work. The final outcome is expected to improve the understating of client needs and satisfaction in Nigerian building industry.

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