



Review article

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Intra-professional relationship, unionism, commitment and membership behaviour in professional associations: the stand of health records professionals in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background/Objectives: Membership behaviour and commitment to professional associations and trade unions is a function of a number of factors, which could make or mar the quality of intra-professional relationship, viability of trade unionism and cohesion of professional associations. In the light of this, this review sought to discuss the relationship between intra-professional relationship, unionism, commitment and membership behaviour in professional associations with health records and information management in focus. **Methods/Design:** The study provides an insight into the concepts of intra-professional relationship, unionism, professional commitment and membership behaviours through a review of related literature and sharing of observations and opinions based on personal experiences as leaders in professional association; Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria (AHRIMP/N) and trade unionism; Senior Staff Association of Universities, Teaching Hospitals, Research Institutes and Associated Institutions (SSAUTHRIAI) in the Nigerian health care industry. Literature search was done using Google Scholar. **Result:** The review shows that intra-professional relationship could be enhanced if influencing factors such as mutual respect and effective collaboration is promoted. Trade unions' and professional associations' leadership, on the other hand, must provide membership centred leadership to elicit favourable membership behaviour and commitment. **Conclusion:** There is a need for professional associations such as AHRIMP/N, to promote cultures, qualities and ethics that encourage intra-professional collaboration and discourage intra- and inter-professional conflicts. Besides, leadership, both at associations or unions level, must be members-oriented, members-driven and members-centred in order to achieve requisite commitment and positive members' behaviour.

Keywords: Intra-professional relationship; Intra-professional conflict; Intra-professional collaboration; Union commitment; Membership behaviour

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INTRODUCTION

The health industry is a complex and multidisciplinary system comprising multifarious professional groups working together to render qualitative, preventive, rehabilitative, palliative

and curative health care services to patients; conducting effective research to expand frontier of medical knowledge and providing requisite training to healthcare professionals to produce human resources for the health sector among others. Hence, members of each professional

group intra-relate to achieve the mandate spelt out for the group while all professional groups inter-relate to accomplish the overall health objectives. The quality of this relationship will therefore impact negatively or positively on the membership behaviour and commitment. Intra-professional relationships occur between members of same profession¹. This relationship could be healthy or unhealthy; it is healthy when the relationship is cordial and unhealthy if it is hostile.

Unionism can be viewed as the act of defending the rights, promoting the interests and advancing the cause of workers in line with their condition of services, terms of employment, public service rules and the law of the land. Unions are known to be the employees' organizations which are formed with the expectation of resolving job related matters and increasing the benefits of employees². The acceptance or resistance to the unions by the Management of any institution will determine whether the industrial climate is harmonious or not³. Overall, participation of employees in union activities can be said to have an effect on employees' outcomes, an organization is seeking for; likewise, the effectiveness of unions is a function of the favourable membership behaviour and commitment to the union.

However, in Nigeria, as important as cordial intra-professional relationship and effective unionism are as veritable tools for actualizing the rights, protecting the interests and advancing the cause of the employees in organizations in particular and realizing the organizations' goals in general; personal experience over the years has shown that membership behaviour and commitment toward associations and unions vary from one organization to the others, depending on a number of factors to be seen later. Hence, this work is aimed at examining these factors with a view to providing proper insight into the concepts of intra-professional relationship, unionism, commitment and membership behaviour as it affects healthcare professional associations in general and Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria, in particular.

METHODS

This study provides an insight into the concepts of intra-professional relationship, unionism, professional commitment and membership behaviours through a review of related literature and sharing of observations and opinions based on personal experiences as leaders in professional association (i.e. Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria - AHRIMPN) and trade unionism (i.e. Senior Staff Association of Universities, Teaching Hospitals, Research Institutes and Associated Institutions - SSAUTHRIAI) in the Nigerian health care industry. Literature search was done using Google Scholar.

RESULTS

Understanding professional associations, trade unions, commitment and membership behaviour

Sherif & Sherif CW assert that the presence of organized groups is a consequence of interacting individuals, who possess a set of values or norms of their own, regulating their behaviour, at least in matters of consequence to the group⁴. In the case of white-collar workers like healthcare professional groups in public sector such as the Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria (AHRIMPN), group organizations often take the form of either professional associations or unions, both of them representing the special interests and objectives of this class of employees.

Unionization and professionalization are two processes by which members of an occupation seek to achieve collective upward mobility⁵. Van Maanen & Barley described associations as "a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from the work and who share with one another, a set of values, norms and perspectives"⁶. Professional associations ascribe to a culture of consensual collective efforts to preserve a profession's unified front. As Galaskiewicz notes, "one of the latent functions of professional associations is to put people together in

committees, panels, task forces, and study groups, who might not otherwise be attracted to one another based on their background characteristics alone”⁷. A consequence of such interactions is the establishment of a unified culture for the profession, the institutionalization of professional codes of conduct, establishment of educational and performance standards, and the diffusion and incorporation of change and innovation within the profession.

The presence of union groups, on the other hand, is often treated as the result of conflict of interests between Management and workers. Galaskiewicz explains that, particularly in times of uncertainty, “professionals will seek out those with whom they can communicate easily, even if this means that they systematically segregate themselves from a subset of other actors in the group”⁷. White-collar labour unions such as public health sector unions in Nigeria sprang up as a reaction to a search for occupational justice and improvement of working conditions among the rank-and-file of a profession. They differentiated themselves from the Management even within the same occupation and they also make demands against the status quo of the authorities.

Union commitment is defined as “a relative strength of members’ identification with and involvement in a union”⁸. The level of union commitment of employees has been found to affect most employees’ work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, and performance⁹. Employees attached to unions tend to be committed to both union and organizations, which is termed as dual commitment to various degrees¹⁰. However, employees may be highly committed to their union than organization in some context which is termed as unilateral commitment¹¹.

Membership behaviour can be described as the attitudes, dispositions and reactions of members of professional associations and unions to the policies, plans, programmes, events and activities of the associations. This could take negative forms such as discontentment, conflict,

resentment, protest, distrust, factions and so on. Conversely, it could also lead to positive behaviour like cooperation, collaboration, loyalty, solidarity, esprit de corps, commitment, and so on. Hence, commitment is a subset of membership behaviour.

Concept of intra-professional relationship

The concept of relationship is broad and varied. This is important to state upfront as each discipline interprets and understands relationships in its own way and will view relationship through its own theoretical perspective¹². All relationships have underlying motive, intention, and purpose and can be seen in the patterns they produce¹³. Relationships have been defined as the way two or more people are interconnected and the impact one has on the other¹²⁻¹⁴. Intra-professional relationships occur between members of the same profession¹. Professional membership behaviour could be cordial or hostile depending on a number of factors; thereby, resulting in intra-professional collaboration or conflict.

Intra-professional collaboration is a situation whereby members of same profession cooperate and work together to achieve common goals and promote the larger interests of the profession. This could be enhanced by a number of factors including mutual respect and trust among members, effective communication of issues bothering on the generality of members, joint consultation and collective decision making, enhanced professional cohesion and bonding, motivation of the rank and file of the profession, prompt conflict resolution, among others. Intra-professional conflict, on the other hand, can be described as friction and misunderstanding among members of same profession¹. This is more likely to arise from poor interpersonal relationship, which in turn, is more likely to result in both personal and professional consequences¹. Factors that may contribute to poor intra-professional relationships include busyness, poor or inappropriate communication, or underlying resentment from past unresolved conflict¹.

Therefore, professional groups in health care industry in Nigeria such as Association of Health Records and Information Management Practitioners of Nigeria (AHRIMPN) must strive to achieve intra-professional collaboration and avoid intra-professional conflict by desisting from negative tendencies. Otherwise, it is believed that the actualization of corporate vision of providing effective and functional health records and information management services to support quality patients' care, research studies, health care auditing, accreditation of health care facilities, training of health care manpower among other health care objectives, will be impaired.

DISCUSSION

Determinants of commitment and membership behaviour in professional associations and trade unions through the eyes of AHRIMPN

The following factors, among others, influence membership behaviour and commitment in trade unionism and professional associations:

i. **Compliance with professional associations' and unions' constitutions:**

The constitutions of associations and trade unions serve as their grand norms. Hence, adherence to the dictates and provisions of the constitutions by the leadership in the day-to-day administration of the associations encourages favourable membership behaviour and commitment. Whereas, flagrant violation of the constitutions breeds membership discontentment and it engenders distrust. Therefore, both leaders and members must ensure strict compliance to the rules and regulations of the associations and unions in every decision making process. This is especially regarding financial allocation and utilization among others, to guarantee harmony and build confidence. Until 2018 during the Jigawa AGM/National Conference, there had not been Congress-deliberated and adopted constitution for the association. This left all the organs of the association with self-suited rules.

ii. **Sense of responsibility:** Another critical determinant of membership commitment and behaviour is the sense of responsibility on the part of the leaders. When employees perceive that unions are providing more support than the organization for resolving their problems, they are more attached to the union, thus, increasing their commitment and loyalty to the union¹⁵. Besides, if the rights of members are protected, their interests defended and their causes advanced; members will be more committed and positively disposed to the unions and associations. On the contrary, if leaders abdicate their responsibilities and do not attend to the demands and yearnings of members, there tends to be crisis. Members' interest is of paramount importance to leaders of AHRIMPN right from the old days. However, members' commitment especially, in terms of financial obligations has not been encouraging in any way. As of today, only a few federal tertiary institutions pay to the National body directly from the source. That is the much recorded achievement in this regard.

iii. **Responsive leadership:** It has been established that members' perception of their union leaders' responsiveness significantly moderates the relationship between the degree to which those members perceive their union to be effective and the extent of their commitment^{11,16}. Responsive leaders place members outcomes and their development ahead of their own; responsive leadership has been found to be effective in engendering commitment because of its empowering effect on workers¹⁷. In contrast, unresponsive leadership entails blindly following the policies and procedures set out by the union hierarchy at a higher level, leaving no room for creativity or innovative problem solving at the workplace level. Thereby, precipitating negative membership behaviour such as lack of solidarity¹⁸. Although there have

been leadership challenges so much that activities of the association was grounded for more than three years in a recent past, leadership efforts have always been members-centred.

- iv. **Participation:** The degree of membership participation in the activities of professional associations and trade unions is also a key influence of membership behaviour and commitment. Members identify salient goals through involvement in and understanding of union decision making; the more members are involved in needs assessment, agenda setting, policy formulation and programme implementation; the more positively inclined they are. Therefore, democratic leadership promotes commitment and favourable membership behaviour while autocratic leadership breeds resistance and dissatisfaction. This is one area that AHRIMPN members have done the profession an unprecedented honour. Members as well as professional leaders and elders always rally round when issues of urgent importance arise.
- v. **Transparency:** Transparent leadership requires processes that are visible to others and outcomes that are applied consistently, important features of the “organizing” model¹⁹. Transparent processes are often formalized in order to ensure consistent and clear decision making. Transparent leadership that is accountable is also essential to maintaining solidarity and active participation in the organization, and to make new practices persist²⁰. The more transparent the union activities are executed, the more committed the members. On the other hand, if the union activities are shrouded in secrecy; there will be opaqueness, and members will not be able to follow through the policies and programme of the union and association, thereby, causing suspicion, poor perception and distrust.
- vi. **Innovation:** This is particularly important to union members’ commitment because

worksite-level problems are idiosyncratic and require novel responses¹⁸. It follows, then, that innovation is crucial to membership commitment as members tend to embrace novel ideas that impact positively on their well-being and performance. Innovative leadership encourages discretionary effort by encouraging new ideas and informal interactions rather than reliance on formal authority²¹. In contrast, lack of innovation on the part of the leadership causes stagnation. Successive AHRIMPN leaders at different seasons, under different nomenclatures and regimes, have worked to enrich the lots of their members with new innovations.

- vii. **Communication:** Effective communication is central to every organization activity and administration, if an organization must achieve its goals and objectives. Similarly, to realize strong commitment and desirable behaviour from membership of professional bodies and unions; the policies, plans and programme of the associations must be promptly disseminated to their members. The various channels of communication such as print, electronic and social media can be engaged for timely information dissemination. Summarily, poor communication is a disincentive to membership commitment while effective communication is a facilitator of enduring commitment. The leaders as well as members of AHRIMPN have made use of memos, print media and physical gatherings for communication of important messages. Nowadays, social media offer a platform for more effective communication and AHRIMPN has deployed and still embracing media such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram for communication.
- viii. **Accountability:** This is also critical to the commitment of membership for the efficient and effective administration and management of professional associations

and trade unions. Accountability is the hallmark of good leadership. Hence, leaders must ensure that the resources of associations be it material, financial or human are judiciously deployed and accounted for. To this end, the leadership as a matter of responsibility, should maintain an up-to-date record of financial transactions and provide a comprehensive, verifiable and up-to-date account of income and expenditure in line with the constitution of the union and association. Accountability promotes trust, unity and cooperation among membership while lack of accountability causes distrust and protest.

- ix. **Conflict resolution:** Crisis is inevitable in every association and union. However, the ability to promptly resolve any conflict among members of the association before it degenerates into irreconcilable crisis is a key factor in the stability, progress and unity of the association, which in turn guarantees membership commitment. Hence, a functional conflict resolution mechanism devoid of bias and compromise must be put in place by the association, and aggrieved members must be given fair hearing; and justice must be served in every case brought up for adjudication. Prompt resolution of grievances and complaints restores members' confidence and fosters peace while unresolved conflicts foster animosity and resentment. Elders in the profession are the backbones of AHRIMP. Their resolve to remobilize members under a new name and ensured a working merger of the major and other groups to forestall disjointed operations and disharmony is a strong marker of hope for the profession in Nigeria.

Study limitations

There was limited availability of literature and some times, obsolete literature in the subject area.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the foregoing influencing factors, if any professional association or trade union is to achieve its obligations and mandates, all determining factors must be accorded priority and treated expeditiously so as to engender favourable membership behaviour and achieve professional stability, cohesion and solidarity. This is obviously, one major antidote to guarantee intra-professional collaboration, avoid intra-professional conflict and actualize optimal commitment from membership toward the realization of common goals of AHRIMP and similar healthcare professional associations. There is a need for professional associations such as AHRIMP, to promote cultures, qualities and ethics that encourage intra-professional collaboration and discourage intra- and inter-professional conflicts. Besides, leadership, both at associations or unions level, must be members-oriented, members-driven and members-centred in order to achieve requisite commitment and positive members' behaviour.

Recommendations

AHRIMP leaders and members are implored to uphold professional ethics and abide by the constitutions of AHRIMP.

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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