

**OFFICE PRACTICE AND OFFICIAL  
COMMUNICATION FOR COURT  
EMPLOYEES**

**BEING A PAPER DELIVERED IN A  
WORKSHOP AT THE  
NATIONAL JUDICIAL INSTITUTE, ABUJA.**

**DELIVERED BY**

**MADUGU, MOHAMMED ALHAJI(ESQ) LLM(IFE), B.L.  
DIRECTOR PERSONNEL & ADMINISTRATION,  
HIGH COURT OF FEDERAL CAPITAL TERRITORY,  
ABUJA.**

**MONDAY, 23<sup>RD</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2019**

# **OFFICE PRACTICE AND OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION FOR COURT EMPLOYEES.**

## **Protocol**

Firstly, I would like to appreciate the Administrator of the National Judicial Institute, Hon. Justice Rosaline Irorefe Bozimo, OFR, for giving me the opportunity to present this paper and as well discuss with you all.

## **Introduction.**

Court employees are said to be the face of the Court, reason being that they are the first point of contact with persons seeking the services of the Court. They are involved in the day to day activities of the Court; the importance of the duties of Court employees can never be overemphasized. In this light, it is absolutely necessary that we get acquainted with the standardize office practice and official communication skills to assist us in discharging our duties optimally in line with world best practices.

The Court apart from its adjudication duty also performs administrative services. It is a place where records of various activities are kept. According to Denyer, Office is a place where clerical operations are carried on. It is not a mere place but a place with various activities.

In the words of Mills and Standingford, 'the purpose of office has been defined as the providing of service of communication and record. The office collects information about the various activities of the organization from both internal and external sources, the structure of relationships and responsibilities, authorities and duties by means of which work to be done by the personnel and means to do it are brought together and coordinated.'

In the course of this training we shall discuss the basic concept of office practice and official communication vis-à-vis the role of Court employees towards improving the quality of judicial services in Nigeria.

## **Definition of Concepts.**

Before we proceed, it is imperative to understand the meanings of certain concepts in order to have a detailed understanding of this presentation.

### **i. Courts**

A Court may be defined as an organized body with defined powers meeting at certain time and places for the hearing and decision of causes and other matters brought before it. Aided in this its proper business by its proper officers i.e. Lawyers, Clerks, Bailiffs, Registrars, Legal Assistants, Secretaries and law enforcement officers who execute the Court's command and secure due order in its proceedings.

### **ii. Court Employees**

Court employees are persons employed in the service of the judiciary to assist in the smooth running of the day to day administrative responsibilities of the Court. This includes Registrars, Clerks, Legal Assistants, Bailiffs and Secretaries amongst others.

### **iii. Judicial / Court Services**

Judicial services are services rendered by the judiciary to litigants and other Court users. It is necessary to know that the function of the Court is not limited to adjudication over cases alone, other services rendered by the Court includes Procurement of letters of administration, lodgment of wills, Records keeping of cases files, service of Court processes, issuance of affidavits, Enforcement of Court pronouncements, conciliation, Mediation Arbitration etc.

#### **iv. Office Practice & Communication**

Office practice and communication involves the frequent practice and procedure, rules and regulations, conducts expected of Court employees in the discharge of their judicial services.

Office Practice refers to the day-to-day clerical and administrative activities performed by office employees to support work-related functions and organizational decision makers. These activities range from managing, organizing and storing files and electronic documents to responding to phone and email requests and typing documents.

Communication is process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, verbal or behavior and practice is the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it; the word practice is synonymous with application, exercise, use, operation, implementation, execution and action.

Having explained briefly the judicial system / court system, communication and practice; I am sure no one is in doubt about the fact that office practice and official communication of Court employee is vital in the dispensation of justice anywhere in the world.

According to Radmila Dici (Judge of the Supreme Court of Cassation of the Republic of Serbia) the goal of the Communication strategies is to strengthen the trust and the respect of the public in the judiciary and strengthen the authority of the Judiciary.

The mission of Court employees is to convey the messages of the Court and show citizens that the judiciary, as the third branch of government, plays an extremely important role in their everyday lives.

In the democratic society citizens have the right to be informed about work

of the Courts. Through good communication; courts can have educative role and also, by proper and timely communication with media; act on prevention of human rights violations, that are often seen in sensational reporting in media.

While it is necessary to develop openness towards media, it should be always born in mind that the duty of judicial branch is to protect right of privacy, presumption of innocence, right to fair trial, right of victims. It is therefore necessary to develop balance between legitimate right of public to be informed and to be critical on the work of the Courts, and rights of all those involved in judicial proceedings.

It is not always easy task and Courts very often keep an old traditional attitude – it is safe to be quiet. In today's societies, with the great expansion of social media and need for sensational information, communication becomes even more challenging.

However, Courts need media, and therefore, they need to develop strategies and certain procedures in communication with media. Good strategy should cover everyday informative communication as well as communication provoked by some crisis.

Though, Judges are not allowed to grant press interview or communicate with the public about issues pending in Court; I am strongly of the view that there is need for the Courts to have a spokes person that will educate the public about issues pertaining to Court to avoid misconception. The case of Federal Republic of Nigeria Versus John Yusuf in case No. FCT/HC/CR/64/2012 decided by A. M. Talba J. (now A. M. Talba J.C.A) of the Police Pension Scam is still fresh in our memories; while the pressmen who were not even present during the proceedings were busy reporting what did not transpired in Court, there is nobody that can officially educate the public. This, I believe needs serious consideration.

I agree entirely with Radmila Dici that if Courts employees do not actively participate in communicating their own story about what they do and how they do it, they risk that the message public is receiving may not be true, positive, or affirmative and very often it will violate the basic human rights.

Court employees should be constant relevant source of information, or they will have to deal with half information, arbitrary interpretation of the different authors and media scandals.

Public opinion of Courts is of great importance since the more the public knows about Courts, the more judiciary will gain higher trust and confidence. Transparency breeds respect while secrecy triggers mistrust. Greater public understanding means public is more likely to adhere to Court rulings. Courts need to adapt to the stronger influences of the media revolution and a new communication practice.

What core message should be conveyed? Courts are fair, impartial, and independent, Courts exist to protect citizens and their rights, Courts are transparent and accessible.

## **Etiquettes expected of Court employees in the discharge of their duties.**

Etiquette refers to behaviours and conducts expected of judicial employees while rendering judicial services and even at all times to ensure transparency and boost public confidence in the judicial system.

Some of the expected etiquettes are as follows;

### **1. Courtesy**

Court employees must be polite to Court users at all times; they are also expected to be courteous in discharging their official duties. Words such as “please, Thank you, you are welcome are the phrases which should be used often when dealing with Court users.

## **2. Professionalism**

Court employees are expected to be professional while dealing with Court users i.e. exhibiting the highest level of knowledge and expertise.

## **3. Punctuality**

Court employees must be in the office from the hours of 8.00 am to 4.00 p.m. or beyond on every working day. Punctuality does not only enclose the time of your arrival to the office, but it also includes your availability to respond and attend to your duties timeously.

## **4. Diligence**

Court employees must be diligent in the discharge of their duties; this involves immediately attending to any work given to him/her. Not prolonging work that can be done on the spot or within few minutes.

## **5. Confidentiality**

Court employees are not expected to disclose certain official information that is considered to be confidential/secret to unauthorized persons. They are bound to abide to the oath of secrecy sworn to by them.

## **6. Impartiality**

Court employees are expected to attend to and treat every person equally irrespective of their race, gender and ethnic group.

## **7. Appropriate Dressing**

Court employees are expected to dress appropriately at all times. Your dressing should be in conformity with the predefined dress code of your workplace. You are the ambassador of the Courts so your attire should not convey undesirable notions about your office.

Please keep in mind that office etiquette is the part and parcel of your work environment. If you neglect it, you could harm your career and the image of the Court. When you follow it, you will not leave any stone unturned towards your progress and that of the Court.

## **Conclusion**

Court employees are the first point of contact of the Court, for instance people seeking information, those who have cases pending before the Courts or before the Dispute Resolution Centre and any person seeking other judicial service from the Court. You may be the primary or even the only person they interact with in their dealings with the Court. You are the face of justice in our Courts. In their eyes, you may control the key to whether or not they feel they have been fairly treated, whether or not they have access to our judicial services.

The attitude exhibited in responding to their questions and enquiries is germane to ensuring that the public's perception of the accessibility of judicial services is positive and not jeopardized.

In many ways you must treat Court users in an impartial and fair manner. You must attend to them in the utmost civilized manner. Do not hesitate to educate them on issues not clear to them. You must be disposed to rendering necessary assistance to Court users.

Furthermore, Court employees are expected to be transparent and accountable in their dealings with the public, this will definitely go a long way in promoting the integrity of the judiciary.

It is the practice of some Court employees to inflate official Court fees as well as collect monies from Court users to perform their expected duties, this is not appropriate as it is inimical to the image of the Court. A good Court employee must not engage in such practices. Note, you are nothing if you are not on the part of truth. The biggest reward is not financial benefits though that can help you acquire the good things of life like shoes, but those shoes, houses, cars etc doesn't feel up your life. It doesn't. Rather living a life of substance can, and

could turn out to be the biggest benefits. Substance through your service, your offering of your whole self. And the baseline for how to live a life of substance, is whatever is the truth for you, what you stand for. Before I go let me leave this with everybody in the room, junior or senior staff members, ***“...your legacy is every life you touched. Your legacy is every life you touched.*** Feel everything you do, every service you render with love because every moment you are building your legacy.”

Think of those you have worked with who have left an indelible mark on the organization and then ask what they did and how they did it. You will soon discover it's not only the senior people in an organization who leave a legacy, but those in Administration, Litigation, Account, on the workshop floor, driving the delivery trucks or the Executive Assistants, among others, who are more often than not the ones who have left the workplace a better place than when they joined. No matter your role, every person has a chance to improve what it is they do and how they do it for the next person.

Thank you all for listening, please do continue in your duties in promoting the integrity of the Courts and the good image of the Nigerian Judiciary.

# Questions & Comments