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Beyond Identity: Strengthening Personnel Vetting for Modern Governance

Identity verification establishes who a person is. Modern personnel vetting must go further by assessing suitability, integrity, competence, affiliations and access risk through consistent, professional governance.

CPT Oyeleke Fola OLUWOLE (U.S. Army Veteran)

Chief Strategist, Foxtrot Shield Limited

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EXECUTIVE ASSESSMENT

Identity verification is foundational, but identity alone does not establish suitability, integrity, professional competence or acceptable access risk. Modern governance requires a layered personnel-vetting system that combines trusted digital identity, standardized verification, structured due diligence and accountable decision-making.

Government is built on trust. Every appointment, every contract, every advisory role, every committee and every individual entrusted with access to public institutions represents an extension of that trust.

Trust in public institutions cannot rely solely on official correspondence, organizational titles, personal introductions or perceived proximity to authority. It must be supported by systems that verify identity, authenticate authority, assess suitability and manage institutional risk through consistent, transparent and professional processes.

As governments become increasingly interconnected, technology-driven and reliant on collaboration with the private sector, academia, development partners, consultants, contractors and technical specialists, the environment in which public institutions operate continues to evolve. This evolution has brought significant opportunities for innovation, efficiency and service delivery. At the same time, it has introduced new governance challenges that require equally modern approaches to personnel security, due diligence and institutional verification.

A broader institutional question

Recent public reporting concerning allegations involving a purported government entity has generated national conversation around questions of identity verification, appointment authentication and institutional oversight. As the matter remains before the courts, it would be inappropriate to comment on the facts of the case or any individual's legal responsibility. Those matters are rightly reserved for the judicial process.

What the public discussion does provide, however, is an opportunity to reflect on broader institutional questions that extend far beyond any single event.

How should governments verify the legitimacy of appointments? How should public institutions authenticate individuals who claim to represent government? How should contractors, consultants, advisers and organizations seeking access to sensitive government functions be assessed? More importantly, what systems should exist to ensure these processes remain consistent, efficient and resilient as government continues to modernize?

These questions are not unique to Nigeria. Every modern government faces the challenge of balancing openness with security, efficiency with accountability and accessibility with institutional integrity. As governance becomes increasingly collaborative, the traditional boundaries between public institutions and external stakeholders continue to expand.

Consequently, personnel vetting has evolved from a purely administrative process into a strategic component of national governance, organizational resilience and public trust.

Vetting as governance and risk management

Personnel vetting should not be viewed exclusively through the lens of national security. It is equally a governance, enterprise risk management and institutional resilience function. Effective vetting supports informed decision-making by providing verified information regarding identity, qualifications, professional history, organizational affiliations, integrity and suitability.

When implemented within a structured framework, it enables appointing authorities, contracting organizations and public institutions to make decisions based upon independently verified facts rather than assumptions or appearances.

Throughout my professional career, I have had the privilege of working in both military and personnel-security environments. One of those roles involved supporting personnel-security processes within the United States Government, where my responsibilities included reviewing completed background investigations and applying established adjudicative standards to determine eligibility for access to classified information and sensitive positions. That experience reinforced a principle that remains relevant regardless of jurisdiction: effective personnel security is fundamentally a process of informed risk management.

Personnel security does not seek to eliminate all risk - an impossible objective. Rather, it seeks to provide decision-makers with reliable, objective and professionally verified information upon which sound judgments regarding trust, access and suitability can be made. Strong personnel-security systems recognize that risk can be identified, evaluated, mitigated, monitored and managed through structured processes supported by clear governance and professional standards.

Identity is the foundation, not the whole structure

Nigeria has already made notable progress in strengthening national identity management through the National Identity Management Commission and the continued expansion of the National Identification Number ecosystem. The enactment of the new NIMC Act further strengthens the legal and institutional foundation for trusted digital identity, interoperability and secure identity verification.

These developments represent important milestones in Nigeria's ongoing digital transformation and provide an opportunity to consider how identity assurance can be integrated into a broader, more comprehensive personnel-vetting framework.

Identity verification, however, is only one component of institutional trust. Knowing who a person is does not, by itself, answer other equally important questions relating to suitability, integrity, professional competence, conflicts of interest, previous employment, organizational affiliations or the level of risk associated with granting access to government resources, facilities, information or decision-making processes. These additional dimensions require structured due diligence supported by consistent standards and professional investigative practices.

A layered personnel-vetting ecosystem

This discussion should not be interpreted as suggesting deficiencies within Nigeria's existing security architecture, nor should it be viewed as advocating for the transfer of statutory responsibilities away from established government institutions. On the contrary, agencies responsible for national security, intelligence, law enforcement and public administration continue to perform essential constitutional and statutory functions that remain indispensable to the protection of the Nigerian state.

The question, therefore, is not whether existing institutions should be replaced. Rather, it is whether Nigeria can continue to strengthen its personnel-vetting ecosystem by adopting a more layered approach that combines trusted digital identity, standardized verification processes, structured due diligence and appropriately regulated professional support services while preserving government authority, oversight and accountability.

Many mature democracies have recognized that personnel vetting is most effective when viewed as an integrated system rather than a single investigative activity. Government retains responsibility for policy, adjudication and final decision-making, while different components of the verification process may involve specialized expertise operating within clearly defined legal and regulatory frameworks. This approach enables government institutions to expand capacity, improve consistency and strengthen resilience without compromising sovereign control or national-security responsibilities.

Stronger vetting strengthens governance.

As Nigeria continues to implement reforms aimed at improving governance, strengthening public institutions, expanding digital public infrastructure and enhancing investor confidence, there is an opportunity to examine how personnel vetting can evolve alongside these broader national priorities. Doing so would not simply strengthen security. It would strengthen governance itself.

Ultimately, resilient institutions are not defined solely by the people who serve within them. They are defined by the quality of the systems that support those people, verify trust, manage risk and preserve institutional integrity over time. Modern governance demands modern systems, and personnel vetting should be recognized as one of the foundational pillars upon which that trust is built.

About this insight: This article provides general personnel-security, risk and governance analysis. It does not comment on any matter before the courts and does not constitute legal advice.