

THE PHENOMENON OF PASSIVITY IN PUBLIC AND BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS

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Purpose: To show the differences between public and business organisations in passive organisational behaviour and to identify the reasons for this behaviour.

Design/methodology/approach: The research was conducted among employees of public and business organisations in various organisational roles. A total of 497 people took part. It was conducted according to a symbolic-interpretative approach, using survey questionnaires containing two open-ended questions. Semantic field analysis was used to structure the content, which allowed the main research categories to be distinguished. The phenomenon of passivity is one of the identified organisational behaviours.

Findings: There is value in identifying differences between public and business organisations in the area of organisational passivity, which justifies the need to look at these organisations differently when making changes to organisational behaviour. The underlying phenomenon of passivity are the different motives of the participants in these organisations. In business organisations, passivity is a manifestation of disagreement with the treatment in question and a lack of acquiescence to the organisational system in place. In public organisations, it is the result of a sense of lack of agency, a subjective approach to the employee and seeing oneself as a helpless and powerless individual. Knowing how to interpret organisational reality and organisational roles makes it possible to influence organisational motives and behaviour more effectively. At the same time, it emphasises the validity of influencing passivity in a different way, which should depend on the type of organisation.

Research limitations/implications: inability to fully objectify the research results obtained.

Practical implications: The results obtained improve the understanding of organisational passivity. Knowledge of the causes of this phenomenon allows us to influence organisational behaviour more effectively by shaping organisational conditions that support activity and offset organisational passivity.

Originality/value: The originality of this article lies in combining the cognitive aspect of the individual with the organisational behaviour undertaken. In the methodological area, the qualitative aspect (open-ended questions) was also combined with the quantitative aspect. The use in the qualitative study of a tool that is typical of a quantitative approach allowed a larger number of statements to be obtained, which far exceeded the possibilities of a study using standard qualitative methods. This, in turn, made it possible to show the relationship between organisational type, organisational role, seniority and cognitive dimension and the phenomenon of organisational inactivity.

Keywords: passivity, organisational behaviour, public organisation, quiet quitting.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Organisational passivity is a specific human attitude that consists of behavioural and cognitive aspects. It is a lack of activity, initiative and will to act, which is linked to a lack of confidence in one's own abilities and the conviction that one has no influence on what happens in the organisation. Passivity is often combined with conservatism, seeing solutions in someone else and not in oneself, fear of risk, in extreme cases also with learned helplessness, i.e. a more or less generalised feeling created by repeated failures or experiences that lower the motivation to act. The phenomenon of organisational inactivity has much in common with 'quite quitting', i.e. the tacit resignation from active participation in organisational life, which is increasingly referred to as a new problem for employers. It is the abandonment of both career ambitions and the avoidance of responsibility and new tasks.

Thus, passivity is unwanted and undesirable, and stands in contrast to the demands placed on organisations by the environment. Modern organisations should be creative, innovative and capable of plasticity (Kozusznik, 2011). The readiness to continuously modify plans and activities and to treat non-standard situations as a challenge seems to be crucial for the survival of an organisation. Passivity is therefore the opposite of proactivity and flexibility, and therefore hinders organisational change. It is therefore crucial to get to know this phenomenon, especially its causes, because in knowing them, we can influence them in a more conscious way.

In the organisation and management literature, passivity has been linked to two issues: leadership style and organisational behaviour. In the first case, the impact of a passive leadership style on employees is examined, the consequences of this style for the organisation are identified, as well as the conditions that initiate this style of leadership.

The second considers the influence of various organisational factors in shaping passive behaviour. These are, for example, the organisational structure, the method of coordination, the organisational space, inconsistency and ambiguity of goals and values.

Previous research has been conducted in a variety of organisations - public and business - but the phenomenon of inactivity has not been analysed from the perspective of organisation type. Thus, the research problem was formulated in the form of a research question: What shapes organisational passivity in public and business organisations?

The purpose of this article is to identify the differences that exist between public and business organisations in terms of passive organisational behaviour and to identify the reasons for this behaviour.

During the analysis, attention was paid to aspects external to the individual, such as the behaviour of superiors and the organisational norms shaped by them, and to the cognitive aspect of the individual related primarily to the way in which organisational reality is interpreted.

2. Systematic literature review

Inactivity can be an occasional or recurrent response conditioned by the situation or a more or less permanent human characteristic. A review of the literature shows that many studies have been conducted to identify the determinants of passivity. We can distinguish between internal and external determinants shaping passivity. Intrinsic certainly includes personal motives and needs, which are specific to the individual and, perhaps because of this, some people will be highly active in areas where others will be passive. According to some, people's needs condition behavioural motives, which are related to attitudes (Obuchowski, 1983). Knowledge of the totality of attitudes towards a certain situation makes it possible to explain why a person in a certain situation behaves in this way and not in that way, and why he justifies his behaviour to himself, that is, he is guided by his motive (Obuchowski, 1983).

Another internal determinant conditioning passivity is the value system, i.e. the system used to describe and evaluate the world, expressing that certain situations, phenomena, actions will be particularly important for the individual, thus directing human choices and activity as a consequence. The value system is linked to the conception of life and one's own role in the world, shaped under the influence of the need for the meaning of life (Obuchowski, 1983). Reacting with passivity can thus become one of the symptoms of existential frustration manifested by the loss of a sense of existential meaning (Poznaniak, 1999).

Another is the lack of skills in formulating a goal and actions to achieve the task. By this I mean inadequately set goals for one's own potential, as well as a lack of skill in formulating appropriate strategies to meet the goals and perseverance in achieving them.

Another factor related to passivity is a lowered sense of self-efficacy, which causes people not to perceive themselves as someone who can cope with difficult situations, as they believe that what they encounter on their life path does not depend on their direct decisions, but on external conditions. According to some researchers, the reassertion of the feeling of not being able to fully influence the surrounding reality can act as a psychological alibi, justifying their lack of involvement and absolving them of responsibility (Ziółkowski, 2015). Reduced self-efficacy is associated with extrinsic controllability, i.e. subordination, inability to make decisions independently. Such a person may become an obedient executor of orders, is submissive to authority and external pressure. Such an individual waits for instructions, guidelines from superiors, is not able to be an active participant in organisational life, and does not have the readiness to become independent and autonomous in action and thought.

According to Albert Bandura, human behaviour also depends on the belief in one's own competence and capabilities, and this means that, in addition to setting a goal, it is important for the individual to have an inner conviction that he or she is effective and able to achieve his or her goals (Bandura, 2001).

Temporal orientation also correlates with passivity, i.e. whether a person is oriented towards the past, present or future in their actions. Future orientation is associated with a willingness to take risks, openness to new experiences, greater self-confidence, and persistence in pursuing goals despite uncertainty and problems. Past orientation, on the other hand, tends to build reactivity, i.e. the setting of short-term goals, risk aversion, indecisiveness and difficulties in continuing to act in problematic situations or after experiencing failure.

In an effort to identify the external determinants of passive organisational behaviour, organisational researchers have turned their attention towards passive leadership, which is characterised by, among other things, avoidance and inaction (Bass, Bass, 2008). The hypothesis has been put forward that, since leaders displaying this leadership style behave passively, perhaps they also influence their subordinates in this way. Various research reports confirm that passive leaders avoid making decisions, abdicate responsibility, delay action and refrain from using the authority associated with their role (Vandenberghe, 2021). They also fail to provide feedback and recognition to subordinates and tend to ignore the needs of subordinates (Hinkin, Schriesheim, 2008) because they do not address work-related issues (Yukl, O'Donnell, Taber, 2009). These leaders do not take sides in disputes and are disorganised in dealing with priorities (Bass, 1998), nor do they provide resources such as information, set challenging goals and provide conditions that support autonomy. Empirically, this type of leadership has been found to be associated with reduced subordinate effort (Bass, Stogdill, 1990), performance (Yammarino, Spangler, Bass, 1993) trust in the leader (Baron, 2013) and job satisfaction and perceived leader effectiveness (Judge, Piccolo, 2004). Passivity among supervisors initiates stress and interpersonal conflict among subordinates, as well as a sense of role ambiguity (Skogstad et al., 2007). The use of this team leadership style may also result in the wasting of employees' relational potential due to the fact that this behaviour does not promote constructive role models. Findings from research indicate that organisations should promote ethical leadership behaviour and thereby reduce passive leadership behaviour, as this can influence the formation of role clarity and norms that initiate specific organisational behaviours (Vullings, 2020). It has been noted that the lack of coordination that occurs in passive leadership promotes the construction of multiple interpretations of organisational events, which shapes the phenomenon of delegitimisation of the organisational system and norms (Russell, Brannan, 2016).

However, it is not clear that a passive leadership style contributes to the initiation and maintenance of passivity among employees. It has been noted that the negative effects of this type of leadership particularly affect those with a collectivist orientation, as revealed by lower organisational commitment (Zheng et al., 2011).

It appears that passivity is initiated to a greater extent by an extroverted leadership style because, referring to the complementarity theory of dominance, it is a behaviour that complements and complements the leader's activity. Extroverted leadership is much less successful when subordinates are active. This type of leadership is not susceptible to this

behaviour of employees, there is no striving for complementarity only competition in such a relationship (Grant, Gino, Hofmann, 2011).

Interesting results were obtained by examining the time orientation of managers and the team. It turns out that passive leaders oriented towards the past are not able to positively influence future-oriented employees. This inconsistency in time orientation between employees and managers can also initiate passive behaviour (Briker, Walter, 2020).

Another determinant shaping passive behaviour in organisations is organisational space. It has been observed that organisational space is not just a passive element of the organisation but an active factor that engages or not the human being in various endeavours (Ropo, Hoykinpuro, 2017). It has been observed that humans perceive and interpret in a certain way the space they inhabit and this triggers a certain personal narrative that translates into action. Thus, it can be said that space can trigger both passivity and organisational activity, and interestingly a change in space can influence not only the type of action taken but also the change in action (Van Marrewijk, Van den Ende, 2018).

An additional element related to passivity is the organisational approach to the information received from its employees about service delivery, organisational deficiencies and opportunities for improvement. Failure by managers to listen to the voice of the employee can lead to a failure to realise the potential inherent in the workforce and induce organisational passivity as a result of organisations failing to meet expectations. An interesting study conducted in outsourcing organisations in Malaysia showed that employee potential is often greater than organisational capacity and the lack of a monitoring system in place to solicit information from the company's employees on service delivery can be judged by HR as strategic passivity which in turn can trigger passive organisational behaviour (Iman, Douglas, Ali, 2015).

Passivity has also been linked to occupational burnout, which is accompanied by a strategy of avoidance and emotional distancing from organisational problems (Voitenko, 2021). It can also be triggered by information confusion, ambiguous situations and lack of clarity in organisational communication (Baron, 2013), and emotions (except sadness and anger) accompanying perceived distributive and procedural injustice (Khan, Quratulain, Crawshaw, 2013).

The above-mentioned studies were carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods in business organisations, public organisations as well as public-private partnerships, but none of them showed that the determinant of passive behaviour may be the type of organisation and the organisational mission adopted as a result, which perhaps shapes a particular way of interpreting reality and organisational role. The research described below shows that perhaps the orientation adopted by the organisation triggers a specific way of thinking about oneself as a member of the organisation and consequently also organisational behaviour.

3. Materials and methods

The phenomenon of organisational passivity is one of a number of research categories identified as part of a larger research project that aimed to explore the ways in which employees of public and business organisations interpret organisational boundaries. An organisational boundary is such a cognitive construct that locates an individual either on the side of striving to maintain the existing, known status quo, or it mobilises the individual to change the known and follow the unknown. The assumption is that, in order to ensure internal comfort, the individual seeks to take, as a rule, actions that are appropriate to the way of thinking and the accompanying emotions, in order to maintain as much coherence as possible between these elements.

During the project, which ran from 2017-2019, a structured interview was used during which two questions were answered. The first concerned what an organisational boundary is for the interviewees, while the second referred to their way of behaving towards perceived boundaries. The research found that the organisational boundary was a category that was given different meanings and the way in which it was interpreted became a valuable source of information about the actions taken in the face of the organisational problems and challenges that organisational participants face every day. The variety of meanings given to this concept has triggered different forms of employee activity. Using the method of content analysis - semantic field analysis - different types of organisational behaviour were distinguished: from change-oriented behaviour (innovative behaviour, communal behaviour, individualistic behaviour, disagreement and rebellion) to behaviour focused on maintaining the *status quo* (concordance, conformism, separation, avoidance and passivity). Categorising the behaviours that occur has made it possible to show the dominant activities in business and public organisations.

A total of 497 employees of business and public organisations participated in the project (Table 1).

Table 1.

Structure of the research sample by organisational role and experience

Distinguishing criterion	Type of organisation	
	Business organisations	Public organisations
Function of respondents		
Operational and executive employee	182	135
Leader	31	-
Manager	52	34
Director	10	21
Owner	32	-

Source: own elaboration.

When selecting respondents, attention was also paid to differentiating them by type of organisation (Table 2).

Table 2.*Structure of the survey sample by organisation*

Type of public organisation	Number of participants
Food safety monitoring body	35
Public school	24
Agricultural Advisory Centre	5
City Hall	11
Municipal Office	23
Employment Office	10
Police	8
Hospital	14
Nursing home	16
Cultural institutions	14
University	15
Budgetary unit (no additional data)	15
Business organisations	
Accounting and financial services	42
Catering and hotel services	46
Transport services	14
Construction and renovation services	16
Production and commercial services	44
Health and beauty services	16
Educational services	18
IT services	28
Office and administrative services	16
Own business	15
Carpentry and joinery services	7
Other (e.g. laundry, florist, post office, energy, employment agency)	14
No data available	31

In the remainder of this article, in order to highlight the phenomenon under investigation, passivity is juxtaposed with activity in order to be able to show the current, dominant phenomena in the different types of organisations.

4. Results

When comparing behaviour in business and public organisations, it can be seen that the differences are mainly in the intensity of the behaviours undertaken - mainly passive and individualistic behaviours. Passive behaviour predominates in public organisations and individualistic behaviour in business organisations. Differences can also be seen in other behaviours, for example, in business organisations there is more dissent and rebellion and innovation and conformity, while in public institutions there is more concordant behaviour based on the conscious acceptance of organisational norms due to the belief that they are necessary and needed in organisational reality (Figure 1).

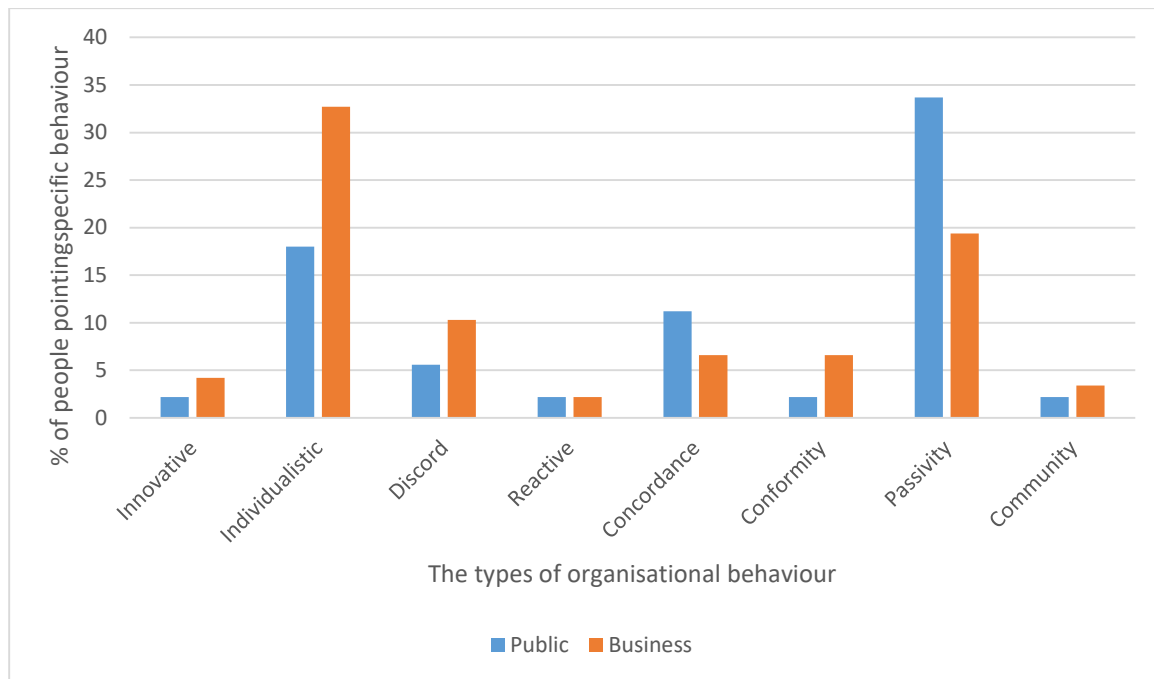


Figure 1. Structure of behaviours in public and business institutions.

Source: own elaboration.

With such a large difference in organisational behaviour, the question was asked about the reasons for the dominant passivity in public organisations. The first factor taken into account was the organisational role adopted. It was assumed that perhaps this type of behaviour tends to occur in executive positions, among those in lower positions in the organisational hierarchy.

The compilation of the data shows that passive behaviours occur in both types of organisation, albeit with different intensity and in different positions. In public organisations, passivity is prevalent among executive employees, while among middle and senior managers these behaviours are on a par with individualistic behaviours. In business organisations, on the other hand, passive behaviours occur to a much lesser extent among managers and supervisors at all levels of management, with a greater degree of passivity observed among executive employees (Figure 2).

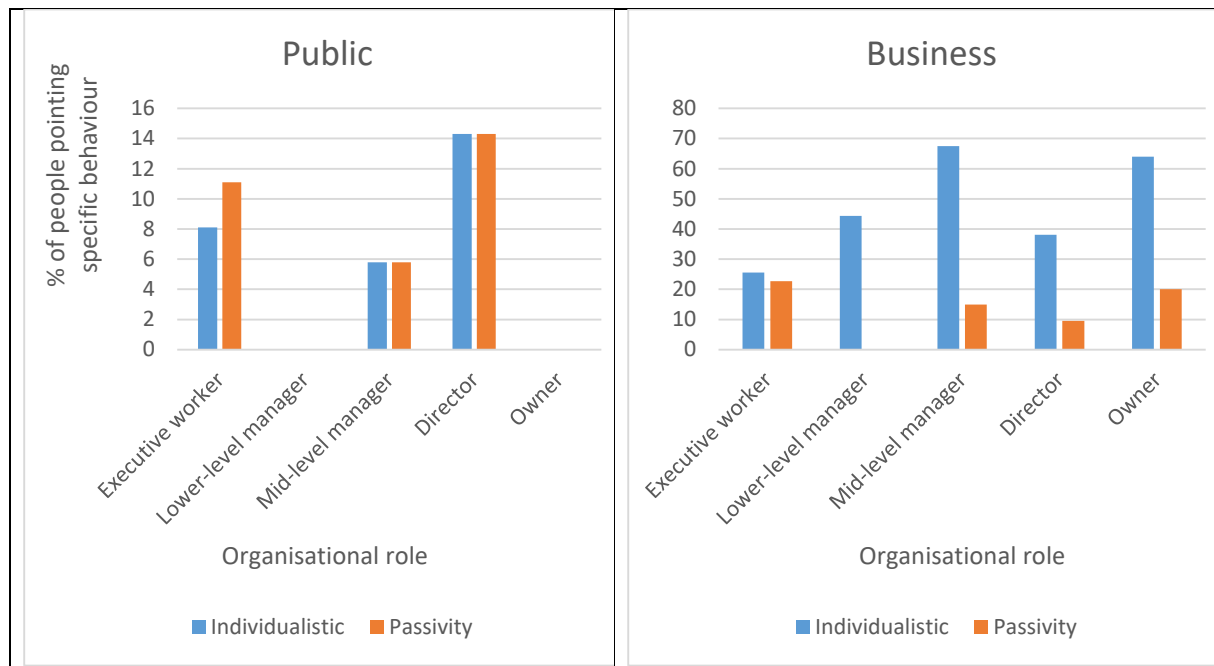


Figure 2. Comparison of passive behaviour according to organisational role in business and public organisations.

Source: Own elaboration.

The second factor that was juxtaposed with passivity was how one interpreted organisational reality and oneself as a member of the organisation.

In both public and business organisations, passivity accompanies a relationship that objectifies people, i.e. one in which the individual feels unimportant, ignored, undervalued by management, and in this aspect there are no differences between organisations. They can be seen in the dimension of the sense of agency and delegitimation.

In business organisations there is a greater delegitimation of the organisational system, which means far less acceptance of organisational reality and a lack of acquiescence to the organisational system and management. In public organisations there is more legitimisation of organisational authority and norms and acquiescence to the rules in place. In these organisations there is also far less internal sense of influence and agency than in business (figure 3).

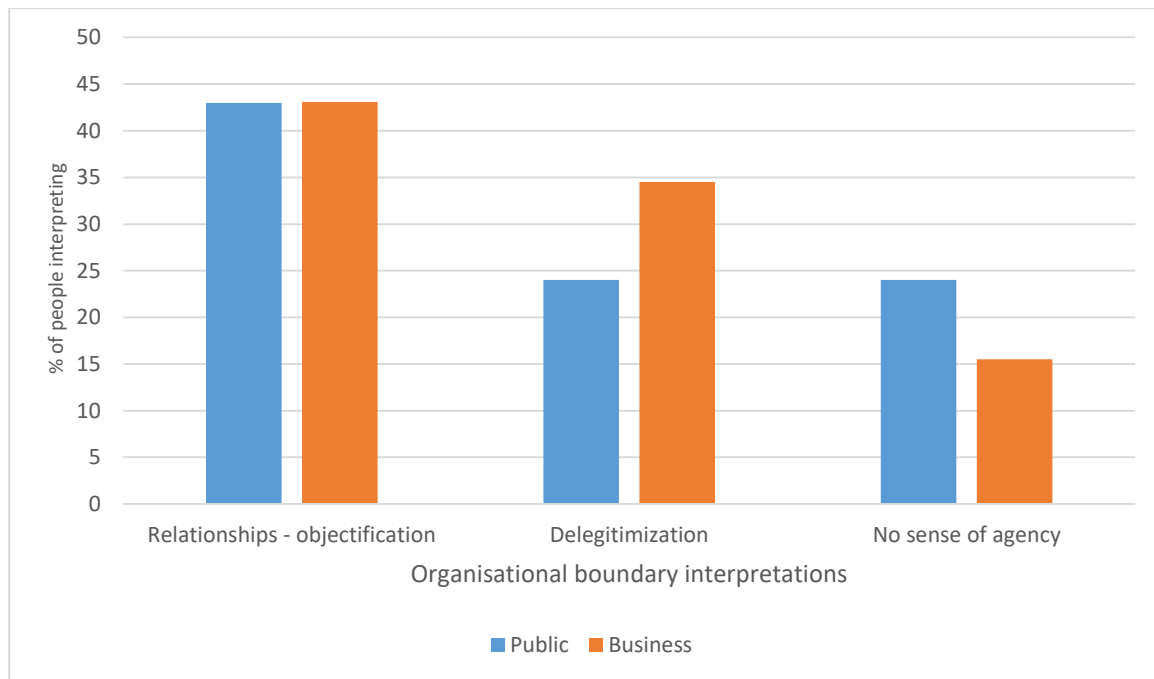


Figure 3. Linking passivity to interpretation of organisational boundary.

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Discussion

The research noted that in public organisations, far more participants show organisational passivity than in business organisations, where individualism predominates.

What shapes this difference?

Firstly, the type of organisation, as completely different expectations are built up towards business and public institutions.

Public organisations differ significantly from business organisations, among other things, in that the way they are organised is determined by legal norms. The law defines the objectives, tasks, budget, organisational structure, division of labour, competences, remuneration and procedures for carrying out official activities.

Public organisations also often have links with politics, which has an impact on interpersonal relationships. Public organisations are monopolies in the provision of specific goods and services, so they do not need to show action to the same extent as business organisations vying for customers and the market (Nutt, Backoff, 1993). They operate in an environment of multiple interest groups, often having to reconcile their divergent expectations.

Specific to public organisations is the scale of operations and the large number of employees, often causing difficulties in coordinating activities. Therefore, public organisations are more formalised (Boyne, 2002), which determines a bureaucratic way of solving problems

and the existence of a large number of documents and procedures, and thus less autonomy for managers and their low propensity to take risks (Rainey, Pandey, Bozeman, 1995).

A key characteristic of public organisations, however, is their specific system of objectives and values; public organisations are not like businesses focused on optimising profits and gaining competitive advantage, but their aim is to satisfy different stakeholder groups. However, the large number and diversity of interest groups, together with the subordination to political influence, mean that the objectives of public organisations are often vague and ambiguous (Farnham, Horton, 1996) and their implementation very complex.

The above characteristics condition a certain type of culture of public organisations, which becomes visible in behavioural norms and interpretations of organisational reality. This is because interpretations reveal the image of organisational reality that is collectively shared and the way its participants see themselves - who they are, what role they play.

The research found that in business organisations, passivity tends to be an expression of protest and disagreement with the prevailing relationship between superiors and employees and how the employee is perceived and treated by the organisation.

It is a manifestation of the delegitimisation of the organisational system and superiors.

The situation is different in public organisations, where passivity is a response to the lack of a sense of influence over organisational reality and relationships that objectify human beings. Participants in the public organisation mostly feel powerless in the face of procedures, budgets, legal norms, i.e. elements established by superior bodies - the governmental ones - which are treated by participants in the organisation as if they were beyond human influence and control. The people who define organisational norms are not perceived by the participants of the public organisation as a concrete entity but become a system against which one does not know how to oppose.

We are therefore confronted with different motives shaping passivity in the organisations in question. In business, participants first of all need conditions to legitimise authority, i.e. a sense of fairness, equality and trust in competent management is essential. It is also important to involve participants in the processes that organise work and decision-making. Employees want not only to be familiar with the rules, but also to participate in setting them, they want to be seen as a trusted actor with a certain potential that the organisation can use.

In public institutions, on the other hand, in order to reduce passivity, it is necessary to recognise and value the employee and to create conditions in which the individual feels a greater influence on organisational reality. Participants in public institutions have a greater acceptance of hierarchy, but need clear rules to use their competences and build internal agency. It is therefore important to develop a sense of autonomy, independence and responsibility. Involving employees in problem-solving or in the preparation of ways to deal with unexpected situations, in particular, and encouraging the definition of tasks and goals would support empowerment.

The second reason for the prevailing passivity in public administration is the lack of clarity in the messages given by management about the applicable norms. A conflict between activity and passivity can be observed among managers in public organisations. The ambiguity and dichotomy that occurs may be the result of a perceived conflict related to the need to satisfy conflicting interests of different parties: one's own, employees', the organisation's, the public's, politicians'. The effects of the lack of clarity on whether to act or not are therefore transmitted to the rest of the workforce in the form of open information as to the desired course of action.

This is different in business organisations, where an individualistic orientation focusing on the achievement of goals and objectives prevails. It is the norm communicated by management in a clear way to employees, communicating what is expected of them.

Therefore, it can be said that the implemented activity standard and its readability for organisational participants is also an inhibitor of organisational passivity.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to present the differences between public and business organisations regarding organisational passivity. On the basis of the research carried out, it can be seen that in public administration the phenomenon of passivity occurs at a much higher level than in business organisations. Two more reasons can be added to the reasons for this behaviour (in addition to those already described in the literature). The first is the way in which its participants interpret reality and their organisational role, which reveals the different motives that guide employees' actions. In business organisations, passivity is a manifestation of disagreement with the subjective treatment and disapproval of the organisational system in place. In public organisations, it is the result of a sense of lack of agency, a subjective approach to the employee and a perception of oneself as a helpless and powerless individual.

The second reason is the perceived uncertainty of management showing up in behaviour. There is a perceived conflict between action and inaction, which in turn becomes an overt message about prevailing norms to the other participants in the organisation.

The differences identified justify the need to look at the two types of organisations differently, especially when shaping the conditions for changing organisational behaviour. In public organisations, a culture of administration is characterised by passivity, a high degree of formalisation, numerous procedures, rules, regulations and policies conditioning employee behaviour, permanence, predictability and hierarchy, with an extensive control apparatus.

A participatory culture should therefore be fostered in public organisations, giving employees the opportunity to intervene to a certain extent in the system by defining objectives, taking appropriate action and bearing responsibility.

In business organisations, on the other hand, it is important to ensure that organisational participants legitimise power. In these organisations, the employee demands that managers share influence and responsibility, which will perhaps involve changing stereotypes about organisational roles, respect and building power based on equality rather than hierarchy. It is also necessary that the employee trusts authority, because only in such circumstances will the employee be able to justify and accept the actions of superiors.

In diagnosing organisational phenomena, the subjective interpretation of organisational reality is therefore also important. Personal conceptualisations depend on previous experiences and personal history, and this influences the individual's cognitive capacity. It is important that this interpretation of the situation concerns the image of oneself, other colleagues, tasks, the organisational structure as well as managers. As I mentioned earlier, self-efficacy beliefs, possible support from the organisation and reading the situation as attractive triggering joy, excitement and curiosity are particularly important.

The research carried out also shows that the different demands placed on public and business organisations shape a certain way in which society interprets the activities of these organisations, which also results in different perceptions of organisational reality and their roles on the part of the participants. This significantly influences the organisational behaviour undertaken and justifies a different view of the different types of organisations.

7. Managerial implications

The results improve the understanding of organisational passivity. Knowing the causes of this phenomenon allows us to influence organisational behaviour more effectively by shaping organisational conditions that support activity and offset organisational passivity.

The originality of this article lies in linking the cognitive aspect of the individual to the organisational behaviour undertaken. Knowing how to interpret organisational reality and organisational role allows to influence organisational motives and behaviour more effectively. At the same time, it highlights the validity of influencing passivity in a different way, which should depend on the type of organisation.

8. Future research

The results presented are a starting point for further research. The next stage is a further, in-depth study of the factors creating differences between public and business organisations. It is important to learn about the conditions shaping legitimacy in business and public

organisations and the empowerment of the individual in the supervisor-employee relationship in both types of organisations. The next step should be to build a diagnostic tool to explore these dimensions, allowing for an even more accurate and informed reduction of passivity in favour of desirable organisational behaviour.

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