

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR AMID UNSTABLE SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

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Purpose: The aim of the research is to identify the determinants of employee engagement in the public sector, with particular emphasis on factors supporting this engagement.

Design/methodology/approach: The research presented in the article is based on ethnographic methods and was conducted in an organization responsible for state phytosanitary control. The researchers conducted analyses based on 31 open interviews. This approach included partially standardized interviews containing unstructured questions, using a scenario focusing on resource management.

Findings: The results of these efforts identified financial constraints as a significant challenge in the process of improving engagement in the examined public sector organization. However, even slight improvements in equipment or financial motivation are perceived as motivating. A key factor in supporting engagement is the selection of employees with high motivation for public service.

Research limitations: The qualitative research method does not allow for generalization beyond the analyzed case and similar cases. The determinants of involvement of public organization employees indicated in the interviews could be verified in quantitative research.

Practical implications: Public administration, which usually cannot offer competitive remunerations with respect to the private sector, should put more emphasis on the development of HR departments, whose activities should be aimed at two areas: lowering employee retention (lowering the risk of losing organizational memory) and increasing their job satisfaction.

Social implications: The case of public administration is unique in the context of social impact. Identifying the main conditions of public organization involvement can contribute to improving the efficiency of the organization, thus ensuring the efficient expenditure of public funds.

Originality/value: Identifying the key conditions involved in a public organization is particularly important for both management theorists and practitioners. Knowledge in this area is essential for optimizing resource allocation processes and prioritizing actions to improve efficiency.

Keywords: public organizations, qualitative research, employee involvement, systemic approach.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The role of public sector organizations is important not only in the area of social policy, health care or the provision of other services to the population, but is also often crucial for the proper implementation of processes in the business sector. Therefore, public sector organizations, just like in the business area, are faced with growing needs in terms of speed and quality of operation, which, combined with serious limitations, result in interest in better use of existing resources. One solution is to make fuller use of human resources. Stimulating and maintaining engagement can be one such activity. Employees of public sector organizations often demonstrate high commitment (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2013) because they are guided by a specific motivation for public service (Boyd et al., 2018; Piatak, 2015). However, the conditions created by organizations are not always conducive to demonstrating commitment. Research shows that there are more educated workers in the public sector than in the private sector, but workers with higher education report lower levels of satisfaction with working conditions and income when employed in the public sector (Pita, Torregrosa, 2023). This is most often related to the financial constraints that public organizations are subject to. Despite high motivation to serve public service, austerity policies often lead to employees leaving their jobs, which results in a loss of institutional memory (Pollitt, 2000). To prevent this from happening, public organizations should pay special attention to creating appropriate financial and organizational conditions to ensure the optimal level of employee involvement. Empirical evidence discussed in this article was collected during the research which aim was to identify key factors of organizational learning which could boost innovation and thus operational excellence within a public administration entity.

The purpose of this article is to present the key determinants of employee engagement in public sector organizations. Particular attention is paid to the factors that support this commitment, although the research conducted clearly indicates that there are also strong determinants of a negative nature. In particular, attempts were made to obtain answers to the questions:

- What are the most important conditions for building commitment in a public organization?
- Which conditions support commitment and which limit it?
- What actions can the organization take to strengthen commitment?

The article consists of five parts. After the introduction, a review of the literature relating to the issue of commitment of employees of public institutions is presented. Particular attention was paid to the factors supporting and inhibiting this commitment. Then the methodology of the conducted research was presented. The researchers conducted 31 open-ended interviews. The approach included partially standardized interviews containing unstructured questions, using a scenario focusing on resource management. The next section presents the results of the

research along with a discussion. It presents the most important determinants of engagement identified by the interviewees. The conclusion addresses the research questions and presents limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The increasingly complex social, economic, ecological and technological problems that the modern world has to deal with pose many challenges to the public sphere. Public managers face the challenge of overseeing programs that transcend sectors and organizational boundaries (Piatak, 2015). Facing such challenges, organizations need energetic and dedicated employees to constantly improve the quality of their services and products. Younger people recognize opportunities to engage in public service, which undoubtedly impacts the ability of government agencies to recruit and retain people with public service values (Piatak, 2015). In addition to restrictive financial constraints, a high level of formalization and, as a rule, a rigid, hierarchical structure, which is a consequence of the bureaucratic model used, is also an unfavorable condition for achieving ambitious goals. Public organizations have serious problems with learning and knowledge management (Young et al., 2016), which is a key condition for adapting them to the conditions of the digital economy (Alvarenga et al., 2020). In these conditions, employee involvement becomes particularly important. Employee engagement reflects a positive, satisfying, affective-motivational work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2013). The conducted research shows that the involvement of public sector employees is higher than that of private sector employees (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2013). The explanation for this pattern of results is provided by the concept of public service motivation. According to this concept, employees with a high level of motivation for public service are predisposed to greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and thus to achieve better results (Cooke et al., 2019; Kernaghan, 2011). This means that for employees with appropriate characteristics, the mission of achieving public goals balances the inconvenience associated with the specificity of public organizations.

Recruiting and retaining employees with a high level of public service motivation and maintaining this level while supporting the high performance of other employees are a significant challenge nowadays. Research shows that public service motivation drives candidates toward a career in public service and, once hired, motivates employees to take action. According to Boyd et al. (2018) the involvement of employees in the public sector is even more influenced by their sense of responsibility for the community. The specific missionary nature of public sector employees is also evidenced by research by Piatak (2015), according to which employees of the government sector and non-profit organizations are more often involved in volunteering than their counterparts from the for-profit sector. The emotional

connection with work has a positive impact on work engagement (Ibrahim, Al Falasi, 2014). This means that organizations should also demonstrate loyalty and be fair in their relations with employees (Ghosh et al., 2014). Moreover, the organization can influence employee commitment by shaping their psychological capital understood as a set of personal resources. Specially prepared intervention programs by organizations can have a positive impact on the development of psychological capital and work engagement (Costantini et al., 2017). However, this requires strong and well-functioning HR services. Leadership plays an important role in shaping employee engagement. Ethical leadership has an important impact on commitment, but - as research by Mostafa, Abed El-Motalib (2020) indicates - the positive relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement was stronger in the case of employees who experienced a lower, not higher, sense of meaningfulness in their work. Therefore, public sector organizations must place emphasis on cultivating ethical leadership and stimulating a sense of meaning in work among employees, but both investments will not necessarily bring simultaneous effects. The quality and form of leadership are important for the efficient functioning of the organization. It is also positively related to motivation for public service and employee engagement (Ugaddan, Park, 2017). Research shows that transformational leadership has a positive impact on engagement, which in turn reduces staffing flow (Gyensare et al., 2017). Taking into account the need for change and development in public organizations on the one hand and the scarcity of available financial resources on the other, shaping transformational leadership can enable the transformation of the organization and the absorption of staff with a relatively small expenditure of resources. Research by Jin et al. (2016) show that active engagement has a greater relationship with job satisfaction when leader commitment is high and performance orientation is low. For highly engaged employees, leaders should therefore be encouraged to demonstrate a higher degree of commitment to their work, but with less emphasis on results. A promising way to increase organizational social capital is through team-level interventions (Kroll et al., 2019). Engagement is related to job characteristics. Enriching public sector jobs through greater emphasis on offering employees identifiable and meaningful tasks, granting autonomy in decision-making, and providing feedback can significantly increase employee engagement (Rai, Maheshwari, 2021). According to Rai et al. (2017), job characteristics are important, but they affect commitment when employees perceive the support of the organization and superiors. Employees who positively perceive support from their organization and supervisors are more likely to respond positively to relevant job characteristics and are therefore more likely to engage in their work. Employee empowerment through supervisors' consideration of their views can both increase engagement and balance the demands of the performance management system, thereby reducing the harmful effects of emotional exhaustion (Conway et al., 2016). Also, an organizational climate characterized by support from supervisors and the organization as a whole is crucial to creating a positive environment that would lead to greater work engagement (Rai et al., 2017). Proper definition of working conditions and favorable relationships with superiors and team members are crucial

for employee engagement. However, this does not exclude the existence of other factors that favor or disfavor commitment. One of such factors is the flood of information caused by the spread of modern information technologies. Hwang et al. (2020) claim that in order to increase work engagement, the flood of messages reaching employees (especially those transmitted via organizational messengers) should be limited. Budget cuts are also a negative factor, having a particularly strong impact on organizational commitment (attitude towards the organization), but much less on work engagement (attitude towards performed tasks) (van der Voet, Vermeeren, 2017). Although the use of various management instruments is of limited use during cutbacks, it can have a positive impact on employee engagement (ibidem). Vickers et al. (2017) argue that in conditions of limited resources, a hybrid combination of norms, logics and practices of the public, private and civil society sectors can bring interesting innovations.

3. Research method

The research presented in the article was based on ethnographic research methods conducted in an organization dealing with phytosanitary control. In particular, the researchers analyzed 31 open interviews (partially standardized, unstructured). The study was carried out from July to December 2019 in a total of 6 organizational units. Their selection was purposeful and agreed with the management of the audited unit. The sample selection criteria included, among others: size of organizational units, diversity of production and share of export activities from given voivodeships. When it comes to the selection of employees the interviews included employees at various levels of management, regular employees and recipients of their services. Each interview was conducted by 2 members of the project team.

After collecting the data, the field material was coded (using the Atlas.ti program) and then categorized. The project applied the principle of triangulation covering the methodological, theoretical and research dimensions (Denzin, 2012). Various techniques were used to collect data and obtain organizational information, including field research (interviews), literature analysis and desk research involving the analysis of organizational data (Konecki, 2000).

4. Research results and discussion

The research allowed us to identify key factors determining employee engagement in public sector organizations. In the analysis, we pay special attention to the elements that support this commitment.

Remuneration is one of the important tools to influence employee commitment and satisfaction (Dong, Loang, 2023). In the analyzed organization, many interlocutors pointed to the unsatisfactory level of remuneration.

If employees saw that their work would be noticed through these finances, the involvement of these people would probably be greater [UNIT4EE03].

The level of remuneration in the analyzed institution varies, but in general the remuneration can be considered very low. Public organizations often operate in conditions of cuts and austerity (Vickers et al., 2017; van der Voet, Vermeeren, 2017), but in this case the level of remuneration close to the national minimum wage raises dissatisfaction. Respondents indicate a high level of staff turnover resulting from the departure of mostly young employees. The low level of remuneration may also lead to the conclusion that the institution's work is underestimated by the authorities, which creates a dissonance between the perception of the institution's social usefulness by its employees and its reception by the environment.

Interventions at the team level may be an action to increase an organization's social capital (Kroll et al., 2019). They result in better knowledge and more harmonious cooperation. This is especially important in organizations with a complex structure and territorially dispersed.

In general, more meetings in the voivodeship, so that there would be some, you know, not only substantive meetings, but also such integration meetings [...] Here, we managers know each other and so on, but the employees do not integrate with each other like that, there is no such thing. This is something that would also have a positive impact [UNIT1EE05].

Employees indicate the need for integration at the lower levels of the organization. This is caused not only by the territorial dispersion of the organization, but also by the high staff turnover indicated above, which is the result of, among others, the unsatisfactory level of remuneration. Integration and cognition are also important for more effective leadership. Its quality and form are important for the functioning of the organization and employee involvement (Ugaddan, Park, 2017). Due to the numerous challenges related to the dynamic development of exports and the need to adapt to constantly changing regulations, transformational leadership may become particularly important, as it influences commitment and limits staff flow (Gyensare et al., 2017).

In addition to monetary remuneration, the use of other **tangible and intangible solutions** may also be important. Only some of them depend on the financial capabilities of the institution.

Now it is improving, because, as I said, risk analysis came into play and this is where the director introduced a system of motivation and justified rewards. How is the risk analysis, the implementation of plans, quantitative and qualitative, if someone works well he will receive a bigger reward or in another form. For example, I am also happy when I get a new computer. When he told me that I would get a new computer, and I have a very bad one, it was a motivation for me, as well as new equipment [UNIT1EE01].

In some cases, employees may consider improving equipment and working conditions as a motivating factor. When rewarding, a fair approach to employees is important (Ghosh et al., 2014) and a high ethical level of leaders (Mostafa, Abed El-Motalib, 2020). This is especially important in situations of individual rewards and conditions of limited resources.

Independence in the process of carrying out tasks is not easy to implement in an organization based on a bureaucratic model. The applicable regulations significantly limit the scope of employee independence.

Until you have these authorizations for everything, you are not independent, and besides, well, various issues come up in the meantime, so to solve some issues yourself, well, some time will have to pass. After all, when there are any inspections or doubts, we're on the phone, right? Sometimes I don't know everything, I have to consult there and read it [UNIT1EE04].

However, the independence of work is limited not only by formal conditions, but also by the realities of the work performed. Employees are subject to various controls, which may discourage them from making independent decisions. It is crucial that the proper and independent implementation of tasks has the support of the organization (Rai et al., 2017). Moreover, it does not seem possible to engage in independent work without a strong sense of meaning in the duties performed. This proves the importance of selecting employees in terms of their motivation for public service (Cooke et al., 2019; Kernaghan, 2011).

As previously mentioned, the possibilities of discretionary motivation by superiors are limited in the organization, but there is a certain scope of their **decision-making freedom**. Equally important for engagement is the sense of influence on decisions made in the organization.

My vote matters because I decide whether the employee should get a promotion or not. If the employee is [...] newly employed, it is the boss's decision, there are certain and certain conversion factors for this base amount. Then, when I evaluate the employee, I apply for awards [...] every two years, the employee is evaluated, so at that moment I decide about his promotion and his award [UNIT3EE02].

The influence of employees on decision-making processes regarding motivation and other issues is quite limited by the highly formalized, hierarchical structure of the organization. This mainly applies to employees with more seniority who are respected and appreciated by their superiors. As Conway et al. (2016) argue, empowering employees by having their opinions taken into account by their superiors can both increase commitment and balance the demands of the performance management system, thereby reducing the harmful effects of emotional exhaustion.

Development opportunities are an important element influencing commitment (Juchnowicz, 2010). Development is a broad and subjective concept, although the interviewees associated it primarily with external forms of professional development.

We receive training offers from KSAP, i.e. from the National School of Administration, from the Civil Service Office and from private companies and we see which lecturers are invited and we can go to the boss at any time if we are not selected that we would like to take part in such training [UNIT3EE02].

The examined organization has the opportunity to improve and develop its employees by sending them to various courses and training. However, they are limited by the financial capacity of the institution.

Working in public administration has a relatively **clear career path**. However, there are barriers that discourage employees from following suit. As mentioned earlier, flattening of salaries - advancement in the organizational hierarchy and greater seniority are associated with only a small salary advancement.

It is difficult to attract people who will either engage or in some way influence people who are even going through it to stay longer because of the earnings. There is such a huge turnover in the branches, because everyone just wants to gain some experience [UNIT0EE04].

The previously mentioned insufficient financing of institutions paradoxically generates double costs instead of saving the state. First of all, it results from the lengthy recruitment processes related to an offer that is uncompetitive from the perspective of the labor market.

Public organizations, like all others, should adapt to the conditions of the digital economy (Alvarenga et al., 2020). This is also important in the context of intensive investment processes carried out by their clients, who often have the most advanced **equipment**.

The good thing is that we have branches in every district, that we have inspectors who perform inspections, and I think that the knowledge of our inspectors is also growing and they know how to perform these inspections to make them effective. The advantage is that we are a bit better equipped than before, that is, since we have computers with printers, we can actually see progress [UNIT3EE05].

The significant equipment gap is gradually being eliminated. Investments in modern equipment allow for the improvement of learning and knowledge management processes, with which public organizations have serious problems (Young et al., 2016). Moreover, they reduce the gap between the level of equipment of the organization and its customers.

5. Summary

The article is based on research aimed at identifying key factors supporting employee engagement in the public sector. Qualitative research has shown that the conditions for significant improvement in engagement in the studied public sector organization are limited. This is primarily related to insufficient financing of the institution, which translates into poor equipment, high staff liquidity and difficulties in recruiting new employees.

Answering the first two questions posed in the introduction relating to favorable and unfavorable determinants of commitment, the research found that the most important of these in the public organization under study include: (i) Salaries, the level of which negatively affects employee commitment; (ii) Central initiatives for integrating employees of a decentralized and territorially dispersed organization, which positively affect employee commitment; (iii) Improvement of equipment and working conditions, which is indicated as a factor positively affecting commitment; (iv) Employee autonomy and discretion, which is a desirable factor, but limited by the bureaucratic form of the organization; (v) Development opportunities, which positively affect commitment. Answering the third question, relating to opportunities to strengthen commitment, as the research shows, even a small improvement in equipment or monetary motivation are assessed as motivating. The key factor in supporting commitment is therefore the selection of employees with high motivation for public service. Strengthening HR activities in the field of recruitment, as well as improving the financial situation may result in the inflow of such candidates and their subsequent retention in the organization. Expanding and enriching work helps keep engaged employees. From this point of view, ethical and fair transformational leadership is crucial, as it can balance the relative weakness of other management instruments. It may also be important to take actions to promote internal integration in the organization, which, in addition to improving commitment, will also facilitate the internal flow of information.

The conducted research provided interesting insights into the studied public organization, but the qualitative research method used does not allow generalization beyond the analysed case and similar cases. The determinants of commitment of employees of the public organization indicated in the interviews could be verified in quantitative research. The issue of employee motivation for public service and to what extent this factor offsets the weakness of material motivation also requires further study.

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