TOOLS FOR MANAGING LOYALTY OF PUBLIC HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES

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Purpose: The purpose of the research was to identify tools used by management staff to manage loyalty in the professional group of nurses in public hospitals.

Methodology: The research tool was an original survey questionnaire. It included a questions regarding the use of selected loyalty management tools and an indication of the managerial position at which they are used.

Findings: The most important tools for loyalty management are: supporting the professional development of nurses, maintaining appropriate communication between the supervisor and nurses, and creating and maintaining appropriate relationships between the direct supervisor and nurses.

Research limitations/implications: The author is aware of the limitations resulting from the conducted research. One of them is the research area limited only to three voivodships and public hospitals. Additionally, the responses of one professional group were analyzed - nurses, which may make it difficult to transfer the conclusions to other medical professions.

Originality/value: The article presents original research on the tool for managing loyalty of public hospital employees.

Keywords: loyalty, loyalty management tools, nurse/administrator, public hospital.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Economic changes that have occurred over the last sixty years have significantly impacted the responsibilities and rights of employees in organizations. Constant economic development encouraged enterprises to maximize their economic effects. The strong emphasis on making profits has led to the deterioration of the situation of employees in organizations (Mehta, Singh, Bhakar, Sina, 2010). The effects of these activities included, among others: layoffs, often just before retirement age, or transfer of employees between company branches. There was a belief among employees that they should stay in a given workplace until retirement. At that time, work was a priority and attachment to the organization was a result of necessity (Mehta, Singh,

Bhakar, Sina, 2010). Currently, the situation of employees has changed, mainly due to demographic changes, such as the aging of the population and new generations of employees entering the market (Feldy, Bojko, 2020). Moreover, employees are increasingly guided by self-development and the realization of their own ambitions, and not only by achieving the organization's goals (McGuinness, 2012). Liberalization of the economy, globalization and increased competitiveness have made organizations appreciate the value of having loyal employees (Hatwal, Chaubey, 2014; Cuong 2023).

Having loyal employees contributes to the increased stabilization of conditions necessary for the functioning of enterprises (Zaki, Mohammed, 2018; Nadek, Naibaho, 2020). Shaping loyalty increases the sense of security of employees and allows predicting their behavior and attitudes (Robak, 2017), which reduces the level of fluctuation in the company (Ahmad, 2020; Cachón-Rodriguez, Blanco-Gonzalez, Prado- Roman, Del-Castillo-Fieto, 2020). The rising costs of recruitment processes and training of new employees, resulting from the increase in employee turnover, reduce the profits of enterprises (Albtoosh, Ngah, Yusoff, 2022). Loyalty management should therefore cover both long-term and newly employed employees (Ong, Ong, Zhang, Huey, 2014).

Public hospitals are one of the elements of the health care system. There is no doubt that their functioning depends on the amount and availability of human resources - i.e. medical staff (Ewelszyn, 2016). Each medical profession plays an important role in the system and in the health security of society. The largest professional groups are doctors and nurses. This article analyzes the perspective of the professional group of nurses/nurses. The first reason for this choice is the high average age in the analyzed profession - 54.5 years (GUS, 2024), which leads to a generation gap (Karkowski, Banaś, 2020; Buchelt, 2017). Another premise is employment forecasts. In Poland, half as many nurses will work in 2030 as in 2020 (NIPiP, Zabezpieczenie..., 2017). The third premise is the key challenges in human resources management indicated by the World Health Organization (WHO) - staff shortages, inadequate employee skills or competence gaps (WHO, Health Labor..., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic also had an adverse impact on health care sector employees, which increased their stress level, stigmatization and rejection by society (Gniadek, Nawara, Padykuła, Malinowska-Lipień, 2020; Caldwell, Moore, Rail, 2022).

The difficult staffing situation, the crisis caused by the pandemic and unfavorable employment forecasts emphasize the validity of the topic (Kaur et al., 2021). By implementing and using appropriate loyalty management tools, management staff can influence the level of employee turnover, build their commitment and increase the level of attachment to the organization. Loyalty management can be helpful in reducing the demographic gap in this profession and encouraging young people to choose this career path.

The analysis of the literature on the subject allowed the identification of a research gap: there is a need to identify employee loyalty management tools in public hospitals. The following research problem was formulated: which loyalty management tools of public hospital

employees are most often used by management staff? The article consists of an introduction discussing the justification of the subject matter, and a theoretical part presenting an analysis of the essence and tools of employee loyalty management. The next parts present the research methodology and results. The article ends with a summary and discussion, indicating limitations and directions for further research.

2. The essence and tools of loyalty management

The essence of managing employee loyalty also involves creating optimal working conditions, which directly translate into an increase in their commitment and trust towards the employer (Hashimoto et al., 2024). Equally important are relationships, especially interpersonal ones, developed within the organization. It should be emphasized that effective loyalty management is a long-term activity that requires significant financial outlays. A key aspect in loyalty management is understanding employee expectations regarding loyalty.

Donatus (2020) indicates that there are four fundamental spheres that are key in the process of shaping loyalty. These include: investing in employee development, developing organizational culture, recognizing the importance of employees for the organization and strengthening commitment. The imperative of managing employee loyalty results from the negative consequences and lost benefits that result from lack of loyalty. An enterprise struggling with problems of employee disloyalty faces a number of challenges, including: difficulties in strategic planning, reduced employee productivity, satisfaction and commitment, decline in employee morale, emergence of intergenerational conflicts, deterioration of the organization's image, weakening diversity (in the context of managing it) and less frequent implementation of innovative management solutions (Nieżurawska-Zając, 2020).

Deloitte (Lojalny…, https://www2.deloitte.com/pl) presents four activities aimed at effectively shaping employee loyalty. The first action is to create a positive organizational culture, strengthen the role of leaders and build the social impact of the company. The second step focuses on ensuring appropriate and attractive financial conditions and an employee benefits package. The third concerns the introduction of more flexible forms of employment, e.g. the possibility of remote or hybrid work. The last activity concerns setting a strategy and enabling continuous development and learning of employees.

The introduction of flexible remuneration systems also facilitates the development and formation of loyalty by increasing overall employee satisfaction. Such a flexible approach should be combined with increasing employee involvement in decision-making processes and delegating greater powers to them (Andrajłoć, Ławrynowicz, 2012). Research presented by Winnicka-Weis (2012) indicates that over half of respondents declaring high loyalty recognize its value. At the same time, the same respondents, demonstrating a pro-loyal attitude, expect

that the employer will treat them with respect and recognition, and their remuneration should be higher.

One of the most popular concepts is the concept of integrated loyalty management. It assumes achieving specific benefits by developing an appropriate level of employee loyalty. The values that an organization can obtain from its loyal employees include employee recommendations, the ability to share knowledge between employees, increased work efficiency and the selection and retention of the right customers (Szwajca, 2012). One of the currently dominant approaches emphasizes that the essence of management and shaping employee loyalty to the organization is creating appropriate relationships (Moczydłowska, 2013). The employee should be treated as an internal customer of the organization. If the employer perceives its employees in this way, it will influence the recruitment of the appropriate number of them and the optimization of the use of human resources in the organization (Biesaga-Słomczewska, Iwińska-Knop). The main goal here is to create an appropriate brand of the organization that will make employees more willing to work there (Moczydłowska, 2013). In the literature on the subject, this approach is defined as Employee Relationship Management (ERM). The ERM concept consists of five key elements: trust - which is the main component of building relationships with employees, the level of which significantly affects the effectiveness of communication between employees, leadership style, common goals and values among employees, HR practices and communication (Młokosiewicz, 2019).

The literature on the subject presents considerations indicating that building commitment is one of the tools for shaping employee loyalty (Rakowska et al., 2018; Świątek-Bysko, 2018; Robak, 2016; Wijonarko et al., 2024). Activities that build employee commitment (and therefore loyalty) include: appropriate information flow, creating an appropriate organizational culture, employee participation in the decision-making process, and adapting employees' duties to their needs and capabilities (Świątek-Bysko, 2018; Alsakarneh et al., 2023).

A similar situation can be observed when considering building trust as a tool for stimulating loyalty. Many researchers emphasize that it is an important tool in loyalty management (Wysocka, Lewandowski, 2017; Jurek, 2019; Lipka, 2022; Dutta, Dhir, 2021). Trust is the foundation of teamwork, which will affect the willingness to share knowledge and the number and level of conflicts (Lipka, 2022). The literature on the subject presents employee loyalty management tools in a quite general way. A synthetic approach was proposed by B. Mydłowska (2019), indicating the following tools:

- proper flow of information,
- building a positive image of the organization,
- appropriate form of recruitment,
- adaptation of new employees,
- supporting employee development,
- creating loyalty programs,

- clearly defining the rules,
- appropriate motivation of employees,
- maintaining appropriate communication.

Managing employee loyalty is a difficult process. It has a specific beginning, but cannot have a specific end. It should be emphasized that building loyalty should be bipolar - outside and inside the organization. Loyal employees are one of the main driving forces of a company. Thanks to them, the organization can develop a competitive advantage over others (Shafique, Ahmad, 2022).

3. Research methodology

The aim of the research was to identify tools used by managerial staff to manage loyalty in the professional group of nurses in public hospitals. The following research problem was formulated: which loyalty management tools of public hospital employees are most often used by management staff?
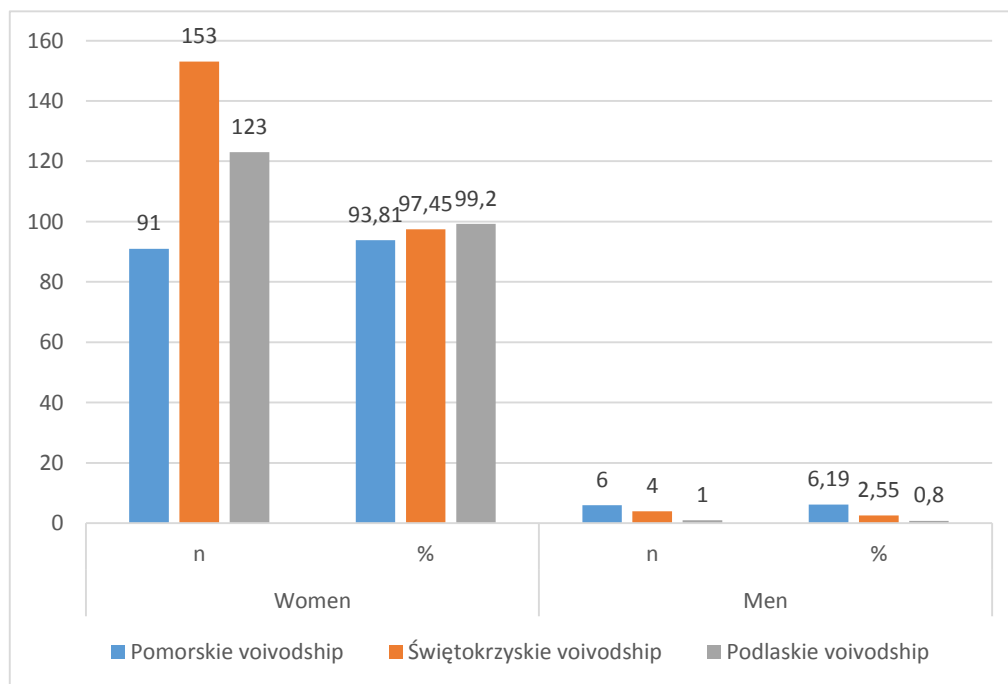

Figure 1. Structure of respondents by gender.

Source: own study.

The research was conducted in a group of 378 nurses, of which the vast majority (376 people - 97.08%) were women. The gender distribution of the respondents is the result of the specificity of the profession, which is usually chosen by women. The largest number of respondents were residents of the Świętokrzyskie Voivodship, while the fewest were from the Pomorskie Voivodship.

The research was carried out in the Świętokrzyskie, Podlaskie and Pomorskie Voivodships. The basis for selecting the regions in which the study was conducted was the analysis of the average number of nurses/nurses employed in public hospitals per 10,000 inhabitants. In the general ranking, the indicated voivodships obtained the highest, average and lowest values of this indicator. In this publication, district hospitals (first level) were assumed as the place of research. The justification for their choice is both the financial and development situation of these hospitals. These are units usually located in small towns, legally established by the district office. Compared to e.g. university or provincial hospitals, they have fewer departments and often receive less financial resources.

The research tool was an original survey questionnaire. It included a question regarding the use of selected loyalty management tools and an indication of the managerial position at which they are used. Respondents were also asked to indicate the five most important tools in their opinion, and then to determine the extent to which their use affects their loyalty to the organization. The research was carried out using the PAPI method.

The original survey questionnaire was subjected to reliability analysis. For this purpose, the value of Cronbach's α coefficient was calculated. For this research tool, the coefficient value was $\alpha = 0.79$.

4. Results

The analysis of the obtained empirical material showed that loyalty management tools are most often used by ward nurses, chief nurses and hospital directors. According to the respondents, medical and administrative directors and department heads use them less often. However, there are noticeable differences emphasizing the different use of loyalty management tools between middle and senior management (Table 1). Respondents indicated that directors more often use those related to creating the image of the organization, the employee gratification system or investing in their development. However, for middle-level staff, respondents indicated those relating to employee adaptation processes, maintaining relationships and proper flow of information.

Table 1.

Instruments and tools most frequently used by management staff in the opinion of respondents*

Position		Loyalty management instruments and tools	% of indications
Middle management staff	Ordinator	Creating a positive image outside the organization	32.8
		Acting ethically, in accordance with accepted standards	30.4
		Creating and maintaining appropriate relationships between the direct superior and nurses	25.1
	Ward nurse	Appropriate introduction of newly admitted nurses/administrators	80.7
		Maintaining proper flow of information between the supervisor and nurses/administrators	80.7
		Indicating/presenting in an understandable way the rules applicable in the ward and hospital	80.1
Top management staff	Head Nurse	Ensuring an appropriate form of recruitment	78.3
		Supporting the professional development of nurses - courses, training, postgraduate studies, scientific development	65.9
		Adapting work stations to the competences and skills of nurses/administrators.	52.1
	Director	Creating a positive image outside the organization	59
		Use of a flexible remuneration system	57.7
		Investing in employees	45
	Director of Administration	Building and shaping a system of values and beliefs	30.7
		Investing in employees	23.5
		Creating a positive image outside the organization	22.5
	Medical Director	Creating a positive image outside the organization	23.3
		Building and shaping a system of values and beliefs	21.2
		Creating a brand that will make nurses more willing to work or take up work in a given hospital	20.9

* % of responses calculated in relation to the total number of respondents n = 378.

Source: own study.

It can be concluded that the tools used by senior management apply to a greater extent to the activities of the entire unit. In turn, the activities of middle management focus on direct contact with employees, which makes their role in loyalty management significant. It is obvious, however, that without appropriate communication between middle and higher levels of management, the appropriate use of loyalty management tools will not be possible. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the development of the so-called soft skills, especially among management staff at the level of chief and department nurses.

Further analyses showed which tools are least frequently used by management staff in the opinion of respondents (Table 2). It was noticed that positions such as ward nurse and head nurse received more responses than others, which emphasizes their important role in building the loyalty of nurses/administrators. Respondents indicated that managers in these positions are reluctant to use instruments such as: *managing remuneration levels* and *investing in employee development*. The first indication may result from the top-down, statutorily defined pay scales in the examined professional group. Secondly, it may be caused by a limited, and in some units absent, budget for training and employee development in public hospitals.

Table 1.
Instruments and tools least frequently used by management staff in the opinion of respondents*

Position		Loyalty management instruments and tools	% of indications
Middle management staff	Ordinator	Use of a flexible remuneration system	4.2
		Appropriate introduction of newly admitted nurses/administrators	4.8
		Ensuring an appropriate form of recruitment	5.3
	Ward nurse	Use of a flexible remuneration system	16.7
		Investing in employees	18.5
		Ensuring an appropriate form of recruitment	28.6
Top management staff	Head nurse	Use of a flexible remuneration system	15.9
		Investing in employees	22.2
		Maintaining proper flow of information between the supervisor and nurses/administrators	29.4
	Director	Appropriate introduction of newly admitted nurses/administrators	3.2
		Maintaining proper flow of information between the supervisor and nurses/administrators	4.5
		Building/strengthening nurses' commitment to work	7.1
	Director of Administration	Appropriate introduction of newly admitted nurses/administrators	0.5
		Maintaining proper flow of information between the supervisor and nurses/administrators	0.7
		Maintaining appropriate communication between the supervisor and nurses (possibility to talk, listen to complaints and requests, possibility to meet directly)	1.8
	Medical Director	Appropriate introduction of newly admitted nurses/administrators	1.3
		Indicating/presenting in an understandable way the rules applicable in the ward and hospital	3.2
		Use of a flexible remuneration system	4.23

* % of responses calculated in relation to the total number of respondents n = 378.

Source: own study.

To better understand which of the analyzed loyalty management tools have the greatest impact on its level, respondents were asked to indicate a maximum of five items from the developed list. Then, they assessed, on a scale from 0 to 5 (where 0 meant no impact on loyalty, and 5 meant a very high degree of impact), to what extent the indicated tools influenced their own level of loyalty (Table 3).

Table 3.
Assessment of the most important loyalty management instruments and tools in the opinion of respondents

Loyalty management instruments and tools	Number of indications	Grade point average impact of tools to the level of loyalty
Supporting the professional development of nurses - courses, training, postgraduate studies, scientific development	227	4.49
Maintaining appropriate communication between the supervisor and nurses - the opportunity to talk, listen to employees' complaints and requests, and the possibility of direct meetings	196	4.54

Cont. table 3.

Creating and maintaining appropriate relationships between direct superiors and nurses/administrators	156	4.57
Conduct by the direct superior in an ethical manner, in accordance with accepted standards	143	4.52
Maintaining proper flow of information between the supervisor and nurses/administrators	139	4.39
Indicating/presenting in an understandable way the rules applicable in the ward and hospital	134	4.43
Motivating nurses/administrators	129	4.57
Creating a positive image of the hospital outside	117	4.38
Appropriate introduction of newly admitted nurses/administrators	110	4.43
Use of a flexible remuneration system	102	4.59
Investing in employees	97	4.60
Adapting work stations to the competences and skills of nurses/advisors	69	4.28
Building/strengthening the nurse's level of trust towards the hospital as an employer	67	4.51
Building/strengthening nurses' commitment to work	57	4.30
Ensuring an appropriate form of recruitment of nurses/nurses	47	4.34
Creating/creating a brand of the organization that will make nurses more willing to work or take up work in a given hospital	39	4.33
Building and shaping a system of values and beliefs in the hospital	27	4.67

Source: own study.

The most frequently indicated loyalty management tool was *supporting professional development* (227 indications) (Table 4). According to the respondents, it was indicated as very often used by the head nurse (269 indications, 65.9%). The second most preferred tool among respondents was *maintaining appropriate communication between the nurse and the superior* (196 indications). According to almost 80% of respondents, this tool is used by ward nurses. The third most important loyalty management tool in the opinion of nurses/nurses is *creating and maintaining appropriate relationships between direct superiors and nurses* (156 indications). More than half of the respondents stated that this tool is also often used by ward nurses (Table 1). Importantly, high ratings for the degree of impact of these instruments and tools on the level of one's loyalty (average rating 4.49 or higher) indicate their key importance in managing loyalty to the organization.

The least indications were for *building a system of values and beliefs* (27), *creating/creating the organization's brand* (39) and *ensuring an appropriate form of recruitment* (47) (Table 3). According to respondents, even the least frequently mentioned tools have a significant impact on their loyalty (average rating above 4.33). These results may be the result of several factors. Firstly, the system of values and beliefs in the nursing profession is partly shaped by the code of professional ethics of nurses. Secondly, public hospitals rarely put emphasis on creating their own brand, although activities such as acquiring qualified staff, modern equipment or using innovative treatment methods somehow create it. This may be surprising, considering patients' expectations regarding the standards of medical care. Thirdly, the low assessment of the form of recruitment may result from staff shortages in the analyzed professional group, which means that nurses have relatively great freedom in changing their workplace.

5. Summary

The analysis of the obtained research material allowed for solving the formulated research problem. The most important tools for loyalty management were identified as supporting the professional development of nurses, maintaining appropriate communication between the supervisor and nurses, and creating and maintaining appropriate relationships between the direct supervisor and nurses. These results are confirmed in the literature on the subject. Wysocka and Lewandowski (2017) emphasize that effective communication and focusing on employee development are key soft skills in the health care sector. Moczydłowska (2016) notes that deficiencies in communication systems may make it difficult to shape commitment, which largely determines loyalty. In turn, Ziółkowska and Szmit (2018) indicate discrepancies between the requirements placed on nurses by the management staff and the lack of development opportunities offered. This causes many people to undertake professional development activities on their own. Stojanoic and co-authors (2020) also emphasize the relationship between the development opportunities offered and the number of loyal employees. Other researchers also emphasize the relationship between loyalty and relationships with co-workers (Robak, 2017). Research conducted among nurses indicates that the quality and level of relationships with colleagues from the department are the main reason for remaining in a given organization (Tourangeau et al., 2020)

Both ward nurses and head nurses play an important role in shaping loyalty, as evidenced by the number of tools assigned to these positions by respondents. According to the respondents, ward nurses more often use tools that are directly related to a specific employee, e.g. appropriate information transfer or adaptation. In turn, head nurses use those related to employee recruitment and development processes.

A critical analysis of the literature on the subject and research results allow the formulation of conclusions:

1. Loyalty management of nurses should be based on the implementation of instruments and tools that improve communication strategies in public hospitals.
2. The management staff should implement development programs addressed to nurses and enable me to participate freely in them.
3. Middle and top-level staff should be directed towards the need to build strong relationships between employees.

The author is aware of the limitations resulting from the conducted research. One of them is the research area limited only to three voivodships and public hospitals. Additionally, the responses of one professional group were analyzed - nurses, which may make it difficult to transfer the conclusions to other medical professions. Taking into account the identified limitations, directions for further research should include, in particular, expanding the research sample, primarily to include other professional groups (e.g. doctors, paramedics, etc.), but also to include employees of the private health care sector. Qualitative research conducted with hospital managers could also provide additional conclusions.

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