

## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND THE ENGAGEMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES: A CASE STUDY

Joanna WÓJCIK-CHODOROWSKA

WSB University, Dąbrowa Górnicza; joanna.wojcikchodorowska@wsb.edu.pl, ORCID: 0009-0004-9924-5899

**Purpose:** The aim of this article is to identify and evaluate the impact of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach on the level of engagement among local government employees. The study focused on a municipal office in the Silesian Province, which enabled an empirical analysis of AI application in the specific context of the public sector.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research was conducted as a case study using a quantitative method – a questionnaire survey addressed to employees of 12 departments of the municipal office. Statistical analyses included non-parametric tests and correlation coefficients.

**Findings:** The results confirmed the main research hypothesis – the AI approach positively influences employee engagement, particularly through practices based on appreciation and positive feedback. Respondents identified recognition from supervisors, remuneration, and job security as the most important motivational factors. The frequency of receiving positive feedback was significantly correlated with the declared level of engagement.

**Research limitations/implications:** The main limitation of the study is its cross-sectional nature and the use of a single case study, which hinders the generalisation of results. Future research should include longitudinal studies and methodological triangulation with the use of in-depth interviews.

**Practical implications:** The findings may provide a basis for incorporating elements of AI into HR procedures in local government administration, thereby contributing to the development of a culture of appreciation and enhancing the attractiveness of the municipal office as a workplace.

**Social implications:** The application of AI in local government administration may foster the creation of a climate of trust, shared responsibility, and openness, which translates into the quality of public services provided and increased citizen trust in local government institutions.

**Originality/value:** This article contributes to the literature on public sector management by demonstrating both the potential and the limitations of AI in local government administration. It provides an empirical addition to existing knowledge as well as practical recommendations for local government managers.

**Keywords:** appreciative inquiry (AI), change management, employee engagement, local government administration, case study.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary local government offices operate in an environment of growing citizen expectations, frequent regulatory and legal changes, and pressure for efficiency and transparency. In such an environment, employee engagement, understood as a lasting and positive connection to work, becomes crucial. At the same time, the public sector faces specific challenges. These include a high level of formalisation of processes, rigid procedures and a multi-level hierarchy. This makes developmental approaches, which strengthen employees' internal motivation and have a positive impact on the quality of team relations without the need for costly systemic changes, increasingly important.

One such approach is the appreciative inquiry (AI), which assumes that organisations develop most effectively by identifying and strengthening what is most valuable in their functioning. AI emphasises dialogue, discovering strengths, positive feedback and co-creating the desired future of the organisation. In the logic of human resource management in the public sector, this translates into building a climate of recognition, deepening cooperation and increasing the sense of agency among employees, which is linked to higher levels of engagement and better quality public services.

However, the application of AI in local government administration faces constraints resulting from the nature of public organisations: strong regulation, accountability to external stakeholders and the need to remain impartial. In this context, it is particularly important to understand which elements of AI (e.g. recognition, positive feedback, partnership dialogue, co-creation of a vision) actually support employee engagement in the reality of a city council, and what role leadership and organisational climate play in this. Despite growing interest in the appreciative inquiry approach in public sector management research, there is still a lack of in-depth empirical analyses of its practical impact on the engagement of local government employees in Poland. Most of the studies to date have focused on commercial organisations or educational institutions, while local government offices remain largely outside the scope of quantitative research. There is also a lack of studies that systematically analyse the relationship between the implementation of AI principles and changes in the attitudes and behaviours of public sector employees. Filling this gap is the main motivation for undertaking this study.

The aim of this article is to identify and assess the impact of the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach on the level of engagement of local government employees, using a single case study of a city council in the Silesian Province. The article makes an empirical contribution to the literature on public sector management by providing data from a quantitative study covering functionally diverse departments of the office. It also has a practical dimension: it identifies areas where AI-inspired implementations can have the greatest impact, both at the individual level (motivation, sense of influence) and at the team level (climate of cooperation, quality of relationships).

Referring to the practical implications of the topic, it can be pointed out that the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach can be a useful tool supporting both department managers and HR staff. In the former case, it can contribute to the development of a leadership style based on trust, recognition and cooperation. In the latter case, it can have an engaging effect on the atmosphere of staff meetings, reinforce regular positive feedback and promote a communication style based on appreciation. The practical potential of the appreciative inquiry (AI) concept can be seen in the increased number of training courses on motivation and interpersonal and team communication. In a broader perspective, the principles of the concept in question can also be applied in participatory processes with city residents. Examples include public consultations or the development of city development strategies. Joint discovery of the strengths of the local community allows for a better understanding of citizens' needs and their involvement in the process of co-creating public policies.

In light of the above assumptions, the research problem of this study can be formulated as follows: What is the impact of the appreciative inquiry approach on the level of engagement of city hall employees? This problem gives rise to the following research questions: (1) what is the relationship between the perception of the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach and the level of professional engagement of city hall employees; (2) Which components of the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach are considered by city hall employees to be the most motivating and supportive of their professional engagement? (3) How do management actions consistent with the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach influence the organisational climate and the quality of team relations? Based on a review of the literature, research hypotheses were also formulated – main and detailed: MH – Appreciative inquiry has a positive and significant impact on the level of commitment of city hall employees; SH1 – There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the perception of the appreciative approach (AI) and the level of professional engagement of city hall employees; SH2 – City hall employees consider positive feedback, recognition of achievements and the opportunity to co-create the organisation's vision to be the most motivating and supportive of professional engagement; SH3 – Management actions in line with the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach have a positive impact on shaping the organisational climate and improving the quality of team relations.

The article has been divided into several parts. The second chapter, following the introduction, presents an overview of the theoretical assumptions covering the basics of the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach and its potential applications in local government administration. The third chapter presents the methodological basis of the study, including the rationale for a single-case study, a description of the sample selection and the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. It is also noted here that the study was quantitative in nature and that a questionnaire was used as the research tool. Chapter 4 presents the results of a study conducted in August 2025 among employees of one of the city offices in the Silesian Province, which was the case study. The fifth and final chapter presents a discussion of the results in the light of the literature and conclusions, including the verification of research hypotheses and implications resulting from the adopted case study perspective.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed in the 1980s in the United States by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva from Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider, Srivastva, 1987). This approach originated in management sciences, in particular in research on organisational change (Cooperrider, Srivastva, 1987; Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008). Epistemologically, it derives from social constructivism (Berger, Luckmann, 1966) and generative theory (Gergen, 1994), and methodologically, it is rooted in participatory action research (Reason, Bradbury, 2008).

Appreciative inquiry (AI), strongly associated with positive organisational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, Quinn, 2003), is an approach to diagnosing and implementing organisational change that shifts the focus from deficiencies to identifying and developing existing resources, strengths and factors that sustain the well-being and effectiveness of social systems (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005). Its origins are linked to criticism of the problem-solution paradigm that dominates organisational scholarship, both in research and in organisational development practice, and to the call for the creation of theories that inspire new organisational areas and practices (Cooperrider, Srivastva, 1987).

When attempting to break down the meaning of this concept, it can be pointed out that 'appreciate' is defined as the ability and act of recognising the best qualities in people and the surrounding reality, as well as affirming successes. In turn, 'discourse' ('inquire') is understood as exploration and discovery combined with the art of asking questions and demonstrating an attitude of openness to recognising potential, strengths and opportunities (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005, p. 7). The appreciative inquiry (AI) approach can therefore be described as a method of researching and reflecting on change in social systems (groups, organisations, communities) that encourages joint discovery of what works best in order to imagine a desirable future on this basis and design it in such a way that the changes are attractive enough that they do not require coercion to implement them (Bushe, 2013).

The appreciative discourse perspective reverses the classic approach: it assumes that the organisation itself is a value and contains resources, strengths and past successes that are worth extracting, appreciating and developing. In this approach, the organisation is primarily a solution that needs to be strengthened, rather than a problem to be fixed (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008). Appreciative discourse sees performance as a 'glass half full,' filled with proven practices, rather than a space to be filled with improvements (Lewis, Van Tiem, 2014, p. 19).

A key element of AI is the organisation's 'positive core' of an organisation, comprising key strengths: achievements and capabilities, innovations, technical and financial resources, collective wisdom and best practices, leadership, values and relationships, social capital, and a vision of the desired future (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005). The above assumptions form

the foundation of the 4D model, which is at the core of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider, Srivastva, 1987). In practice, the process begins with the Discovery phase, which involves the entire system (rank-and-file employees, managers, external stakeholders) being engaged in the process of identifying the best experiences, successes and areas of strength within the organisation. At this stage, participants identify the elements that work most efficiently and search for the 'positive core' of the organisation, i.e. the element that decisively gives it life and energy (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008). The second phase of the cycle is Dream, during which participants jointly build a picture of the desired future. This involves imagining how the identified potential can strengthen the organisation's strengths and guide its further development in the future. The result is inspiring but realistic images of the organisation's near future (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005). The third phase, Design, is the stage at which the vision from the previous Dream phase is translated into practical action, i.e. specific organisational solutions, processes and roles that will enable the dreams to come true. Participants focus on developing new or improved systems and structures, as well as implementation plans and measures of success (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008). And the fourth and final phase, Destiny, which involves implementing the designed changes in the organisation and includes launching initiatives, gradually consolidating them and learning on an ongoing basis so that the new way of operating becomes a permanent practice. In this phase, it is important to expand responsibility, track progress, and reinforce what works, so that the organisation is, in a sense, rebuilt based on the results achieved (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005).

The positive core of the organisation is created in stages throughout the 4D cycle: discovered, mobilised, designed and finally implemented (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008).

Classic approaches to AI combine five related principles that organise thinking and practice (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008; Watkins, Mohr, Kelly, 2011). The first, the Constructionist Principle, assumes that organisations are created through conversations. This means that language not only describes but also co-constructs organisational reality. The second principle, the Principle of Simultaneity, states that change begins when a question is asked, i.e. the very act of inquiry is an intervention. The third principle, the Poetic Principle, emphasises that organisations are like 'open books' that can be read and whose reality can be co-created by choosing topics of conversation. The fourth principle, the anticipatory principle, states that images of the future trigger present actions, i.e. they influence actions taken here and now. This means that the process of creating a positive vision by an organisation inspires actions aimed at its actual implementation. The fifth and final principle, the Positive Principle, emphasises that reinforcing emotions and narratives foster the co-creation of energy for action (whereby the aforementioned 'positivity' refers to direction and generativity, not avoidance of difficult topics) (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008; Barret, Fry, 2005).

In their book *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, the authors expand the catalogue of AI principles with three rules that facilitate understanding and implementation of the approach in various organisational contexts (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2010). *The Wholeness Principle* emphasises a holistic view of the system and the participation of the entire organisational community in change (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 66). *The Enactment Principle* emphasises that change begins 'here and now' when people act in accordance with the desired vision and values (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 68; Bushe, 2011). *The Free-Choice Principle* assumes that freedom of participation and choice of action strengthens responsibility and individual commitment (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 71; Watkins, Mohr, Kelly, 2011). These principles are applied not only in business, but also in the public sector, healthcare and education, where they support broad stakeholder engagement and the implementation of generative solutions (Bushe, 2011; Watkins, Mohr, Kelly, 2011).

One of the most important advantages of the appreciative approach is its ability to bring out and mobilise positive energy in organisations. It is emphasised that focusing on what works well helps to strengthen the sense of meaning in work, shared responsibility and employee engagement (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005; Cameron, Dutton, Quinn, 2003). It is worth mentioning here the connection between appreciative inquiry and theories of employee engagement, which define the psychological basis of the bond between the individual and the organisation. The point of reference in this regard is W. Kahn's (1990) concept of engagement, which he defines as full involvement in one's professional role in cognitive, emotional and physical terms. Commitment is treated here as the result of a sense of security, significance and accessibility, i.e. components that can be successfully reinforced by appreciative practices. It is also pointed out that professional commitment is shaped as a result of social exchange between the employee and the organisation (Saks, 2006). In this respect, appreciation can play a significant role in strengthening this relationship. Furthermore, Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model indicates that access to organisational resources promotes higher levels of engagement, while appreciation practices can be interpreted as tools for strengthening key employee resources, leading to the development of engagement. The integration of the AI approach with classical engagement theories thus allows for the construction of a coherent theoretical framework that combines positive organisational transformation with psychological mechanisms that promote sustainable employee engagement.

The concept of appreciative inquiry (AI) creates a basis for breaking out of routine thinking and opening up to dialogue, which in turn increases trust and builds an organisational climate conducive to innovation and change implementation (Bushe, 2013). This is particularly important in times of dynamic and unpredictable socio-economic change, when organisations and public institutions need flexible tools to support adaptability, creativity and shared responsibility for the transformation process (Bushe, 2013; Cameron, Spreitzer, 2012).

Another advantage of appreciative inquiry (AI) is its participatory and inclusive nature. Unlike traditional models of organisational diagnosis, which are often based on deficit analysis and hierarchical decision-making, AI involves a wide range of stakeholders in the process of co-creating a vision and designing change (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2010). As a result, organisations not only strengthen their resources, but also develop a culture of cooperation and shared responsibility, which translates into lasting effects. In public and local government administration, this means greater involvement of both civil servants and local communities in decision-making processes, which supports the democratisation of management and increases the legitimacy of actions (Mahroof et al., 2025). This approach also has beneficial effects in other sectors. Examples include military training (Wójcik-Chodorowska, 2025), social assistance (Młyński et al., 2024) and nursing homes (Dal Corso, 2021), healthcare (May et al., 2011) and parental coaching (DeGaetano, 2011). These examples show that AI can be an effective tool not only in managing commercial organisations, but also in a broader social context, where it promotes the development of shared visions of the future. From the perspective of this article, the most interesting area of application for appreciative inquiry (AI) is local government administration, where this approach focuses on involving not only civil servants but also residents of a given city in the processes of co-creating public services and strategic planning at the municipal level. It is pointed out here that AI can increase public trust and the quality of civic dialogue, especially at the local level, where the proximity of problems facilitates the identification of the positive core of the community and its translation into action (Schooley, 2012; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Institutional guidelines for the public sector recommend AI as a participatory procedure for visualising the desired future and designing solutions with residents, rather than ‘for’ residents (U.S. EPA, 2025). At the level of urban practice, a classic example is the ‘Focus on Longmont’ process, in which the city of Longmont (USA) used appreciative inquiry (AI) to work on a strategic plan and engage stakeholders—civil servants, non-governmental organisations, and residents. City documents and studies on this process point to the development of a shared vision and the translation of conclusions from the dialogue into specific public policy priorities (City of Longmont, 2024a, 2024b).

The prospects for further development of AI are linked to its adaptation to contemporary organisational challenges, such as globalisation, digitalisation and sustainable development. Increasing attention is being paid to the possibility of integrating AI with other approaches to change management, such as complexity theory or dialogic practices in organisations (Bushe, Marshak, 2015). Such combinations can foster the creation of more sustainable and inclusive forms of organisational development that respond to dynamic and uncertain environmental conditions.

The appreciative inquiry (AI) approach, although highly regarded and widely applicable, is not without its limitations. One of these is the risk of overemphasising positive elements while overlooking key problems such as inequalities or conflicts, which can lead to overly superficial diagnoses or misguided decisions (Grant, Humphries, 2006). For this reason, there

is a growing emphasis on the need to combine appreciation with a constructive approach to problems in order to ensure a balance between optimism and realism (Cockell, McArthur-Blair, 2012). Applying this approach in practice also requires sufficient time and a high level of competence on the part of those responsible for transformation processes (Bushe, 2013). In the case of local government administration, the implementation of an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach may also be threatened by the neglect of dialogue practices and implementation mechanisms embedded in the public policy cycle (Schooley, 2012; Bushe, Marshak, 2015). Nevertheless, in light of the perspectives presented, the concept of appreciative discourse seems to have more strengths than weaknesses, especially when treated as an integrated perspective of positive organisational communication. It offers more than just a tool for motivation or strengthening commitment – it proposes an innovative shift in the cognitive paradigm, thus constituting a significant novelty in thinking about change.

### 3. Methodology

The results presented in this article refer to research conducted in August 2025 among employees of one of the municipal offices in the Silesian Province. The main objective (MO) of the research was to identify and assess the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on the level of engagement of municipal office employees. In order to achieve this objective, several specific objectives were set:

- SO1: To examine the relationship between the perception of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and the level of work engagement among municipal office employees.
- SO2: To identify the components of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach that municipal office employees consider most motivating and supportive of their professional engagement.
- SO3: To assess the impact of management actions consistent with the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach on shaping the organisational climate and the quality of team relationships.

In order to achieve the indicated objectives, the main research question (MRQ) was formulated as follows: *What is the impact of Appreciative Inquiry on the level of engagement of municipal office employees?* Specific research questions were also presented:

- SQ1: What is the relationship between the perception of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and the level of professional engagement of municipal office employees?
- SQ2: Which components of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach are considered by municipal office employees to be the most motivating and supportive of their professional engagement?
- SQ3: How do management actions consistent with the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach influence the organisational climate and the quality of team relations?



Research hypotheses were formulated for the research questions: a main hypothesis and detailed hypotheses. MH: The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has a positive and significant impact on the level of commitment of municipal office employees. The detailed hypotheses were as follows:

- SH1: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between the perception of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach and the level of professional commitment of municipal office employees.
- SH2: Municipal office employees consider positive feedback, recognition of achievements and the opportunity to co-create the organisation's vision to be the most motivating and supportive of professional engagement (statistically more often than other components).
- SH3: Management actions consistent with the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach have a positive impact on shaping the organisational climate and improving the quality of team relations.

The study was a single-case study conducted at a municipal office in the Silesian Province. The case was selected as typical for a medium-sized local government administration characterised by a high degree of functional heterogeneity, which allowed for capturing diverse organisational practices and working conditions. The study used a quantitative method, employing a survey technique. The research tool was an original questionnaire, which was made available to the respondents in paper form. Respondents were informed that participation in the study was voluntary. The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of 12 closed questions – single and multiple choice – and a personal data form.

The choice of a local government unit located in the Silesian Province was justified. It should be noted that this region is characterised by significant social and economic diversity and developmental transformation. Local government administration in such areas faces challenges in terms of economic restructuring, demographic changes and the ever-growing expectations of public service beneficiaries. In this context, it seems interesting to analyse appreciation practices that can support employee engagement and the effectiveness of public institutions operating in conditions of high dynamic change.

The sample selection in the conducted research was non-probabilistic and was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, purposive sampling was used, covering 12 selected departments of the municipal office. The criteria for their selection were the size of the department (the units with the largest number of employees were selected) and the diversity of the employees' competences (departments with different task profiles were taken into account). In the second stage, questionnaires were distributed to all persons working in the selected departments. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary – all employees were informed that participation in the survey was voluntary. The final sample was therefore shaped by the decisions of those who expressed a willingness to participate, which methodologically means the use of self-selection sampling.

The sampling method used has both strengths and methodological limitations. Purposeful sampling in the first stage enabled the selection of departments relevant to the research topic, which allowed us to capture the internal diversity of the organisation. However, it should be noted that the researcher's determination of selection criteria is subjective and may limit the possibility of fully generalising the results to all departments of the surveyed municipal office. On the other hand, the voluntary selection used in the second stage ensured that the respondents' participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, which is a significant advantage from the point of view of research ethics. At the same time, such selection reduces the representativeness of the sample and creates the risk that the results obtained may reflect the attitudes of people who are more open, motivated and willing to cooperate than the entire population of the departments surveyed.

When analysing the profile of the people who took part in the study, it should be noted that the largest percentage of the research sample were women (60.1%), people aged 36-45 (44.8%), with 6 to 10 years of service in the municipal office under study (54.6%), and those holding middle-level civil service positions (89.6%). Detailed breakdowns are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Sociodemographic profile of respondents (data in numbers and %) (N = 163)*

Sociodemographic information		N	%
Gender	Female	98	60.1
	Male	65	39.9
	Other	0	0.0
Age	Up to 25 years old	4	2.5
	26-35 years old	21	12.9
	36-45 years old	89	54.6
	46-55 years old	31	19.0
	Over 55 years old	18	11.0
Length of service in the current office	Less than 1 year	5	3.1
	1-5 years	23	14.1
	6-10 years	73	44.8
	11-20 years	45	27.6
	Over 20 years	17	10.4
Position held	Support position	2	1.2
	Mid-level administrative position	146	89.6
	Senior administrative position (managerial)	15	9.2
	Other – what?	0	0.0
Overall		163	100.0

Source: own study.

The calculations were performed using SPSS Statistics 26 software, while the statistical tests used were Pearson's chi-square independence test and other non-parametric tests: Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis H, post-hoc test: Dunn with Holm correction, and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (rhoSpearman). Relationships with a significance level of less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

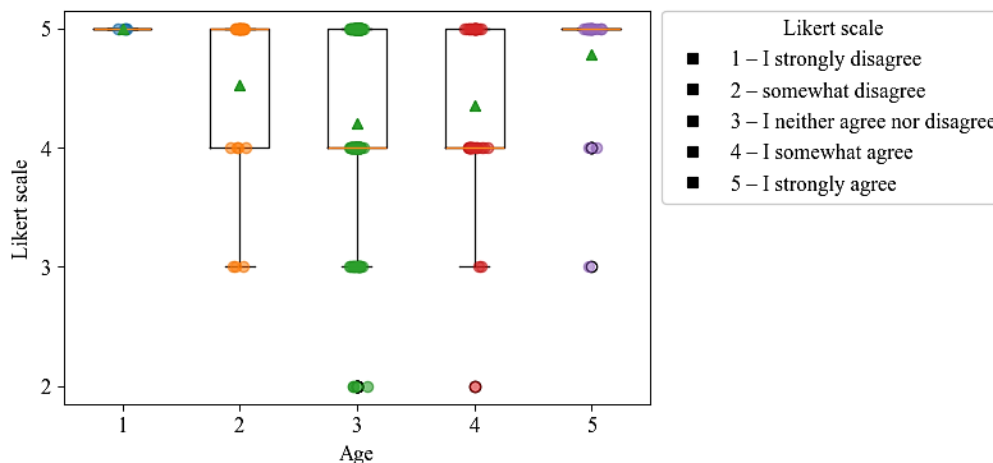
## 4. Results

This chapter presents the results of research on the functioning of employees of a selected local government unit and the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and the perception of the analysed phenomena.

The first question of the survey included four statements about working in the city hall, rated by respondents on a five-point Likert scale.

The first statement referred to the respondents' opinions on their superiors' perception of their strengths. The results show that, regardless of gender, the respondents rated this statement highly (70.4% of women and 87.7% of men).

The second statement examined the phenomenon of the so-called positive feedback culture in the institution. In this case, there are also no differences in the choices between women and men. High ratings dominate in both groups (86.5% on average). However, the situation is different with regard to age. The Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA statistical test showed that there is a significant correlation between the age of the respondents and the degree to which they believe a culture of positive feedback exists in their workplace ( $H(6) = 13.706$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). The value of the coefficient  $\epsilon^2 = 0.061$  indicates that approximately 6.1% of the variability in the results can be attributed to differences between groups, which means a moderate effect size. The value of the coefficient  $\epsilon^2 = 0.061$  indicates that approximately 6.1% of the variability in the results can be attributed to differences between groups, which means a moderate effect size. The detailed results are presented in Figure 1.

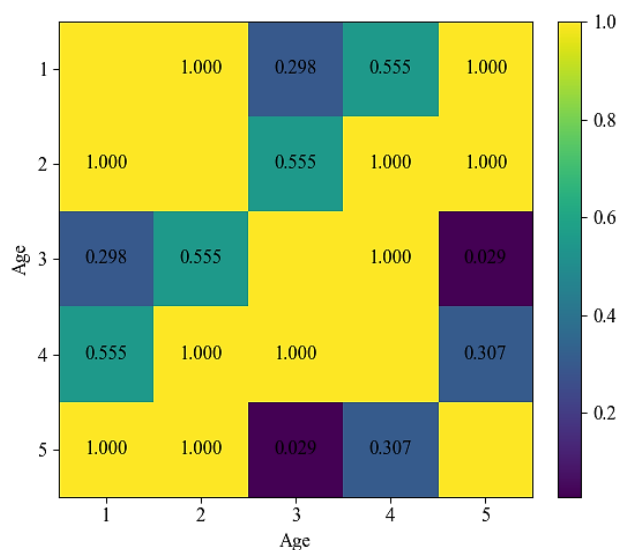


**Figure 1.** Assessment of the culture of positive feedback depending on the respondents' age.

Source: own study.

To determine which groups differed from one another, additional post-hoc tests were conducted: Dunn's test with Holm correction, which indicated significantly higher scores among individuals aged over 55 compared with those in the 36-45 age group ( $p_{adj} = 0.029$ ,  $\delta = -0.398$ ). The value of Cliff's delta coefficient ( $\delta = -0.398$ ) indicates the moderate strength

of this effect. At the same time, no significant differences were identified between the other age groups. Detailed results are presented in Figure 2.

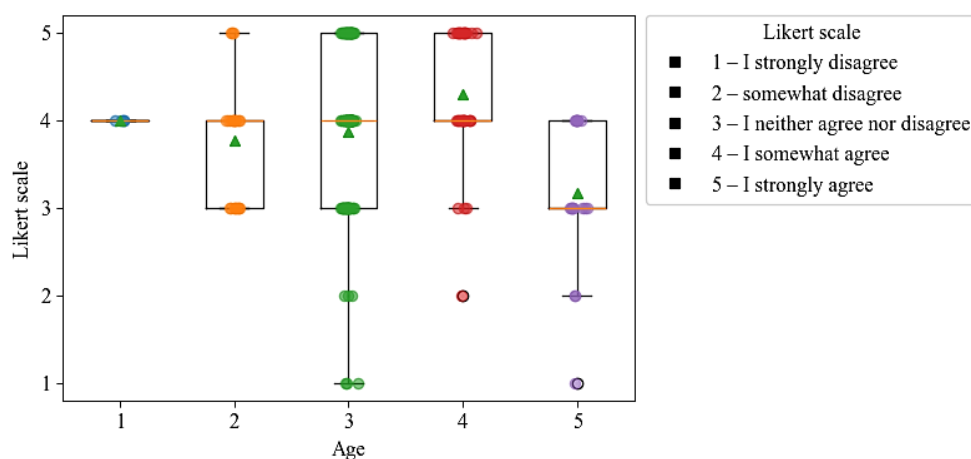


**Figure 2.** Assessment of the culture of positive feedback depending on respondents' age with consideration of intergroup differences.

Source: own study.

With regard to length of service, ratings at the upper end of the scale (4 or 5) accounted for an average of 87.3% in each group.

The third statement concerned the consideration of employees' opinions in the process of implementing changes. In this case as well, no differences were identified in relation to gender or job position, but a statistically significant association was found with respect to the age of respondents ( $H = 18.66$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ ). The  $\epsilon^2$  coefficient was 0.093, which means that approximately 9.3% of the variability in results can be attributed to differences between groups, indicating a moderate effect size. Detailed results are presented in Figure 3.

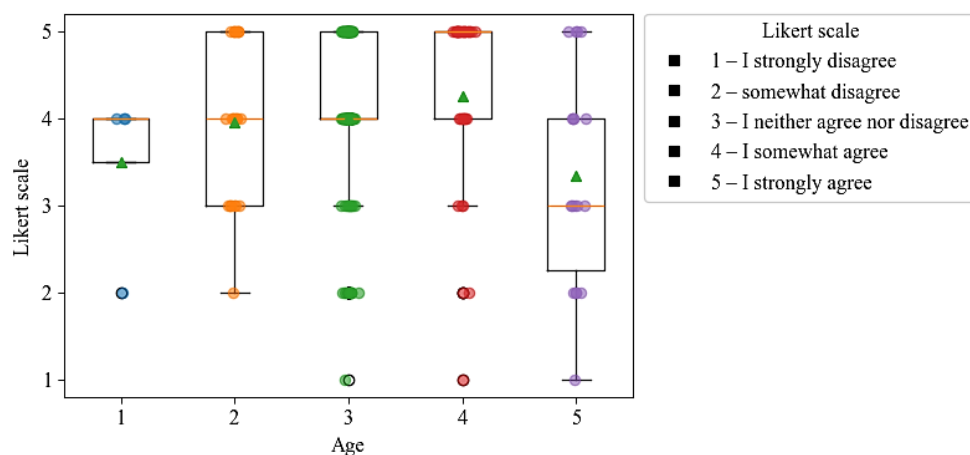


**Figure 3.** Assessment of the consideration of employees' opinions in the change implementation process depending on respondents' age.

Source: own study.

Based on post-hoc tests (Dunn's test with Holm correction), significantly higher scores were observed among respondents aged 36-45 compared with those aged over 55 ( $p_{adj} = 0.023$ ,  $\delta = 0.415$ ). A significant result was also recorded in relation to length of employment ( $H = 27.48$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Employees with 11-20 years of service rated the consideration of their opinions in the process of implementing changes more highly (84.4%) than those with 6-10 years of service (63.0%) ( $p_{adj} = 0.000$ ;  $\delta = -0.25$ ) and those with more than 20 years of service (41.2%) ( $p_{adj} = 0.000$ ;  $\delta = 0.661$ ).

The final statement from the first question concerned the assessment of the work environment in terms of opportunities for personal development. Here as well, age proved to be a significant factor ( $H = 10.81$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). Approximately 3.0% of the variance in results can be explained by differences between the groups studied, indicating a weak effect size. It was shown that respondents in the 46-55 age group rated developmental opportunities in the workplace more highly than those aged over 55 ( $p_{adj} = 0.021$ ,  $\delta = 0.437$ ). The value of Cliff's delta ( $\delta = 0.437$ ) indicates a correlation strength close to strong. Detailed results are presented in Figure 4.



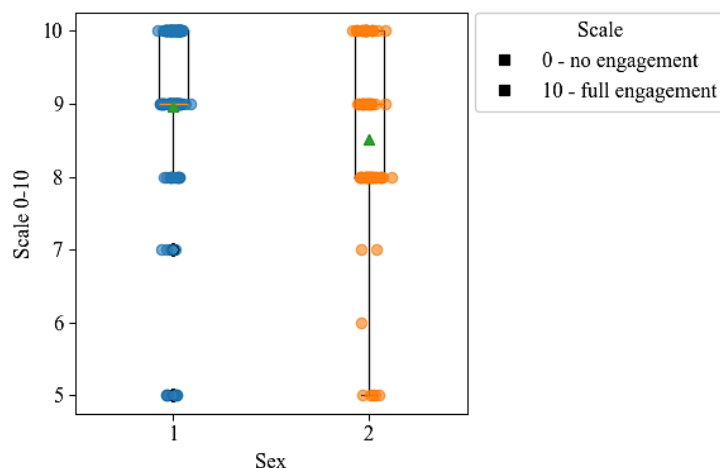
**Figure 4.** Assessment of the work environment in terms of supporting personal development depending on respondents' age.

Source: own study.

Interesting conclusions are also provided by the analysis in terms of length of service, where, similar to the previous issue ( $H = 24.41$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ), employees with 11-20 years of service recorded significantly higher scores than those with 6-10 years of service ( $p_{adj} = 0.000$   $\delta = -0.200$ ) and those with more than 20 years of service ( $p_{adj} = 0.004$   $\delta = 0.437$ ).

In the analysis of the first question, the highest ratings were observed among men in middle-level clerical positions aged 36-45 with 6-10 years of professional experience (24 respondents; 14.4%) and women with analogous demographic characteristics (22 respondents; 13.5%). Attention should also be drawn to the group of respondents who did not award any of the highest scores – these were most often women and men in middle-level positions, aged over 55 and with more than 20 years of service, as well as women with less than one year of experience.

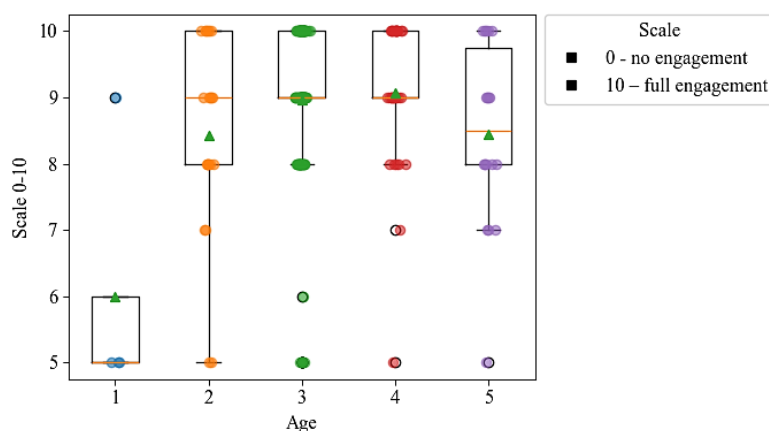
The second question of the questionnaire concerned the declared level of employee engagement in the performance of current duties. Ratings were given on a 10-point scale, where 0 indicated no engagement and 10 indicated full engagement. Analysis using the Mann-Whitney U test showed that women significantly more often than men reported a higher level of engagement ( $U = 3943$ ,  $p = 0.0071$ ). The value of the effect size coefficient ( $r = 0.238$ ) indicates a moderate strength of association, which means that the differences between the groups are significant but of low practical importance. Detailed results are presented in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Level of employee engagement in performing current duties depending on the sex of respondents.

Source: own study.

Taking into account the age of employees, the results were also statistically significant ( $H = 12.51$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ,  $\epsilon^2 = 0.054$ ). Approximately 5.4% of the variance in results can be explained by differences between the groups studied, indicating a moderate effect size. The highest values concerned individuals in the 36-45 and 46-55 age groups. Detailed results are presented in Figure 6.

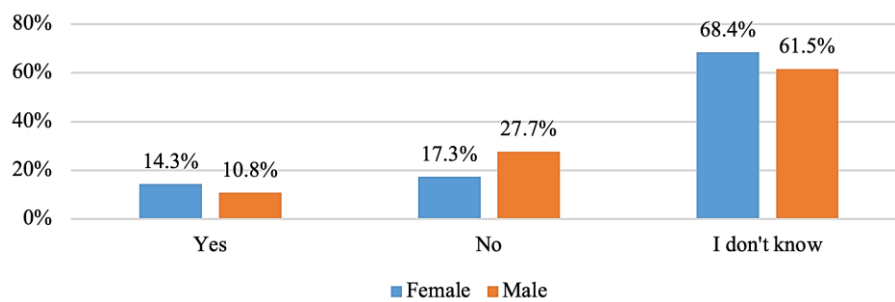


**Figure 6.** Level of employee engagement in performing their current duties depending on the age of respondents.

Source: own study.

In summary, it can be observed that the highest level of work engagement was declared by women in middle-level clerical positions, aged between 36 and 45, with 6-10 years of professional experience (20.9%), as well as by men with the same sociodemographic profile (16.0%).

The next issue addressed in the study concerned employees' sense of appreciation by their supervisors. Regardless of sex, respondents most frequently selected the response "I do not know" (68.4% of women; 61.5% of men). Detailed results are presented in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Perceived appreciation from the supervisor by respondents' sex.

Source: own study.

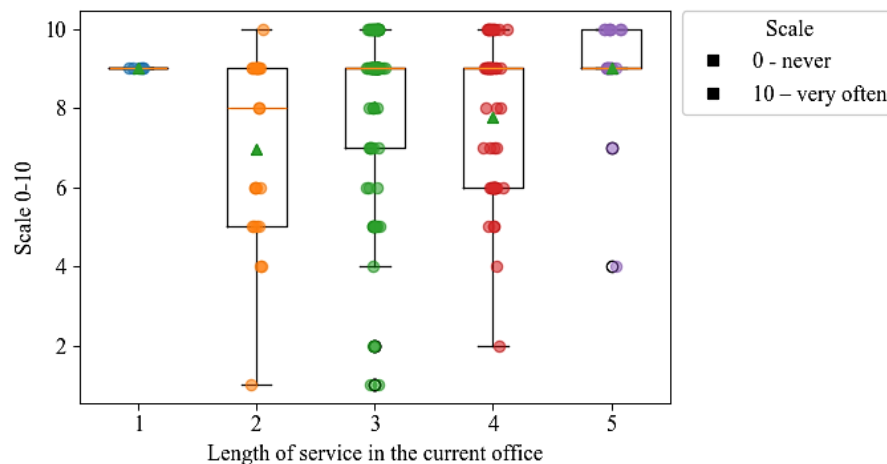
Taking into account the distribution of responses by age, it can be observed that lower ratings were declared by individuals aged between 26 and 55 (on average 12.1%).

In the subsequent part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to determine the frequency of three types of workplace behaviours: receiving positive feedback from a supervisor, engaging in conversations about the team's strengths, and participating in meetings concerning good practices and successes. Ratings were provided on a five-point scale. Analysis of the first statement showed that in both sex groups a high proportion of respondents indicated the options *Often* or *Very often* (83.4% of women; 81.6% of men). The second item revealed that 85.1% of women and 87.8% of men considered that conversations about the team's strengths occur *Often* or *Very often* within the institution. Interesting observations also emerged from the statement concerning participation in meetings where good practices and successes are discussed. In this case, more than half of women (55.8%) and nearly half of men (44.2%) selected the response *Sometimes*.

At the stage of the fifth question, respondents assessed the impact of appreciation and positive feedback on their motivation to work, using a five-point response scale. The results indicate that positive options (*Definitely yes* and *Rather yes*) were chosen by as many as 90.8% of women and 95.4% of men. The strongest increase in motivation was declared by individuals aged 36-45, with 6-10 years of service, employed in middle-level clerical positions (20.1% of women, 18.2% of men). The lowest indications concerned women over 55 years of age with more than 20 years of professional experience (5.5%).

In the sixth question, respondents evaluated the frequency with which their supervisor focused on their achievements, using a 0-10 scale (0 = never, 10 = very often). Responses in the 7-10 range, treated as the highest level of assessment, accounted for an average of 66.5%,

with no significant differences between sex or age groups. Variation appeared only in relation to length of service in the municipal office under study ( $H = 13.30$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ). The  $\varepsilon^2$  coefficient was 0.059, which means that approximately 5.9% of the variability in the results can be attributed to differences between groups, indicating a moderate effect size. It was further shown that respondents with the shortest and longest periods of employment indicated the most frequent recognition of their professional achievements by their supervisor. Detailed results are presented in Figure 8.



**Figure 8.** Frequency of employees' achievements being recognized by the supervisor depending on length of service.

Source: own study.

The next issue examined concerned the elements that most strongly motivate respondents to work. According to 92.0% of those surveyed, the most important factor increasing their engagement at work is appreciation from their supervisor. A total of 66.3% indicated remuneration, while for every second respondent job security and recognition from colleagues were also important (55.8% and 48.5%, respectively). One in five respondents pointed to opportunities for professional development (20.9%), and for one in eight the workplace atmosphere was significant (12.9%). The least important factor proved to be autonomy in action (only 3.7%). Detailed results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

*Factors motivating respondents to work (data in numbers and %)(N = 163)*

Answer to choose from	N	%
Appreciation from superiors	150	92,0
Remuneration	108	66,3
Workstability	91	55,8
Recognition from colleagues	79	48,5
Opportunities for personal development	34	20,9
Team atmosphere	21	12,9
Autonomy in work	6	3,7
Other...what?	0	0

Source: own study.



Looking at the detailed results obtained in this section, it can be observed that respondents, regardless of sex, answered at a similar level across all statements. The only exception was the last item, where intergroup analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences between sexes ( $\chi^2 = 7.397$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $\phi = 0.213$ ). It was found that men (62.2%) valued recognition from colleagues considerably more than women (38.8%). Taking age into account, respondents most frequently selected appreciation from a supervisor, team atmosphere, and remuneration within their respective age categories, while differing in the remaining sub-items. In relation to opportunities for professional development ( $\chi^2 = 13.270$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $V = 0.285$ ), job security ( $\chi^2 = 14.904$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ,  $V = 0.302$ ), autonomy in action ( $\chi^2 = 16.833$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $V = 0.321$ ), and recognition from colleagues ( $\chi^2 = 10.743$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $V = 0.257$ ), respondents aged 46-55 stood out most clearly. For this group, job security was considerably less important (38.2%) compared with the average result of the remaining age groups (60.0%). Autonomy in action, on the other hand, proved to be significant for this group (15.8%) compared with the average of the remaining groups (1.1%). An exception was also observed among employees aged 26-35, for whom job security was the most important factor (81.2%).

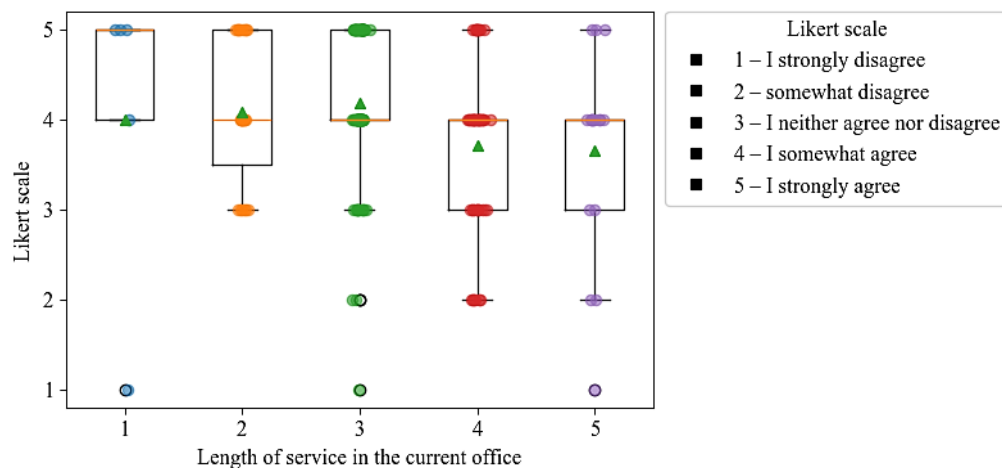
Another issue examined was respondents' perceived influence on matters concerning the team or the entire municipal office. In this context, interesting results emerged with respect to the distribution by age and length of service. Respondents in the age group up to 25 years (25.0%) and with less than one year of service (40.0%) rated their contribution to the functioning of the workplace the lowest.

The study also addressed the assessment of the level of communicative openness within teams, measured on a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). The average level of responses amounted to 64.9%, with higher ratings more frequently declared by men (70.8%) than by women (62.2%).

Another aspect concerned respondents' participation in meetings in the form of workshops, dialogue sessions, or team gatherings aimed at jointly creating visions and solutions during the past 12 months. An affirmative response was indicated by 66.3% of women and 55.4% of men. Variation was also observed with respect to age – only 41.9% of employees aged 46-55 reported participation in such meetings, while in the remaining groups the percentage ranged between 61.8% and 81.0%.

A further issue was the evaluation of three statements relating to respondents' work, assessed on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The first statement concerned the subjective assessment of the importance of one's work for the functioning of the municipal office. Higher ratings were more often declared by women (75.5%) than by men (55.4%). The lowest results were recorded among the youngest respondents (under 25 years of age, with less than one year of service) – 50.2% compared with 61.1-90.2% in the other groups. A similar distribution was obtained for the statement concerning job satisfaction, where the youngest group again indicated the lowest values (50.9-60.2%) compared with a range of 72.1-100.0% in the other age groups.

When analysing the assessments concerning the statement related to the level and quality of open and supportive cooperation within the municipal office, the highest ratings on the scale were declared by 77.6% of women and 70.8% of men. Statistically significant differences were, however, noted in relation to length of service ( $H = 9.82$ ;  $p = 0.04$ ). The value of the coefficient  $\epsilon^2 = 0.037$  indicates that approximately 3.7% of the variability in the results can be attributed to differences between groups, which means that the effect size is low. Employees with 6-10 years of professional experience, compared with those with 11-20 years, rated the quality of cooperation within teams more highly ( $p = 0.06$ ,  $\delta = -0.069$ ). Detailed results are presented in Figure 9.



**Figure 9.** Assessment of the openness and supportive nature of team cooperation depending on length of service.

Source: own study.

The final issue examined was the perception of the desirability of introducing a greater number of initiatives in the municipal office based on everyday employee appreciation. Respondents assessed this matter on a five-point scale (1 = definitely yes, 5 = definitely no). The results indicate that such a solution is highly desirable – 88.5% of respondents gave affirmative responses, regardless of sex. In the age groups up to 25 years and over 55 years, all respondents (100.0%) selected *Definitely yes* or *Rather yes*, whereas in the remaining age and service categories the percentage averaged 85.5%.

## 5. Discussion

The main hypothesis (MH) in the conducted research assumed that an appreciative inquiry (AI) has a positive and significant impact on the level of engagement of local government employees. The empirical results confirmed the validity of this assumption, pointing to the strong importance of practices based on appreciation and positive feedback for strengthening motivation and maintaining a high level of commitment to work.

The confirmation of the main hypothesis is consistent with a broad body of research indicating that appreciation, recognition and positive feedback are among the most important factors shaping employee engagement. In terms of the JD-R (Job Demands-Resources) model, such practices serve as key work resources that support the motivational process and protect against burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Mazzetti et al., 2021). Field research consistently shows that recognition from superiors enhances employee satisfaction and effectiveness, while a lack of recognition is associated with decreased motivation and withdrawal from organisational activity (Brun, Dugas, 2008; Saks, 2006). Appreciation practices are particularly important in public organisations, where financial motivation is often not the main factor determining attitudes towards work. In this context, recognition and constructive feedback become essential tools for strengthening loyalty and commitment, which is also reflected in the literature on public administration (Vigoda-Gadot, Beerli, 2012). At the same time, research shows that the effects of AI are not only the result of individual interventions, but require systemic implementation and a supportive leadership style (Bushe, Kassam, 2005). The importance of appreciation is also highlighted by recent analyses, which indicate that recognition programmes in organisations – both private and public – lead to a marked increase in engagement, quality of cooperation and innovation (Yang, Jiang, Cheng, 2022). What is more, regular feedback strengthens employees' sense of influence on the functioning of the organisation and builds a climate of psychological safety that promotes openness and knowledge sharing (Edmondson, Bransby, 2023; Frazier et al., 2016). The collected results therefore indicate that an appreciative approach can be an effective mechanism for supporting engagement in public administration, as long as it is linked to an organisational culture based on recognition, transparent communication and an inclusive leadership style.

The first specific hypothesis assumed the existence of a positive and statistically significant relationship between the perception of appreciative inquiry (AI) and the level of professional engagement of local government employees. Correlation analysis showed only partial confirmation of this relationship. The relationship proved to be significant, although at a weak level in relation to the frequency of positive feedback ( $\rho = 0.258$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), but no confirmation was obtained for other indicators related to appreciation, such as discussions about strengths or participation in meetings focused on the exchange of good practices. The partial confirmation of the hypothesis indicates that positive feedback plays a key role in building professional engagement, which is consistent with the results of previous studies. The literature consistently emphasises that regular and constructive feedback is one of the main resources at work that influences motivation and willingness to make additional efforts (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Mazzetti et al., 2021). At the same time, the lack of significant correlations with other elements of the appreciative approach may indicate the limited effectiveness of selected practices in the context of public administration. Bushe and Kassam (2005) noted that AI-based interventions are transformative only when accompanied by deep dialogue and genuine employee involvement in the co-creation process. Otherwise, their impact may be weak

or difficult to grasp. Similar observations are contained in critical analyses of Appreciative Inquiry, pointing to the risk of reducing this approach to superficial rituals that do not always translate into actual attitudes and behaviours of employees (Grant, Humphries, 2006).

The second specific hypothesis assumed that the most important factors motivating and supporting the professional commitment of public administration employees are positive feedback, recognition of achievements, and the opportunity to co-create the organisation's vision. Statistical analysis partially confirmed this assumption, indicating a significant although at a weak level relationship between receiving positive feedback and the declared level of commitment ( $\rho = 0.258$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). However, no analogous relationships were found with regard to recognition of achievements and participation in the process of co-creating the organisational vision. The partial confirmation of the hypothesis suggests that, among the factors analysed, it is positive feedback that has the most direct impact on the level of commitment. The literature emphasises that providing systematic, constructive and positive feedback increases the sense of competence, strengthens internal motivation and promotes pro-organisational behaviour (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Yang, Jiang, Cheng, 2022). The lack of significant correlations in terms of recognition of achievements may indicate that in organisational practice it is not always communicated in a clear and consistent manner. Brun and Dugas (2008) point out that the discrepancy between the actual contribution of employees and the perceived level of recognition is a common barrier to the effectiveness of incentive programmes. Similarly, co-creating the organisation's vision did not show a correlation with engagement, which may result from the limited influence of local government employees on decision-making processes and the hierarchical nature of local government structures (Vigoda-Gadot, Beerli, 2012; Ingrams, 2018). Research indicates that participation and co-creation are only effective when accompanied by genuine employee involvement and appropriate leadership styles, such as inclusive leadership (Ashikali, Groeneveld, Kuipers, 2021).

The third specific hypothesis assumed that management actions based on the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach contribute to the creation of a positive organisational climate and improve the quality of relationships within employee teams. Statistical analysis provided partial confirmation of this thesis, indicating a significant correlation, although at a weak level between discussions about the team's strengths and the assessment of cooperation as open and supportive ( $\rho = 0.165$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). The results obtained indicate that practices related to the appreciative approach can foster the development of an organisational climate based on openness and mutual support. Research confirms that conversations focusing on team strengths not only increase trust and cohesion, but also support the creation of a work environment conducive to learning and cooperation (Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros, 2008; Bushe, Kassam, 2005). At the same time, the literature emphasises that the effectiveness of AI practices depends on their embedding in a broader organisational context and on leadership style. In the public sector, inclusive leadership is crucial, as it strengthens a climate of openness and participation, thereby

increasing the likelihood that appreciation-based actions will have a lasting impact on inter-employee relations (Ashikali, Groeneveld, Kuipers, 2021). The results of empirical research suggest that although the mere presence of conversations about strengths does not guarantee profound transformation, their consistent implementation, combined with an inclusive management style and a culture of openness, can significantly contribute to improving the organisational climate and the quality of cooperation.

The study provided important insights into the role of the appreciative approach in public administration. The results confirm that elements such as positive feedback and discussions about the strengths of the team promote engagement and the quality of cooperation, although their effectiveness is not uniform. At the same time, there are still areas that require further improvement, especially in terms of the clarity of recognition from superiors and the systematic implementation of measures based on daily appreciation of employees.

## 6. Conclusions

The study confirms that the implementation of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach in the field of local government administration yields positive results. This primarily concerns interpersonal relationships, the quality of cooperation, and employee engagement. Particularly significant was the role of supervisors, whose recognition was identified by respondents as an important motivational factor- often rated higher than material incentives such as salary or job security. The findings also indicate that the frequency of receiving positive feedback translates into an increase in declared employee engagement.

According to respondents, elements of the appreciative approach were present in the daily functioning of the municipal office, which positively influenced job satisfaction and the sense of meaning at work. Conversations about team strengths and employee involvement in change processes were rated especially highly. However, their impact on engagement was found to be less straightforward than that of systematic positive feedback. The results therefore suggest that, while elements of an appreciative culture play an important role in shaping a climate of trust and shared responsibility, their effectiveness is diverse and depends on organisational context and leadership style.

In human resource management practice within local government administration, it is advisable to consider integrating elements of the appreciative approach into HR procedures to strengthen their motivational dimension. Municipal office leadership should treat AI not only as a tool for supporting relationships but also as a component of organisational strategy that can increase the attractiveness of the office as a workplace.

It must be emphasised, however, that this research was designed as a case study. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all local government administration units in Poland. Moreover, the study was conducted within one local organisational culture and at a specific point in the institution's development, which may have influenced respondents' evaluations.

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out the prospects for further research on this issue. It seems particularly interesting to conduct longitudinal studies that would capture the long-term effects of appreciative practices. Such studies would allow for the observation of changes over time at the level of individual units and entire teams, which seems to be a particularly interesting direction of analysis in the case of the discussed topic. Such research would make it possible to distinguish between short-term effects and permanent behaviour patterns. One source of inspiration here is the use of several measurement waves, which would allow for modelling the trajectory of engagement and the impact of the frequency of appreciation practices on its dynamics.

It is also worth considering the use of triangulation of research methods and supplementing surveys with in-depth interviews, which allow for a deeper insight into the subject under study and would make it possible to extract a broader dimension of employees' experiences related to appreciation. In subsequent studies, it is worth adopting specific indicators, e.g. the level of engagement in daily professional duties, organisational climate, psychological safety, leadership style. In this regard, it is recommended to use repeated questionnaire measurements and quantitative analyses based on structural equation modelling, growth curve models and multilevel models. This perspective would allow for a better understanding of the sustainability of the effects and identify factors that promote or limit the implementation of the appreciative approach in local government administration.

Another interesting approach would be to include additional groups of respondents in the research and take into account the perspective of external stakeholders (e.g. citizens, local organisations, cooperating institutions) and to conduct inter-organisational comparisons based on analyses in various local government offices and institutions.

Consequently, future analyses may contribute to the development of effective practical recommendations that will support the growth of a culture of appreciation in the local government sector, thereby strengthening the foundations of efficient and citizen-friendly administration.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the management of the city council in the Silesian Province for granting permission to conduct scientific research.

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