

**Employability enhancement for career future: new practice of human resource  
management in Polish public organizations**

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# **Employability enhancement for career future: new practice of human resource management in Polish public organizations**

**ABSTRACT:** *The paper tries to answer the following questions: what individual factors decide about employability of employees in public sectors, what practices of HRM are used to enhance employability of employees and what are the key differences in employability management practices in organizations of different sectors of public services in Poland as well as is employability enhancement connected with the career success of employees in public organizations. These aims will be achieved by presenting the results of 47 semi-structured interviews carried out with the top-management of public schools, health care entities, institutions of social welfare and labour market as well as public administration.*

**Keywords:** career development, human resource development, HR policies, innovation

## **INTRODUCTION**

New concepts of public management emphasize the role of human capital of public organizations as the key factor which decides about the success of these organizations. Because the practice of management clearly indicates that the traditional approach to a personnel function which has been mostly limited to the administration of personnel issues has not suited the needs of contemporary public organizations and their employees, also the way in which this capital is managed is evolving. In public organizations various attempts to apply HRM methods and instruments previously used in the private sector are undertaken. Simultaneously, requirements regarding employees increase in the public sector. Nowadays, an employee is expected to have not only a high level of professional knowledge and skills but also a variety of general competences to quickly adapt to changing needs of the organizations. Moreover, changes in employment relationships have led to replacing previous employment security with the so-called employability security (Tangian, 2008). These changes are particularly clear in the transforming Polish public sector in which employment restructuring is often connected with the necessity to dismiss or move some employees to other jobs. The traditional model of lifelong employment, which was characteristic of the Polish public sector before the system transformation, is more and more often replaced with temporary contract-based arrangements (Strużyna, 2009; Marzec, 2015). To face these challenges, Polish employees must continuously develop their competences and enhance their employability.

The paper tries to answer the following questions: what competences decide about employability of employees in the public sectors, what are the practices of HRM applied in Polish

public organizations to enhance employability of employees and what are the key differences in employability enhancement practices provided in the different sectors of the public services as well as is employability enhancement connected with the career success of employees in the Polish public organizations? These aims are realized by presenting the results of 47 semi-structured interviews carried out with the top-management in organizations providing the key types of public services, i.e. education, healthcare, social welfare and labour market as well as public administration.

### **EMPLOYABILITY: A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In the last two decades employability has become a subject often discussed not only in the social and labour market policy but also in HRM literature because the issues of employability may be analyzed in many various contexts. Moreover, the concept of employability has evolved over time and its sense has changed (Marzec, 2015). However, in the literature on the subject two basic but mutually related perspectives can be distinguished, i.e. individual and macroeconomic perspectives. In each of these perspectives this concept is differently defined and understood. The researchers who represent the macroeconomic approach emphasize the objective aspect of employability, i.e. factors which are external and mostly independent from an individual, e.g. the situation on the labour market, while others representing the individual approach, stress its subjective aspects connected with an individual.

The notion of employability is often used in the context of the problems of unemployment, labour market and social policy. Since the 1990s, a high level of unemployment in Europe has led to the increase of its political and social significance. Employability has even started to be used as a symbol of the problems connected with the transition from the industrial society to the post-industrial society (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). On the other hand, changes in employment relationships and growing popularity of new career models result in moving the responsibility for employees' career management from organizations to individuals who become the entrepreneurs of their own job career. At the same time, to limit personnel costs and to increase numerical flexibility of human resources, the so-called flexible forms of employment have become commonly used in the private sector. In this individualistic perspective employability is defined from the supply side and it is connected with various attributes of individuals, which determine their ability to deal with the

situation on the labour market. In response to the dynamic changes in the environment, organizations have started to look for new sources of competitive advantages. The limitation of developmental activities and changes in employment contracts to increase numerical flexibility of human resources have appeared to be an insufficient basis for creating competitive advantage of the organization in the area of HRM. In practice, they have mostly led to the decrease of employees' competences, loyalty and commitment and the division of organizational human resources. Therefore, some organizations have strived for the increase of functional flexibility of their human resources. They have started to support the broad development of employees' competences encompassing generic competences which are transferable across jobs and organizations, thereby enhancing the employability of employees. From this perspective employability is connected with functional flexibility of an employee and his/her ability to adapt to changes on the internal and external labour market.

According to Forrier and Sels (2003, p. 105), internal employability concerns chances of employees for employment on the internal labour market of the organization and external employability is related to his/her possibilities for employment on the external labour market. However, due to the significance of employee's knowledge on the specific conditions of functioning of public organizations and high specialization of competences characteristic of numerous jobs in the public sector services, the internal employability can be considered in the broader sense, i.e. as an employee's chances for employment on the internal labour market of the public sector or even as an employee's chances for employment on the internal labour market of public organizations providing a given type of services. In this context particular attention should also be paid to the competence-based approach proposed by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), who point out that not only occupational exercise but also specific generic competences. According to Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006), these competences encompass personal flexibility, optimization and anticipation, corporate sense and balance. However, it should be noticed, that this model was validated in the private sector and it is not adjusted to the needs of both public organizations and their employees.

## **EMPLOYABILITY IN POLISH PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS**

Before the system transformation Polish public organizations were directed mainly by political issues. The process of political and economic reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s led to the situation that public organizations faced the necessity to meet the expectations of the democratic society. This situation resulted in numerous changes in management, encompassing changes in personnel function, which also consisted in employment restructuring. Many public organizations have started to perform according to the same rules as private organizations. Nowadays, to improve effectiveness of Polish public organizations, persistent attempts are undertaken to introduce methods and tools of HRM used in the private sector into public organizations. However, due to the specific role and aims of these organizations in the society as well as the existing political, socio-economic and legal conditions, these efforts do not always bring the expected results. In many sectors of public services legal regulations often indicate at the necessity to continue the improvement of job qualifications, e.g. in the public administration. They also determine general principles regarding employees' competences, employment forms and dismissing employees. Nowadays, because of low mobility of Polish public sector employees the need to enhance employment flexibility and employability has also started to be strongly emphasized.

On the other hand, the achievement of the specific, long-term social aims of public organizations requires some stability of employment. However, this stability which is connected with employment security should rather be considered as employment security in the organization or in the sector. In this context, the issue of internal employability enhancement acquires special importance because many jobs in public organizations require a high level of occupational expertise as well as knowledge of characteristic conditions of the functioning of these organizations. This particularly concerns public administration where the specificity of tasks leads to the situation that, on the one hand, employees' specialist skills and experience gained in these organizations are difficult to fully use in other sectors but on the other hand, they condition the proper accomplishment of job duties in the public administration (Szewczyk, 2010). High employability of employees enables their lateral movement in accordance with the current staffing needs of the organization. Therefore, public organizations can provide highly employable employees with some security of employment in exchange for their greater adaptability and flexibility. Higher stability of employment is accompanied

with a bigger consistency in achieving organizational aims because it encourages employees' commitment in their realization. Additionally, enhancement of employees' employability increases functional flexibility of organizational human resources. It limits the danger of the possible excess of employees and the necessity to make them redundant. Highly employable employees who possess occupational expertise and who know the conditions of a given sector of public services are a beneficial asset enabling the organization to achieve its aims. Premature dismissal of employees is a waste of valuable capital. However, undoubtedly, the need for flexibility is not only connected with the necessity to support employees' employability enhancement but it is also involved in modification of the preferred forms of employment in public organizations. As Kozuch (2009, p. 38) pointed out, the applied forms of employment allow to 'diagnose whether passive administration or public management dominates' in the organization. This problem is particularly evident in the public administration and it is reflected in the growing popularity of the use of employment forms previously typical for the private sector.

## **THE RESEARCH METHOD**

Semi-structured interviews with top managers were conducted from June to August of 2015 as the first stage of the two-year research program. The interviews were carried out in 47 organizations of different sectors of public services in Poland, i.e. education, healthcare, social welfare and labour market services as well as public administration. They encompassed 8 public primary schools, 11 public healthcare entities, 7 municipal social welfare centers, 9 labour offices and 12 municipal councils which represent the fundamental organizations providing the listed kinds of public services in Poland. In order to get a more complete view of the situation, organizations operating in southern, northern, central, eastern and western Poland were targeted. It was assumed that in each organization at least one interview with the representative of the top management should be conducted.

The study of literature on the subject revealed that there is a lack of knowledge on factors which determine employability and conditions of its enhancement in the Polish public organizations. The main aims of the interviews were to answer the following questions:

- what factors decide about employability of employees in the examined public organizations?

- what practices of HRM are applied in these public organizations to enhance employability of their employees?
- do these practices vary according to the kind of activity of the organizations?
- is employability enhancement connected with the career success of employees in public organizations?

Interviews were carried out in line with the previously prepared protocol. They started with the arrangement of the discussion, explanations of aims, the raised subjects, and the notion of employability. The interviews encompassed 32 questions regarding the situation in the Polish public sector, organizational HRM strategy, factors deciding about employability of employees, the conditions and the outcomes of employability enhancement (only the key results are presented in the paper). The duration of interviews varied between 35 and 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and taped after getting the approval of interviewees and then transcribed. In their analysis a coding schema was applied. In this coding schema the questions constituted core labels in which similar statements of the interviewees were grouped into categories representing comparable answering patterns (Baarda, de Goede & Teunissen, 1995). They were aggregated into the analysis to create an overall frequency table of responses (Scholarios et al., 2008, p. 1041).

### **RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS' ANALYSIS**

The vast majority of the interviewed managers maintained that in their organizations the management's attention is paid to issues of enhancement of employees' employability (45 persons). Only in public administration 2 persons said that in their organizations the management does not care about employees' employability. The necessity to enhance employability of employees was particularly emphasized in health care entities. In labour offices some respondents indicated that they strive to enhance their employees' employability but it is difficult due to high costs of such actions. Some also stressed that organizational support for employability enhancement in public organizations is guaranteed by existing legal regulations (respondents at schools and labour offices). The interviewees claimed that in their organizations employees have various opportunities to enhance employability. Generally, in the opinions of the examined managers, public organizations provide their employees with a lot of

possibilities of improving qualifications and professional development. The most frequently mentioned activities were trainings (33 persons). They were the most popular at the labour offices and social welfare centers, i.e. all respondents of these organizations listed trainings. The interviewees also indicated at some parts of the training cycle, e.g. planning training. One of the headmasters of a public school stated *'every year we formulate training plans and pay attention to the development of competencies (...)'*. Some also mentioned definite forms of trainings e.g. internal, external trainings, courses, conferences, postgraduate studies, etc. Others listed activities included, e.g. self-education (6 persons), study leaves (2 persons), employment planning (2 persons), evaluation and self-evaluation (2 persons), etc. Simultaneously, interviewees explained that the choice of the form of training is dependent on the financial resources of their organization hence they try to *'gain funds from the municipal council (...). We also try to participate in a variety of additional programs financed by the EU (...)'*. Moreover, the positive impact of the exchange of knowledge and information between employees was the most strongly stressed in health-care entities. Some respondents also linked employability enhancement with career planning. This was particularly evident in education and public administration organizations, where career paths of employees are the most clearly defined. Managers of these organizations explained that employability enhancement is related with employee advancement and receiving financial bonuses (e.g. in health-care entities) in their organizations. However, some managers of the labour offices and social welfare centers expressed opinions that there is no career planning in their organizations and that the limited financial recourses do not allow them for any financial bonuses for employees who enhance their employability. Some of the interviewees also pointed out to the importance of proper designing of employees' compensation and appraisal systems which should motivate employees to employability enhancement, i.e. in municipal offices and schools where employees' appraisal is compulsory due to legal regulations. According to interviewees, job appraisal positively affects employability because it mobilizes employees to development, affects lateral and upward movements of employees and negative job appraisal leads to an employee's dismissal. It should also be noticed that generally the most diverse activities aimed at employability enhancement were undertaken in health-care entities.

Contemporary literature on the subject puts emphasis on the influence of job design on employability (Marzec, 2015; Van der Heijden & Bakker, 2011). The complex work content, various



and challenging job tasks allow employees to enrich job experience, learn and improve their competences. However, the answer to the question concerning the frequency of changes in the job content and tasks given by the vast majority of managers was that they are rare in their organizations. The job content and tasks are the most frequently changed in municipal councils (7 persons) and public schools (4 persons) and such changes are the least frequent in social welfare centers (2 persons) and labour offices (2 persons). Managers of these organizations maintained that these changes are impossible due to the existing legal regulations. Simultaneously, most of the interviewees expressed the opinion that changes in the job content and tasks give employees the possibility to learn, enrich job experience, develop new skills and *'enhance an employee's position on the labour market'*.

In the opinions of the examined managers, they can also influence employability of their subordinates (39 persons) because *'a supervisor may affect the direction of employee's development and the possibility of advancement'*. The style of leadership is also an important factor because leaders encouraging subordinates to participate in decision making processes and who delegate their tasks create for their employees the opportunity to learn and enhance their employability. The majority of the examined managers claimed that their subordinates participate in decision making (36 persons).

In the literature on the subject it is also pointed out that participation of employees in the professional network enhances employability (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Bozionelos, 2003), hence employees' opportunities for cooperation with other people inside and outside the examined organizations as well as their potential impact on employability were also examined. Mostly the interviewees said that their organizations provide support for the development of their employees' professional network through frequent contacts with employees of other departments and organizations (35 persons). Only in health care entities a lot of managers maintained that the cooperation with other organizations is rather limited (7 persons). At the same time the majority of interviewees stated that an extensive professional network *'results in employees' development and increases employees' knowledge'* and enhances employees' employability because employees *'can use it for looking for a new job'*.

Next, the significance of some specific features which may determine individual employability in the public sector was examined. They encompassed professional knowledge and skills, flexibility and adaptability, proactiveness, ethical, civil, and social competencies, willingness to learn and develop as

well as the ability to keep balance between work and home life. In the context of value of professional knowledge and skills which were considered by most of the respondents as the key factor determining employability both in private and public sectors (44 persons), interviewees often stressed that work at the public sector requires specific knowledge concerning this sector. Additionally, they indicated that many jobs in the examined organizations providing such specific types of public services as education, healthcare, social welfare, labour market services and public administration require formal qualifications which are some indicator of occupational expertise.

It should be noticed that employees of the public organizations need to meet high standards of behaviour expected in the professions of social trust such as teacher, doctor or civil servant. It also suggests that the specificity of these jobs demands from employees a high level of ethical and civic competences. Therefore it is not surprising that the vast majority of respondents claimed that ethical and civic competences are key factors determining employability in each of the examined sectors of public services (45 persons). As one of the managers of municipal offices explained, these competences are crucial because *'we work in an entity which serves the society'*. Some maintained that *'these competences are necessary, we need people with mission'*. The vast majority of the managers expressed similar opinions regarding social competences and they claimed that social competences are an important factor determining employability of public sector employees (41 persons). However, the significance of social competences was particularly stressed at schools, where headmasters stated that these competences are required *'due to the specificity of the jobs at schools'* and *'the lack of social competences makes it impossible to realize statutory tasks of a school or it may lead to the decrease of work quality and no headmaster should allow the decrease of work quality of the entity'*.

Also proactiveness was acknowledged by most of the respondents as an important factor of employability (44 persons), although its importance was differently evaluated by respondents depending on the type of the examined public organization. Its impact was emphasized in health care entities and schools, where all respondents expressed the opinion that today proactiveness is one of the key factors deciding about an employee's ability to find and to maintain a job, regardless the sector. In public administration some respondents claimed that proactiveness is more important in private organizations than in the public sector. More explicitly respondents assessed the employees' willingness to learn and

develop as well as their adaptability and flexibility. The quick changes in the public sector, instability of Polish legal regulations, the dynamic increase of knowledge and high social expectations regarding the quality of public services impose the necessity to learn and continuously improve their competences on employees who want to stay employable, hence the majority of interviewees expressed a strong belief that the willingness to learn and develop is a significant factor of employability (44 persons). Similarly, the vast majority of interviewees stated (45 persons) that today willingness to learn and develop is an important feature deciding about maintaining and getting a job both in private and public organizations. Some also pointed out that persons who are endowed with this feature do worse in dealing with the situation on the internal and external labour market (4 persons).

The contemporary literature on the subject more and more often indicates that an employee's ability to balance work between home life as well as self-interest and interest of the organization is an important feature deciding about long-term employability (e.g. Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). According to interviewees this competence prevents job burnout of employees, it influences work outcomes and enables an employee to focus on his or her career plans (35 persons). One of the respondents explained: *'if there is no balance an employee will lose their work sooner or quicker and this will be a loss for both the employee and the organization'*. This attribute was the most strongly stressed at schools where all respondents acknowledged that today it is an important factor determining employability.

Finally, the relationships between employability enhancement and employees' career development and success were examined. Most of the interviewees stated that employability enhancement increases an employee's chances for a career success (34 persons). They stressed that employability enhancement creates the possibility of promotion (11 persons) but only a few respondents maintained that it results in salary raise (3 persons). They explained that employability enhancement is connected more with the subjective success than with the objective career success. Respondents stated that the possibility of employability enhancement gives them satisfaction because *'the employer cares about their career future'* and, as some managers stated *'they can always use the acquired knowledge and experience elsewhere'*. Conversely, in some opinions, the chances for promotion are limited in public organizations,

same as the salary raise, what leads to '*frustration and dissatisfaction of employees*'. Generally, career development was the most strongly connected with employability enhancement in health care entities.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Changes in the environment and in the Polish public sector determine future directions of employees' development hence special attention should be paid to the issue of employees' employability and its enhancement in public organizations. The analysis of the interviews revealed that employability is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which, besides professional knowledge and skills, also encompasses several general attributes, such as e.g. flexibility and adaptability, proactiveness, willingness to learn and develop as well as an employee's ability to keep balance between work and home life. Moreover, interviews showed that employability of public sectors employees is also determined by several specific competences of employees i.e. social, ethical and civic competences. However, in the light of the results it seems that some competences have a different importance in various types of public services. The significance of proactiveness was more stressed in public health care entities and schools, which are more directed by market rules, due to the competition of private organizations also providing these kinds of services. Ethical and civic competences were particularly emphasized in the Polish public administration. Existing legal regulations stipulate that moral and ethical behaviours are required from Polish employees of the public administration because of their special role in the society. Social competences were acknowledged by respondents as crucial at schools, due to the characteristics of the jobs at the education sector. The results also showed that the management of the examined organizations is aware of the importance of the problem of employability enhancement, However, the carried out interviews indicated that the range of possibilities for employability enhancement offered to employees in the examined organizations providing different types of public services is still rather limited. Despite declarations of the managers, the activity in this area seems to focus mainly on trainings. Moreover, the possibility of training is often dependent on small financial resources of Polish public organizations, what was particularly evident in public administration. On the other hand, also other activities were recognized as important factors influencing employability. Interviews revealed a special role of leadership and such its aspects as a style, employees' participation

in decision making processes and the quality of relationships between a supervisor and their subordinates in employability enhancement. However, their impact on employability is dependent on the sector of public services. In the sectors where the model of autocratic leadership and hierarchy are commonly accepted (e.g. Polish public administration and healthcare entities) their positive influence on employability seems to be limited. The results also showed that the job design and professional networks are significant conditions of employability enhancement but simultaneously interviews revealed that the possibility to change the job content and to enhance its learning value is rather small in the public organizations due to high specialization and existing legal rules, what was particularly stressed in welfare centers and labour offices. A cause for concern is also the rare use of career management practices to enhance employability and encourage employees' professional development in public organizations. The conducted interviews showed that employability enhancement related to the career success of employees in the Polish public organizations is more connected with the possibility of promotion and subjective career success than with the salary raise. This fact also suggests a dysfunction in the rewarding systems of these organizations.

The limitations of the study also need to be discussed. The paper only presents the results of preliminary qualitative research on employability in the Polish public organizations. In future, quantitative research measurement instruments of employability adapted to the needs of employees in the public sector should be constructed (Marzec, 2015). The significance of the identified individual factors of employability and the influence of the discussed organizational conditions of employability enhancement should be also examined in the future research.

The issues of employability of public sector employees and its enhancement are still rarely analyzed by researchers and only few empirical studies focused on employability of public sector employees have been carried out. However, high specificity of this sector implies the necessity to take into consideration characteristic features of public organizations which impose expectations regarding their employees and their employability. It should be stressed that by providing insight into the problems of employability and its enhancement, the further studies of this phenomenon will contribute to theory building on employees' developmental practices in the public organizations.

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