

# THE PUBLIC SERVANTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS WITHIN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION – A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *The goal of this paper was to assess the communication efficiency within local public administration in Crisana Region. It also aims to explore factors predicting employees satisfaction regarding communication process. Using qualitative research were investigated public servants' opinions on the communication in local public administration. As an exploratory study, it was performed a content analysis of information gathered from the interviews organized in the two most largest local public institutions in Crisana Region. The particularities of the internal and external communication are analyzed. In addition, it was taken into consideration the importance of citizen involvement in local government and the requirements for the citizen oriented applications. By analyzing data it was possible to highlight the aspects that please or discontent the clerks regarding the communication with their colleagues, their chiefs, the citizens they serve or other institutions. Therefore every participant in the study presented a positive and a negative critical incident on local communication. It was revealed the crucial role of the dispatch to obtain information by public servants on the one hand and citizens on the other hand. Measures for ensuring the institutions transparency and fairness are described. The public servants emphasized some aspects that are characteristic to the communication within large institution inference. This paper offers a view on the communication process seen from the inside. The collected data are used for verifying the hypotheses regarding the difference in the public servants' perception regarding internal and external communication within local public communication. The interviewed employees stated that authorities granted more importance to external communication than internal communication. Accordingly, is needed an improvement to the means and applications through which internal communication operates because the participants are less satisfied with it. The research findings, certainly reflected the genuine desire of public servants to find better ways to communicate with the public.*

**Keywords:** *public servants, external communication, internal communication, transparency, citizen involvement*

**JEL classification:** *M31*

## **1. Literature review**

For the public sector, communication represents an important but delicate part among its responsibilities. Modern public organizations have in the centre of the concerns aspects regarding efficient communication, citizen involvement in public decisions and increasing performance and quality.

Vos (2009: 362) stated that communication quality measurement can clarify the added value that communication has for governmental organizations, support accountability and help set priorities for the organization's communication policy.

In his work Zeff (2008) proposes a framework for a corporate communication scorecard, including elements such as rising stock values and community programs using sponsorship that do not correspond to the activities of municipalities.

Upton (1954: 152) pleaded for the implication of the citizens in the act of governing. Despite the fact that politicians and administrators declared interest in increasing public involvement in public decisions, there is considerable evidence to suggest that these efforts are not effective (Crosby, Kelly, and Schaefer, 1986, Kathleen, Lyn and Martin, 1991, Kweit, and Kweit, 1981).

Potentially, all of a community's residents have an interest in the findings of the most effective solutions for their problems, yet clearly everyone cannot participate in public decision making, and not every interested group can sit at the table to discuss the issues regarding their community (Pearce, 2005: 6). Although not all citizens show interest in the governments' activity, in policymaking, public organizations have to be transparent and need to communicate responsibly about unfinished matters that are still under discussion (Gelders, Bouckaert and Ruler, 2007: 34-35).

Yusoff, Ismail and Ali (2010: 236) stated that internal and external customers are essential to be the main contributing factors of organizational success. Therefore, understanding the internal and external customer's satisfaction is relatively crucial in order to ensure that the employees are able to provide the quality service delivery system at all times.

Consideration of how clerks view the internal and external communication from their institution might help to explain the overall communication process within local public administration.

Pandey and Garnett (2006: 41-42) designed a construct model of communication within public administration. The construct model had three dimensions of communication performance- interpersonal communication, external communication and internal communication which are influenced by goal clarity, organizational culture, organizational size and red tape. In addition, Robbins (1998: 260) states that smaller groups are faster at completing tasks than are larger ones (which affects communication performance), however, he points out that large groups do better if engaged in problem solving.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The research project followed a series of key stages. To collect data were organized in depth interviews in the two most largest local public institutions in Crisana Region.

This investigation was used as exploratory qualitative research.

Considering roles of external and internal communications for the effectiveness of the overall communication process, it was hypothesized that:

H : There is a difference in public servants' perception of satisfaction regarding external and internal communication.

Because were investigated only the communities with a total population exceeding 200,000 citizens and by taking into account the specific of the region respectively Hungarian minority is dominant at a rate of approx. 20-25% of the total population, the communities selection was summarized to the Bihor County. Consequently, the

only communities that meet the two conditions were Oradea City Hall and the Bihor County Council.

The selection of the participants for the in-depth interviews was conducted by the management of each institution. Following the writing request and verbal discussions with the institution managers of those institutions, were approved the number of people who will participate and the interviews schedule. 40 in-depth interviews were conducted (23 interviews - Bihor County Council and 17 interviews - Oradea City Hall).

The interviews had some features:

- the discussions were audio-recorded for later analysis,
- the interview guide,
- at the end of the interview participants also completed a demographics questionnaire (eg age, sex, education, household income, geographic location).

The analysis of the data collected in the survey constitutes the bulk of the material reported. Exploratory data analysis emphasizes analyzing and grouping the mentions into equivalence classes, so that each equivalence class contains exactly those mentions that refer to the same discourse entity. Textual data are typically explored inductively using content analysis to generate categories and rigorous and systematic explanations.

In the paper are quoted participants mentions in order to confirm the results and highlight the most consistent perspectives.

### 3. Results

**Table 1:** Key in-depth interview

Exemple : P1/ IPOr, Q3- participant number 1, interview City Hall Oradea, question number 3 IPCJ- in-depth interview Bihor County Council IPOr- in-depth interview Oradea City Hall [researcher's interpretations]
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Source: Made by author

The overall appreciation of the internal communication has a predominantly positive orientation, but exploring in-depth the phenomenon we can note that the interviewees had different considerations regarding horizontal communication with colleagues beside vertical communication with management. In terms of horizontal communication- between colleagues within the institution were identified numerous references, most with positive orientation. Vertical communication with the heads was less nominated, but opinions were more obvious polarized than horizontal communication. Although internal communication is considered overwhelmingly positive, the vertical communication is predominantly negative oriented, but does not destabilize the general employee satisfaction. This phenomenon is due to the fact that the share of vertical communication across internal communication is lower, than horizontal communication.

Both Oradea City Hall and Bihor County Council are institutions with more than 100 employees and the communication process in these institutions involves a fairly long

communication channel. At Oradea City Hall five participants were dissatisfied but at Bihor County Council more than a half of the interviewees were dissatisfied with the internal communication. When the communication channel is longer there is the chance to appear blockages in the communication system.

P17/ IPOr, Q3 „... being a large institution we communicate quite arduous...”

P23/IPCJ, Q4 „... our organizational culture did not have the purpose of collaboration between colleagues, everyone keeps the information to himself...”

In order to function properly in both analyzed institutions internal communication needs improvement in terms of accessibility to the employees. In addition, the clerks who have direct contact with citizens considers appropriate the discussions with employees from the specialized departments to clarify certain issues that may leave room for interpretation.

P9/ IPOr, Q5 „...we have to know in advance what changes occur in the legislation, to be announced by the specialized department and we should have a discussion about it, in order to clarify certain aspects because one is to read the law and quite another to be explained, because not all of us are lawyers...”

Among the issues raised in discussion by the respondents regarding horizontal communication we can remember the following statements:

P10/ IPCJ, Q1 „... friendship and understanding between colleagues...”

The mentions of the employees participating in the in-depth interviews on the vertical communication were predominantly negative oriented:

P15/ IPCJ, Q5 „... the focus is on formal communication and yet the management of the institution obtain the required information on informal communication...”

The hypothesis was supported, the participants to the in depth interviews asessed differently the external beside internal communication. External communication has received a special attention from the management of local authorities because it is the lever that allows relationships with most of its categories of public.

P10/ IPOr, Q4 „... Internal communication was ignored although it is often observed that the external depends on internal communication...”

Local councilors external communication was considered predominantly negative.

P23/IPCJ, Q3 „... One problem is that our county councilors are not involved in the external communication of the institution, you do not hear anything from them...”

The communication with other institutions predominantly neutral oriented. Among the issues raised in discussion by the interviewees it can remembered that there are certain unreliable institutions in responding to specific requests:

P4/ IPCJ, Q 5 „... when you are writing to the territorial administrative units and they are taken it seriously or not and you have to phone them, you must send an e-mail, you have to say exactly what they should do...”

Another aspect of the external communication is the communication with citizens. Public servants are dissatisfied with the citizens reticence and language.

External communication mediated by media is predominantly positive oriented, clerks are satisfied with the way institutions managed to inform the public through the press.

P5/ IPOr, Q4 „... we perceive the media as partners because through them we can simplify our work...”

It was identified a variable which was not initially considered - " the documents circuit " and is affecting local government communication within public institutions with a large number of employees.

P8/ IPCJ Q16 „[ responses dispatch] is delayed because of the gathering signatures so that a document could leave the institution...”

Regarding the variable "trust" several participants in the in-depth interviews stated that the politicization of local government structures is an important problem.

P7/ IPCJ Q5 „... it is experiencing the politicization of all organizational structures...”

The participants identified a number of human resource issues in local public administration:

- the inequitable division of tasks;

P6/ IPCJQ2 „... the work is not equally divided, one works more than another...”

- the respect towards the public servants;

P5/ IPOr, Q2 „... lately the public official is in the dust, being only an intermediate link between policy makers and citizens, is a buffer, and this is not quite correct...”

- the clerks` number is insufficient and the impossibility of employment;

P14/ IPOr, Q2 „... are some services where public servants are not enough...”

- high workload;

P16/ IPOr, Q2 „... often there are too many demands...”

- the lack of protection of employees against those who are beyond the counter;

P12/ IPOr, Q2 „... we are not protected as we should...”

- the appointments, employments and advancements in some cases are made on the political considerations;

P17/ IPOr, Q2 „... the appointments and often even the advancement are made on political considerations...”

- there are some problems regarding the rank advancement;

P22/ IPCJ, Q16 „... there are some problems regarding the rank advancement. For some of us is possible but for others no ...”

- the violence of language or on the institutions` property;

P15/ IPOr Q 16 „... two or three years ago a citizen came and told me that me - shit (...) although it was not ours fault...”

- the contact with the Rrom ethnic persons is difficult;

P5/ IPOr, Q5 „... Rrom ethnic persons are savages (...) they have urinated in the hallway...”

- the specific working characteristics are requesting;

P5/ IPOr, Q16 „... it is not the clerks` job here to make each persons` psychiatrist...”

- the lack of confidence in professional conduct of public servants.

P4/ IPOr, Q16 „... being here, having this job, giving hundreds of exams, without exaggerating, it can be considered that we are empowered to solve a problem...”

Regarding the activity of local government the civil servants participating in the interview noted that in the analyzed institutions citizen interest prevails. Most of the statements on this issue were mostly positive.

P5/ IPOr, Q6 „... a feature of local government is that it adapts very quickly to the citizens needs...”

The bureaucracy variable had a negative influence on local governments` communication.

P8/ IPCJ Q5 „... bureaucracy [is a problem] we have to do so many papers to get an answer...”

On one hand solving citizens` problem is considered by some interviewees as fulfilling his duties, and on the other hand is generating satisfaction when the citizen is satisfied with the answer and he is appreciating public servants` effort.

P9/ IPOr, Q16 „...when a citizen thanks after solving his problem, it is a satisfaction for having managed to relate with him, understanding the problem and helping the citizen in that matter ...”

Appreciated as important by the overwhelming majority of the participants in the in-depth interviews, citizen involvement is taken into account by local authorities depending on the institution managers attitude regarding this concern. The respondents mentioned that there are web site functions and services that facilitates public involvement.

P12/ IPCJ Q6 „... it is important [the citizen involvement] and even if they get involved theirs opinions are not taken into account...”

P8/ IPCJ Q6 „... citizen involvement is important and helps us because they give us many details that from the office we do not know...”

Citizens can get involved in local government activities in different ways with one common requisite: the desire to do something useful for the collectivity to which they belong to. Starting from desire, is necessary and the availability of time, sometimes physical presence, and in some cases citizen participation this may involve financial resources. Citizens can get involved with minimal effort by informing in the communities they live about local authoritys` projects on its new regulations or events that they organize. They may get involved by directing that 2% of income tax or even directly through participation in the public debates and events local authority derives.

P13/ IPOr, Q6 „... there are topics where the town halls` office where usually these debates are organized is full or sometimes just a few people are present. Depends on the importance of the topic...”

Overall positive appreciation on mayor`s activity or attitude was specified but none of the 23 participants in the in-depth interviews at Bihor County Council had no appreciation of the county council president.

P5/ IPOr, Q5 „... if you have coordinators, a mayor who understands these things and contributes to the welfare of city, things can be solved...”

Compared to written communication the assessment of the verbal communication was predominantly positive. The participants appreciated verbal communication for particularly rapid information transmission, but they mentioned a disadvantage of verbal communication between colleagues (when in the institution there is no team spirit and organizational culture in order to promote good relations between colleagues) is the misinformation or omission of some issues there because there is no "proof" of shared information, claims may or may not be challenged.

P19/IPCJ,Q16 „... it was requested a report data from a colleague who later denied the requested data and more recently we are working with internal memos to make sure we receive the necessary information...”

From civil servants point of view the local government response time was predominantly positive appreciated by most interviewees but there are perception differences between them regarding the legal duration for the responding a request, some participants said that legal period should be reduced, on the contrary, others considered that 30 days insufficient and would like an extension of the legal term.

P13/ IPCJ, Q5 „... the law allows too much time - 30 days or 15 days, It would be enough four or five days to communicate an answers, of course it depends on the subject of the request...”

P4/ IPOr, Q12 „... it should be extended this period because there are many requests, there are many cases, and we should invest more time to solve a case otherwise it is superficial...”

Among the issues that local public administration employees wish to be improved, internal communication and employees training is one of the most cited in this regard. Staff believes it would be appropriate to organize courses for employees development.

P8/ IPOr, Q5 „... communication with citizens could be improved (...) our way of expressing needs improvement ... ”

P4/ IPCJ, Q5 „... the way we communicate depends on each training, the approach, the seriousness, depends on your devotion to your profession...”

The employees attitude influences the communication process of local government in the sense that a positive, open, remarkable courtesy and attention to each citizen according to his specific needs facilitates contact between clerks and the public that they serve.

P1/ IPOr, Q2 „... A problem that should be solved is that every public servant should take responsibility for what he does and unfortunately this does not happen in all our departments...”

P8/ IPOr, Q5 „...It is true that is not always easy to smile and not always are moments to smile, it depends on citizens` problem. So, you must first identify the problem and then have a proper attitude...”

Adopting more and more specific elements provided by private service companies, local government assumes increasingly often customer orientation as more practical than just a established goal.

The communication materials available to citizens popularize certain achievements and inform on specific issues. Bihor County Council employees mentioned that inside the building there is a notice board where the public information is displayed. It is notable that Oradea City Hall has a particular concern regarding the efforts to improve the relationship with population, accordingly it can be seen the extra attention paid to the communication process. Oradea City Hall provides citizens informative flyers that have printed on the back the documents needed for different authorization or demands that citizens frequently required from City Hall.

P5/ IPOr, Q3 „... if you say the same thing ten times a day it is not sure that citizen understand you and you start to get bored, therefore we focused our attention on printing some flyers with the most requested information by citizens (...) thus we facilitate the communication and we would not bore each other...”

In order to communicate, citizens do not have to go to local government institution because the analyzed local public institutions had complied some of the citizens new requirements through adapted communication according to the citizens` needs.

P2/ IPOr, Q7 „...we are inviting them [citizens] to the meetings with citizens in the neighborhoods... and they can express their point of view, because if you want to make parking spaces at first you have go there and ask people there if they need those parking spaces...”

To facilitate citizens` contact with the institution, Oradea City Hall had created an one-stop counter /center for citizen service.

P1/ IPOr, Q3 „...our communication with citizens is better since last year [2011] was created a modern public relations center (...) and all departments are represented down there, citizens no longer have to walk through the institution...”

Internet communication has received special attention. On Oradea City Halls' website citizens can pay online their taxes, they can download forms and they can even schedule their wedding date.

P1/ IPOr, Q11 „... we are the only or one of the few halls in the country who send so many press releases, so we have activity as a newspaper...”

The institutions transparency, fairness was considered positive by most of the participants. The institutions transparency can be viewed from two angles:

- in terms of the employee who is properly and timely informed;
- from citizens' point of view whose authority should provide the necessary information.

P20/ IPCJ Q5 „... we should be informed when the organizational chart changes, so we should be informed before the change not to receive directly the disposal...”

As regards minority languages employees mentioned that there are some employees who speak Hungarian language.

P13/ IPOr, Q10 „... citizens of Hungarian minority who are addressing our institution in very small percentage use this possibility, maybe they do not know about this possibility...”

When participants were asked about the evolution of the communication process since 2010, the participants from Oradea City Hall positively appreciated the communication process of this institution but most participants in the interviews held in Bihor County Council considers communication to be constant or declining.

P2/ IPOr, Q15 „... the communication is improving every year because it was one of the main objectives of the new institution management...”

P13/ IPCJ, Q15 „...it is more difficult, worse...”

#### **4. Main findings and implications**

After coding the data collected during the interviews, it can be concluded that the majority opinions regarding communication process within local public administration had a positive orientation.

The interviewed employees stated that authorities granted more importance to external communication than internal communication. When the participants were asked about the aspects regarding the communication process that should be improved, most of them indicated internal communication. The hypothesis was supported, accordingly, is needed an improvement to the internal communication. The institution managers should set several objectives targeting the improvement of the internal communication.

The employees participating in the in-depth interviews mentioned that the documents circuit is affecting local government communication within public institutions with a large number of employees. The clerks stated that it takes about one week for a document to obtain the necessary signatures in order to be sent to the recipient.

The participants identified a number of human resource issues in local public administration: the inequitable division of tasks, the citizens' respect towards the public servants, the violence of language or on the institutions' property, the contact with the Rrom ethnic persons is difficult, the lack of protection of employees against those who are beyond the counter, the clerks' number is insufficient and the impossibility of employment, high workload, the appointments, employments and advancements in some cases are made on the political considerations, there are



some problems regarding the rank advancement, the specific working characteristics are requesting; the lack of confidence in professional conduct of public servants.

## **5. Conclusion**

The goal of this paper was to collect a series of essential events that can affect communication by facilitating it and increasing clerks satisfaction or on the contrary that disturb the communication process.

This study has limitations common to all qualitative research. It can be mentioned the following limitations:

- the short period for the data collection (16- 31 January 2012);
- employees participants were selected by institutions' management not randomly recruited;
- the denial of two employees from Bihor County Council and one from Oradea City Hall to be registered with the recorder during the in depth interview;
- interpretative research cannot be detached from the biases of researcher;
- using a single coder;
- due to the large amount of gathered information problems in classification have arisen.

Most of the statements in terms of local government communication were regarding the external and internal communication of these institutions and had a positive orientation.

In Oradea City Hall the evolution of communication in a positive way is the result of effective communication policies where the management of the institution has a special role: to establish standards and internal rules, in pursuing of their application and in motivating the staff. The employees motivation has an important role even more because in the current financial restrictions when managers of public institutions can not reward employees with increases in theirs salary, overtime pay or by offering holiday bonuses. For the other local public institution analyzed, an assessment instrument seems one of the few ways in which the communication performance can be measured and after that the institution managers can establish a number of objectives concerning the communication process.

The problem that the participants noticed is given by the difficulty of implication of the citizens in public affair problems. Citizens can get involved in local government activities in different ways with one common requisite: the desire to do something useful for the collectivity to which they belong to. A more important result is that public consultation and citizen involvement as means of legitimation can also be related to the managements' attitude regarding this concern.

The results supported Yusoff, Ismail and Ali (2010: 236) findings that there are ten critical success factors based on priority from the internal client's point of views within local authorities: focus on both internal and external customers, coordination between departments, effective and efficient service delivery system, training for continuous improvement, top management as support system, good and reliable human resources, conducive job environment, application of latest technology and ICT, effective property and facility management, good management of office spaces. Further research is needed, however, to explicate the specific communication characteristics in terms of local government communication for the communities with a total population of more than 200,000 persons. Survey studies would seem an appropriate technique for obtaining data on local public communication process.

Further research require a more quantitative approach based on inquiry in order to investigate a larger sample of public servants. Under this conditions the survey could be used to validate the results found here.

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