Potentials of Information and Organisational Process Improvement Through Trained Office Staff

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Abstract

This paper describes the main possibilities on how to improve the production rate, total efficiency and profit-cost ratio in the administrative processes of public administrative offices. The results that are realized from this research serves as an important output for public administration offices in Slovakia. Process improvements can be achieved through the efficient utilization of own-staff potentials, especially by the optimal use of training modules. Well trained own-staff can radically improve the efficiency of office works, jobs and processes and can influence the satisfaction of internal and external stakeholders.

Key words: competency, structure, assessment, process, staff

1. INTRODUCTION

Lean manufacturing, team working, continuous process improvement, knowledge management and e-business are just a few of the practices that organizations are using in their search for effectiveness. Holman (2009) reminds important fact, that the introduction and use of these practices has provoked much debate and research on their nature and effects. Historically, the main focus on job design research has been on the psychological consequences of work simplification brought about through the pervasive adoption of Taylors and Fords approaches to work organization. Key concepts in human resource management theory are fit and synergy and were criticize by Wood (201) and Brandt (2011). Both authors identified three crucial types of fit can be identified: the internal fit between human resource practices, the organizational fit between human resource systems and the strategic fit between these systems and organizational strategy.

2. THEORETICAL SOLUTIONS

Critical research, realized by Louis (2007), within the working process and tradition has drawn addition to how management attempt to instill within workers the belief that organizational objectives are their own and to ensure that these objectives are considered when making judgments at work. As declared Greiner (2009) and Tapping (2006) in their research studies, modern working practices are thus mechanisms through which the worker becomes "self-disciplined" into making "positive" productive responses. Modern training methods call for active engagement of the trainees in the training process, with real declared value added in the area of process optimisation, as remember Mirehei (2011). A key debate is whether high involvement employees is universally relevant or whether their effectiveness is contingent upon its alignment with other organizational practices, i. e. an organizational fit, and whether their effec-

tiveness is contingent upon its alignment with the organization's strategy. Trained office staff creates very important potential for process effectiveness and performance improvement in the team environment culture. In specialized study, realized by Batt (2010), which was oriented on the self-managing teams in the customer service area was declared, that with customer sales as the performance criterion, improvements of 10-17% were observed.

Although Lean Production is a largely debated issue in business management studies it has recently become a relevant trend for public sector organizations. At the same time, empirical studies declared by Poddighe (2011) focusing on lean production in public administration are limited, special by municipal offices. Very interesting contribution gives in according to this problem Sarapuu (2011), when he discuss the issue of administrative structure and its development in a post-communist context, what is very important moment in the starting process of lean administration processes implementation, because a lot of thinking processes coming from the old times.

As improvements are identified and adopted, employee training becomes more important. Kocakülâh (2011) analyse and comments and in his research study most important parameter, defined as efficiency of work force, in addition to the process, that must be lean and all activities must lead to the declared costs improvements. For employees to improve the process or system to make it leaner, the employees need to understand the process, system, and their respective jobs or tasks. The company should be prepared to answer the following five questions regarding training: (1) who needs to be trained; (2) when should the training take place; (3) what information should be covered in the training; (4) how will the training be administered; and (5) who will facilitate the training. We need to add value for our customers, be they internal or external. The lean initiatives that have become a way of life for many of us really come into play. Lean helps us focus to achieve the goals we have set, and put aside those things that do not add value to our mission. This is important on the factory floor. It's equally important in the engineering offices, sales offices, research offices, and administration offices. Many companies today do a lot to streamline the production process, but overlook the opportunities in the overhead areas. This fact influences radically the successful training, improvement and more effective organisation of administration processes in public offices, as analyses Holmes (2007).

When management concepts are introduced in organizations, common problems are lack of enthusiasm and that the concept does not solve the organization's problems. In this article, I argue that a more participative process is to introduce new ideas through broad participation and dialogue between insiders and outsiders in order to increase the level of industrial democracy. However, to be able to do so, the management concept has to be flexible enough to be able to be interpreted in different ways. Dialogue and participation require the actual opportunity to make changes to the original concepts. Rolfsen (2011) states that most management concepts, however, are inherently flexible by being characterized by interpretative viability. This viability opens up an opportunity for participation.

3. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

As key goals of realised research were defined following parameters:

- analyse of contemporary situation by implementation of lean administration processes and the probability of their successful implementation
- research of efficiency of tasks realised by public offices
- identification of main problems in daily life, influencing the effectiveness and productivity of realised procedures
- discussion to the efficiency of procedures and competencies of officers

Efficient performance of professional tasks and duties requires mastering a set of specific competences, including generic ones, which are often called "soft competences". Possessing, developing and applying competences enables an employee to carry out professional tasks more productively, to adapt better to working conditions and to interact properly with co-workers and clients as well as increases his/her capability to work in changeable conditions. Thus competences not only determine the employee's potential but influence the effectiveness of his/her work performance.

The mandatory criteria encompassed such competences as:

- ability to use relevant regulations,
- planning and organisation of work,
- using principles of ethical behaviour

Among optional criteria dependant on the position the following competences were included:

- ability to operate technical equipment,
- readiness for personal development and improvement of qualifications,
- oral and written communication,
- good communication skills,
- positive attitude to citizens,
- good teamwork skills,
- good negotiating skills,
- information management,
- resource management,
- personnel management,
- quality management in relation to performed tasks,
- change management,
- being results-oriented,
- decision making,
- ability to cope under stress,
- strategic thinking.

The main research was preceded by a pilot survey aimed at verification of the tools regarding the clarity of questions, especially those concerning self-assessment of generic competence level.

The questionnaire consisted of 8 questions, including 6 closed ones and 2 open ones. The structure of the questionnaire was as follows:

- indication of work character and the range of performed duties;
- self-assessment of each generic competence level – each respondent was to indicate, relevant to his/her situation, level of each of 13 competences using 5-grade scale: excellent, very good, good, fair and insufficient;
- indication of three competences of key importance for an effective performance of tasks;
- listing training activities on the generic competences that respondents have participated so far;
- suggesting three generic competences that respondents would like to develop;
- indication everyday work problems concerning work time organisation, work and position organisation, conflicts with co-workers, and adjustment of tasks to employees' competences, documentation flow, keeping deadlines and customer service.

The methods applied in the research are presented in the table 1 below.

Tab 1 - Research methods used by initial office staff effectiveness questionnaire. Source: Chromjakova (2010)

Method	Goal
Individual interview	Acquiring information regarding : • key expectations related to development of generic competences of self-government officers • verification of questionnaire
Method	Goal
Questionnaire (handed out) The questionnaire consisted of thematic blocks grouping questions. The answers were chosen from a list or written down in case of open questions.	• indication of generic competences requiring enhancement for efficient performance of professional tasks • identification of earlier training developing generic competences • identification of problems in everyday work

The research with the use of a questionnaire covered 100 respondents:

- 44 respondents from Municipal Office (30% of all employees);
- 56 respondents from Regional Office (30% of all employees).

The participants were asked to assess the structure and the content of the questionnaire that was to be used in the next stage of the research. Two different versions of the questionnaire underwent the assessment. All respondents unanimously chose the version where the questions regarding competences were presented in the form of a competence grid. The following objective of the interviews was to collect respondents' opinions on competences which are essential for efficient performance of their professional tasks. Equally important was to learn

what in training developing generic competences the respondents already participated and which competences they are still willing to develop. Problems in everyday work of self-government officers were also of researchers' interest.

The gathered information is summed up below:

- **Efficient performance of tasks** – the group of Chief Specialist indicated four competences: use of laws and regulations, problem solving, communication, information exchange. The group of Department Chief Officers regarded communication, information exchange and decision making as the most important. In the whole interviewed group the most often indicated were decision making and communication, however problem solving was also pointed out as significant.
- **Competences to be developed** – the participants would like to train most of all use of laws and regulations, communication, and orientation towards professional development.
- **Participation in earlier training developing generic competences** – the most often mentioned were use information for problem solving and laws and regulations. Moreover, particular respondents took part in training enhancing competences such as: motivation, teamwork, and orientation towards professional development, use of information and communication technologies.
- **Problems in everyday work** – as key problems Chief Specialists indicated mostly the work organisation between organisational units of the Office, changes in quality and quantity of information achieved, full substitutability. Department Chief Officers as the most bothering regarded work force problems resulted from overloading employees with duties and prolonging procedures for recruitment of new employees as well as disturbances in communication inside the Office.

Local government officers' self-assessment of the level of generic competences provided interesting answers. The respondents were asked to assess the level of their competences using five-grade scale: excellent, very good, good, fair and insufficient.

Most respondents assessed the level of their competences as very good and good: the results reach very similar level for summed up categories: excellent, very good, good:

- 87,54 % indications for the competence „Using principles of ethical behaviour";
- 95,28 % indications for the competence „Teamwork";
- 98,00 % indications for the competence „Communication";
- 91,30 % indications for the competence „Services to external clients and cooperation with external institutions";
- 93,56 % indications for the competence „Use of information and communication technologies";
- 88,45% indications for the competence „Orientation towards professional development ";
- 87,56 % indications for the competence „Planning and organisation of work ";
- 90,24 % indications for the competence „Problem solving";
- 85,30 % indications for the competence „Decision making";
- 85,00 % indications for the competence „ Use of laws and regulations";
- 65,70 % indications for the competence „Dealing with change";

- 73,40 % indications for the competence „Stress management";
- 81,45 % indications for the competence „Team management".

The above mentioned results can be interpreted in two ways (see table 2):

Firstly, as a symptom of the high level of self-complacency of local government officers as regards their generic competences. Such phenomenon is also confirmed by other surveys e.g. those presented in conception of education process in public administration: 56 % civil service employees regard their skills and qualifications as adequate to perform their jobs and 44 % - as above the requirements. Therefore, according to the respondents themselves, only 5% should take up training to upgrade the level of competences, what seems far from reality.

Secondly, the unwillingness to uncover their true feelings and opinions in order to avoid negative consequences was identified.

Tab 2 - The assessment of the level of generic competences indicated by local government officers: both offices together. Source: author´s own

Name of competence	The level of generic competences			
	Excellent & Very good	Good	Fair	Insufficient
	Frequency of indications (%)	Frequency of indications (%)	Frequency of indications (%)	Frequency of indications (%)
1. Organisation building				
Services to external clients and cooperation with external institutions	45,67	23,45	10,80	11,38
Team management	56,75	16,78	2,35	5,75
Dealing with change	24,86	12,68	12,68	15,48
2. Professionalism				
Use of laws and regulations	43,08	31,56	6,78	3,58
Use of information and communication technologies	57,80	24,35	2,87	4,96
Problem solving	33,56	31,12	12,8	12,76
Decision making	32,24	32,74	13,56	6,76
3. Interpersonal relations				
Communication	56,80	27,56	8,92	4,72
Teamwork	49,75	38,15	6,15	1,23

4. Self-management				
Using principles of ethical behaviour	34,50	24,59	16,89	11,56
Planning and organisa-tion of work	33,68	23,26	15,48	15,14
Stress management	19,22	35,87	9,74	8,57
Orientation towards professional develop-ment	46,89	33,65	4,80	3,11

Generic competences and the effectiveness of tasks performed by local government officers

In this case each respondent was to indicate three competences essential for effective execution of their tasks. The results are presented below in table 3.

Tab 3 - The assessment of generic competences regarding effectiveness of tasks execution by frequency of indication in both offices. Source: author´s own

Generic competences	both offices together	both offices together
	Frequency of indica-tions	Frequency of indica-tions (%)
1. Use of laws and regulations	42	12,88
2. Communication	35	10,74
3. Use of information and communica-tion technologies	32	9,82
4. Services to external clients and coop-eration with external institutions	31	9,51
5. Planning and organisation of work	29	8,90
4. Decision making	28	8,59
6. Stress management	28	8,59
7. Teamwork	24	7,36
8. Team management	22	6,75
9. Problem solving	19	5,83
10. Dealing with change	17	5,21
11. Orientation towards professional development	15	4,60
12. Using principles of ethical behaviour	4	1,23

The above table shows that 12,88 % of indications relates to the necessity to know, interpret and apply the legal regulations in particular work situations. Further 10,74 % of indications connect the effective execution of tasks with planning and organisation of work and communication skills. Among the least important competences were indicated: orientation towards

problem solving (5,83 % of indications), dealing with change (5,21 % of indications), orientation towards professional development (4,60 % of indications) as well as ethical behaviour (1,23 % of indications).

Summarizing, according to the local government officers, the key competences having the most impact for the effectiveness of the performed tasks are: use of laws and regulations, communication and use of information and communication technologies. On the other hand, as the least meaningful competences the officers regard: orientation towards professional development, using principles of ethical behaviour. The respondents showed the least readiness to develop such competences as: services to external clients, communication, teamwork, use of principles of ethical behaviour and team management. Placing services to external clients and ethical behaviour so far in the ranking of preferences may mean that the vision of modern citizen-oriented office that operates according to high ethical standards is still far from the reality and proves the relatively low awareness of local government officers in this regard.

4. RESULTS

Pareto analysis was significantly enriched with the information on the problems the local government officers face in their everyday work. The problems were divided into categories and presented in the form of closed questions. Moreover, the respondents were given opportunity to provide their own information about problems bothering them in the open questions. The latter possibility supplied rich and important research material. The results of closed questions are presented below in table 4.

Tab. 4 - Kinds of problems in everyday work: both offices together. Source: author´s own

Problem area	Answer YES Frequency of indications (%)	Answer NO Frequency of indications (%)	Lack of answer (%)
1. Documentation circulation	68,54	22,15	9,40
3. Adjusting tasks to the competences of staff	33,00	52,80	14,20
2. Meeting deadlines	27,60	67,50	4,90
4. Organisation of work	39,58	42,89	17,53
5. Organisation of work positions	42,58	48,78	8,64
6. External client service	38,90	57,34	3,76
7. Conflicts with co-workers	33,00	52,80	14,20

The respondents claimed that the biggest problem is documentation circulation (68, 54 % YES answers). Adjusting tasks to the competence of staff and meeting deadlines were indicated as the next biggest problems (67, 50 % YES answers respectively).

The problems mentioned by respondents in the answers to open questions can be divided into following categories:

Communication and cooperation – this category was the most often mentioned by respondents, who stressed the key elements such as:

- improper communication with the management board;
- insufficient cooperation in passing down decisions;
- insufficient flow of information;
- bad communication between the employees of different departments;
- lack of cooperation;
- lack of good communication and information circulation what causes work under time pressure, stress and lower effectiveness of work;
- lack of teamwork;
- avoiding taking up responsibility for tasks.

Planning and organisation of work – this category also gained many indications, the key elements pointed out by respondents are:

- too many responsibilities for one employee;
- uneven spread of tasks and work in particular months;
- too many tasks compared to time for their execution;
- lack of efficient division of work in relation to the grade of task difficulty;
- irregular work overload and distribution of tasks in the following months;
- too wide range of duties and time pressure;

Decision making and management – this category gained several indications and includes such issues as:

- changeability of taken decisions;
- lack of competence;
- work overload and distribution of tasks by office positions.

Furthermore, the respondents mentioned problems connected with inconsistence and imprecision of legal regulations and over formalizing administration procedures.

5. DISCUSSION - CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PRESENTED RESULTS

One the key characteristics of mentioned job positions are its complexity – the necessity to integrate knowledge of many fields and areas such as:

As it arises from above, Process Organizer is a function which requires careful examination in the context of enterprises and public offices. In the process of initial investigation, we have examined the following key elements for this function:

- Tasks allocated for this position;
- Requirements in terms of knowledge;
- Competence profile for this position – functional competencies.

In the competitive and changing market environment of today, smooth and flexible implementation of administrative "production" processes are preconditions for success. This may be possible through utilization of integrated solutions which would ensure linkages of logistics chain with manufacturing processes, manufacturing equipment and manufacturing management systems.

Competence-based description of the position is as follows:
- ability to plan production and order fulfilment processes;
- ability to organise production and order fulfilment processes;
- ability to control production and order fulfilment processes;
- ability to shape optimally work processes, eliminate redundant activities, and thus reduce the time necessary to carry out work operations;
- ability to reengineer work processes;
- ability to ensure continuous improvement process;
- ability to eliminate stoppages;
- ability to eliminate redundant activities;
- ability to reduce the duration of work operations;
- ability to design jobs optimally;
- ability to record and analyse working time;
- ability to prepare data for timesheets;
- ability to reduce the time necessary to make calculations;
- ability to calculate costs correctly;
- ability to choose cost calculation adjusted to the specificity of the company;
- ability to control costs effectively;
- ability to make optimum investment decisions;
- ability to minimise production/project costs;
- ability to optimise indirect costs;
- understanding of statistical relationships;
- ability to use effectively quality management tools;
- familiarity with objectives and requirements of process-centred standards;
- ability to apply well-known methods in the assessment of measuring means, deliveries of goods and processes;
- improving competences in product and process optimisation;
- familiarity with relevant strategies and tools for planning effective order fulfilment;
- ability to prepare work plans;
- ability to apply systematic process planning and optimisation methods;
- ability to optimise flow times and deadlines;
- ability to determine and balance demand and the production capacity level;
- familiarity with materials planning and steering methods and effective materials management tools;
- familiarity with possible flexible working and company time arrangements.

Key factors which determine the organisation of work in administration are as follows:

- Dispersed locations: an increase in the number of locations where administrative production takes place and the resulting need to achieve greater transparency and cooperation control;
- Mass configuration: a relatively rapid growth in demand from various sectors imposes the need to manufacture an increasingly wider variety of products, which poses a challenge in areas such as ensuring production capacity and resources planning;
- Shorter cycles: increasingly short cycles of product lifetime are a challenge with regard to the duration of production cycles, productivity and inventory management;
- Responsiveness: satisfying customers' needs requires flexibility of operations, which in turn influences the costs of maintaining resources necessary to maintain production capacity and the assignment of tasks to employees;
- Quality: increasingly high demands concerning the quality of products are a challenge in defect-free production;
- Flexible organisation of administrative processes: multifunction machines and devices, hiring employees with versatile qualifications, implementation of information technologies, cooperation with a spectrum of suppliers and outsourcing of experts.

From the 70-ties onwards there was a constant development of productive practices and systems – starting from "push" production, through "pull" production combined with lean manufacturing to flexible administrative processes and adaptive production principles. All those systems have been translated in time into an array of IT based software and systems, which have consequently affected position profiles and requirements demanded from the manufacturing and supporting personnel involved.

6. CONCLUSIONS - IDEAS FOR PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS

The training system functioning in public administration offices is focused mostly on development of competences concerning teamwork and communication. Thus the role of an officer is defined mainly through the function of taking administrative decisions. The fact that training in customer service appeared in the office training scheme is a positive sign, however not in sufficient scale to meet the needs of the office mission – as a citizen service- oriented office.

Definitely weak point of the presently functioning system of training is lack of training offer in the field of planning and organization of work. Especially that this was one of the three competences indicated as the most influencing the effectiveness of performed tasks and at the same time pointed out as one of the two key problems in everyday work of local government officers.

Criticism or realistic suggestion must be given from our experiences in administration processes especially to the following main problems:

- Wrong and not clear processes
- A lot of mistakes and repairs
- Not clear competence and organization

- Many interfaces in processes, source of process delay and mistakes
- Needless activities and work
- Not used options of IT technology we have in company

The results of the analysis show the strong need for training in planning of work and work organization, what is also proved by specification of problems in everyday functioning of the both offices.

By reducing waste we can improve productivity and shorten process lead time as follows: productivity can be improved minimal between 5 – 15 %, process lead time minimal between 30 – 50 %. By improvement of information flow and setting of standards and procedures we can significantly improve process quality.

In the light of the conclusions from the analysis organisation of training in the following generic competences is recommended:
- Use of laws and regulations
- Planning and organisation of work;
- Stress management;
- Communication;
- Decision making,
- Orientation towards professional development;
- Services to external clients and cooperation with external institutions.

Designing training should include training needs analysis in three dimensions:
- organisational level (the specificity of the office and adequate attaining strategic and operational goals);
- group level (the specificity of the trainees' group);
- individual level (according to the results of performance appraisal and professional development pathways).

Generic competences are coherent with the model of systemic approach in public administration management (network administration model). Generic competences are related to the strategic and operational objectives of the training policy in public administration:
- **Building up and promoting a new priority system in civil servic**e– refers to the need of developing initiative, reliability, objectivity, identification with the employing institution, combining ethical and legal behaviour with sensitivity to people and their needs (creating an ethos of civil service); includes developing and supporting attitudes such as : client –orientation, citizen-orientation, pride and feeling of affiliation, awareness and sharing the same values and goals, pro-activeness and innovativeness.
- **Improving contacts with clients** - refers to changing attitudes towards clients and changing the public administration officers' mentality towards acceptance and supporting the simplification of legal regulations and procedures (on the basis of internal analysis), informing about servicing role of public administration.
- **Improving education quality in public administration** – comprises working out positive selection mechanisms in administration, making the present model of carrying out

and using staff performance appraisal more realistic, designing individual professional development pathways as well as ensuring high quality education and training and increasing the level of specialist knowledge and familiarity with legal regulations in chosen areas.

- **Introducing modern motivation systems in public administration** – concerns application of non-financial incentives, improvement of HR management quality, motivating employees by values such as: pride and feeling of affiliation, care for awareness of values and goals of civil service and given office, development of managerial skills of supervising staff.
- **Professionalization of the public administration functioning** – includes introducing innovations, building learning organisation, introducing management by objectives, cost structure rationalization, measurement of activity effectiveness, creating opportunities to adapt the organization to change (human level, organizational level), design of strategic planning processes.

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