

Systemic and organizational barriers to service quality improvement in local government administration

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is the identification of the main systemic and organizational barriers to the improvement of the quality of services provided by local government administration with special emphasis on the processes of administrative services provision. The article is based on the results of literature analysis as well as the results of audits conducted in local government offices (in the process system). The research indicates that there exist a number of barriers connected with the functioning of quality management systems. The most significant ones include the following: absence of identified customer requirements, neglect of quality requirements reviews, absence of proper supervision over external processes, limited awareness of the importance of preventive and corrective measures, misinterpretation of ISO standard criteria, performance of activities which do not create added value, mistaking quality audits for inspections. The main organizational barriers comprise the following: absence of the process approach and absence of knowledge of the so-called key processes, which is visible in the incorrect designing of organizational structures and an excessively developed bureaucratic document circulation system.

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Introduction

For the past few years efforts have been made in order to improve the quality of services provided by the Polish local government administration. Quality management systems have been implemented – chiefly in accordance with the ISO 9001: 2008 standard, comprehensive assessments of organizations by means of the CAF (Common Assessment Framework) have been carried out, and e-administration solutions have been introduced. Many offices have developed service provision cards. Many application forms are now available online. Despite all these efforts, customers still cannot have most of the services provided electronically and still encounter numerous bureaucratic obstacles. Local government employees are frequently blamed for failures to improve service quality.

1. Methods and objectives

The objectives of this paper are the following:

- presentation of systemic and organizational barriers to the improvement of administrative services quality,
- presentation of recommendations fostering the improvement of provided administrative services.

The basic research method used has been a meta-analysis of articles available in the EBCSO data base. Publications from periodicals dedicated to the issues concerning the quality of public administration services (including local government administration) have been studied. Another applied method has been an analysis of quality audits conducted within the process system in the years 2010–2015 (in total 12 offices, 36 audits).

2. Selected previous research

Relatively many research studies have been conducted on the possibilities of applying excellence models and ISO standards in order to improve the quality of broadly understood services. In the Polish literature, the issues related to general management of the quality of services provided by local government administration have been frequently discussed. For instance, Batko (2009) published the results of his research on the usefulness of standardized systems in the work of commune offices – *Quality Management in Commune Offices*. Modzelewski (2009) discussed the problems of system effectiveness and efficiency in his work *Quality Manage-*

ment Systems and Local Government Administration's Effectiveness and Efficiency. The possibilities of applying quality tools in administration are presented in the collection of research papers entitled *Management in Public Administration. Tools* edited by Lisiecka and Papaj (2013).

The analysis of available literature proves that public administration (at the local and state levels) in many countries is based on the TQM principles. For instance, in the Scandinavian states, the basic TQM principles have been implemented in order to increase citizens' participation in decision-making processes. Special programmes based on the development of cooperation in social networks have been designed (Bergvall-Kåreborn, Bergquist, & Klefsjö, 2009). In Canada, where TQM tools have been applied, it has been observed that quality management has to be connected with the development of e-services, full involvement of employees, the use of the one-stop-shop idea, and the measurement of the effectiveness of undertaken activities (Robertson & Ball, 2002). Research conducted in two selected offices in Poland (Trzebnica, Dzierżoniów) has proved that ISO 9001 quality management systems, as well as the Common Assessment Framework and the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) foster the improvement of service quality (Wiśniewska & Szczepańska, 2014). In some states, in particular the USA, attempts have been made to improve quality by means of outsourcing (Zhang & Sun, 2012). As it ensues from the experiences of other countries, not only excellence models, but also six sigma models are useful in local government administration units (Schmidt, 2013).

The majority of research carried out so far does not concern the provision of administrative services whose objective is the issue of administrative decisions, but rather the quality of public services (i.e. their technical or social aspects).

The problem of the quality of administrative services has been analysed by Van Ryzin (2015). His research carried out in the USA indicates that the assessment of the provision of administrative services is of great importance for the development of trust, while the assessment of the quality of other services (e.g. technical ones) influences the assessment of the functioning of administration in general (Van Ryzin, 2015). Service quality is also indirectly presented in Rivenbark's and Ballard's publication (2012). They point out that people may be satisfied with the quality of provided services, but they are not always satisfied with the quality of interaction between the customer and the official (Rivenbark & Ballard, 2012).

Paradoxically, research on the provision of e-services in public administration proves the existence of organizational barriers. For instance, Grodzka claims that a necessary condition for the provision of e-services is "a high level of integration and interoperativeness of performed tasks" (Grodzka, 2009a, p. 59; Grodzka, 2009b). It is emphasised that the use of e-services not only requires certain technical conditions, and citizens' awareness and motivation, but also depends on the implementation of numerous organizational solutions (Grudzińska-Kuna & Papińska-Kacperek, 2012). Full computerization of offices necessitates changes in the functioning of structures (Dąbrowska & Trawnicky, 2012).

The conducted research indicates that we know very little about the systemic and organizational barriers to the improvement of service quality in local government administration.

3. Systemic barriers to service quality improvement

The conducted analysis proves that many important elements are disregarded in the implementation of quality management systems. The most significant of them comprise the following:

- a. The absence of identified customer requirements and neglect of quality requirements reviews.

In most of the surveyed offices, the identification of the ever changing legal requirements constitutes a problem. Legal counsellors supervise such requirements, but the fact of a change in legal regulations is the responsibility of office employees. Usually, they have access to various data bases such as lex, the Public Procurement Office website, etc.). Only in one of the surveyed offices, the identification of legal requirements is the responsibility of a legal counsellor. The identification of customer requirements constitutes an even bigger problem. It is generally assumed by offices that the course of processes depends on legal regulations and they have no influence on their improvement at all. Therefore, clause 7.3 concerning the design and development works has been excluded from quality management systems. While employees have no influence on the existing legal regulations, the possibility of modifying the input and output of the process of administrative services is not taken into account. The fact that the (often centralized) circulation of documentation largely influences the duration of service provision is also disregarded.

- b. There is no proper supervision over external processes.

Pursuant to clause 4.1 of the ISO 9001 standard: “Where an organization chooses to outsource any process that affects the compliance of a product with requirements, the organization shall ensure control over such processes” (*PN-EN ISO 9001, 2009*).

In local government administration, investment and construction tasks are outsourced. Agreements with other organizations and local governments are concluded. While the requirements concerning supervision or financial aspects are presented in a detailed manner in such agreements, people responsible for process monitoring and supervision are not unequivocally identified. Too often there is only information concerning a particular organizational unit responsible for the supervision of contracts and agreements. But the so-called process owner is not specified.

- c. Limited awareness of the importance of preventive and corrective measures. Constant improvement of services necessitates undertaking continuous corrective and preventive measures. In local government administration there is a noticeable problem with accepting things that have been determined. For instance, too often procedures are considered to be legal documents not normative ones. Therefore, even if a particular procedure is not useful for customers or employees, it is not being improved. Sometimes employees have very good ideas how to improve service quality, but they are afraid to mention them or think that quality improvement is the domain of the management, and not of employees responsible for customer service.
- d. Considering quality audits as inspections. Another noticeable problem is considering quality audits as inspections. Paradoxically, this happens more and more frequently in good offices which have made the effort to integrate quality management systems with internal control standards. An analysis of audit reports shows that the provisions of the ISO 9001 standard are very rarely the audit criteria. Restrictive treatment of audits does not foster service quality improvement, because defects are concealed instead of being jointly remedied.
- e. Interpretative errors. Interpretative errors occur in almost every quality audit; they result from the lack of relevant knowledge in people responsible for the organization's functioning, as well as in quality representatives and external auditors. In local government administration, a typical error concerns clause 6.2 of the standard referring to the necessity of specifying competences within the existing employee evaluation system. Postulates of employee evaluation can be found among recommendations concerning the improvement of quality management systems. However, the standard clearly specifies the elements of competences (such as experience, training, skills, education) and does not include any requirements concerning employee evaluation. Another error is the limitation of quality requirements to legal regulations only (which is not consistent with clause 7.2 of the ISO 9001 standard). Customer requirements, normative requirements, as well as requirements formulated by the organization itself are being forgotten.
- f. Undertaking activities which do not create added value. The research also reveals the problem of undertaking activities which do not create added value, i.e. activities related to the implementation, maintenance and improvement of quality management systems. At the implementation stage, the current processes of administrative service provision are described without any prior thinking about the effectiveness of the existing status quo. Consequently, the number of procedures is growing but the manner of service provision does not change. Within the course of system improvement, activities going beyond the criteria of the ISO 9001 standard

are frequently undertaken. Recommendations are added which entail other unnecessary instructions or procedures. Many activities undertaken either due to the lack of knowledge or wrong recommendations after an audit do not create any added value. An example may be training effectiveness assessment from which no conclusions are drawn in order to improve the competence development process.

4. Organizational barriers

The main organizational barriers comprise the following: absence of a process approach and absence of knowledge of the so-called key processes, which is visible in the incorrect designing of organizational structures and an excessively developed bureaucratic document circulation system.

a. Absence of a process approach.

The research indicates clearly that the level of knowledge concerning the possibilities of applying a process approach is low in local government administration offices. The evident symptoms of this state of affairs are the following:

- a large number of procedures and processes unrelated to the key processes,
- an increased amount of time spent on making administrative decisions,
- unequal distribution of duties among employees,
- a developed functional structure of an organization.

In the course of a quality management system implementation process, the necessity of identifying key and auxiliary processes is forgotten. No uniform process monitoring principles are implemented, no process owners, quality measures or objectives are determined.

b. Incorrect designing of the organizational structure.

The research shows explicitly that offices' organizational structures are functional structures. Employees are not grouped in accordance with the course of the service provision processes, but in accordance with the so-called operational areas. Thus in every town/commune office there are organizational units (sections, departments) handling citizens' affairs, environmental protection, education, roads, traffic, sports, and other issues. The form of a structure depends not only on the implemented tasks, but also on the following:

- political conditions (e.g. the necessity of employing a full-time management board member leads to the establishment of a new division in a structure),

- available financial resources (hence, for instance, replacing whole office divisions with specialists handling process implementation),
 - tendencies to authority centralization,
 - strategic assumptions (e.g. the establishment of centres cooperating with non-governmental organizations).
- c. Bureaucratic document circulation.
- Undoubtedly, document circulation is of significant importance for the amount of time required for administrative services provision. Hence, the same decision is made in one office within 20 days, and in another one it takes 50% more time. Due to a tendency to have each document initialled by the mayor, secretary, and department head, applications reach responsible employees after some time (sometimes after 2 days). The lack of authorization for employees to make decisions lengthens the service provision process. Applications frequently need to be supplemented (in one of the offices almost half of all applications are sent back to customers with requests for additional information).

5. New challenges

- a. Customers' participation in the improvement of administrative processes quality.
- The current practices show that local government administration units maintain a social dialogue with citizens with respect to the quality of social and technical services. Participatory budgets are being developed. Unfortunately, such positive cooperation is not observed in the area of administrative processes and services quality. An important educational task is the development of graphic process diagrams (which have to be available in the place of service provision). Customers participating in quality improvement have to possess some knowledge concerning the course of processes (their particular stages, legal barriers).
- b. The introduction of citizens' cards.
- Another recommendation is the introduction of citizens' cards. Currently there are only service cards (of diversified quality) for customers. In some offices these cards comprise detailed legal interpretations, descriptions of the course of administrative service provision processes, lists of enclosures, links to legal regulations, while in other offices they are just information cards (providing information on how to have a service provided, or who to contact). The idea of citizens' cards is different. Such cards, now used in Dutch offices, comprise a specification of a standard of service provision. Their advantage is that they are like an agreement concluded between customers and the office; they specify, for instance, the amount of compensation a customer may expect if the time of service provision is extended as a result of the office's fault.

c. Changes of legal regulations.

Changes of legal regulations are a necessary condition for the improvement of administrative services quality. Currently, in a vast majority of acts and regulations concerning the provision of administrative services, the effectiveness of undertaken activities is disregarded. In many cases, legal regulations specify 100% of the course of a process. Therefore, the same processes are implemented by various institutions (e.g. building permits). Legal regulations specify not only the number and type of required enclosures, but also the obligation of external consultations (for instance, in environmental protection decisions, an opinion issued by the Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection is required). Furthermore, they impose on customers an obligation of frequent appearance in an office (e.g. within the motor vehicle registration process).

6. Discussion

The identified systemic and organizational barriers do not exhaust the catalogue of barriers to quality development. There are many more psychological barriers (fear of the unknown, lack of readiness to take responsibility, centralization of authority resulting from mistrust), social barriers (lack of customers' involvement, acceptance of bureaucracy), technical barriers (lack of suitable data bases, defectiveness of computer equipment). Yet, it is important to continue the research on limitations and to find practical applications for its results. Without eliminating organizational and systemic barriers, it will not be possible to improve either traditionally or electronically provided services. Despite the fact that the Polish central and local government administration is a European leader in the implementation of standardized quality management systems, the average citizen does not notice any significant improvement in service quality. The provision of e-services becomes fiction. The Electronic Platform of Public Administration Services (e-PUAP) is "incomprehensible and illogical, and user-unfriendly" (Rzeczkowski, 2014, p. 19). The maintenance of just one system – the Central Register of Vehicles and Drivers – costs PLN 45 million a year, and the system still does not function like it was originally planned (Rzeczkowski, 2014).

Conclusion

The conducted research allows for the formulation of a few conclusions and recommendations for people responsible for the functioning of the local government administration system.

Firstly, it is necessary to apply the entire process approach in quality management. The final form of an organizational structure determining optimal employment has to be based on the course of key processes, and not on functions and tasks, which has been the case so far.

Secondly, the decentralization of the authority to make administrative decisions, as well as an thorough review of document circulation are necessary.

Thirdly, the existing customer service offices cannot be just information centres or, even worse, “application reception offices.” A factual customer service office is an organizational unit providing services.

Fourthly, it is necessary to increase the scope of information addressed to customers and to diversify used communication forms (customers should not be informed about a need to correct an application by registered mail).

Finally, the experiences of the best Polish offices have to be collected in a generally available benchmarking base.

These recommendations refer exclusively to those activities which local government administration offices can undertake on their own. It is self-evident that quality improvement will be impossible without relevant legal regulations.

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