

PUNISHMENT FOR POOR PRODUCT QUALITY – QUALITATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS

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Purpose: The primary purpose of this paper is to identify the reasons for punishing employees, with particular focus on punishment for the poor quality of services, products and work. The author is also interested in employees' personal experience relating to the process of receiving punishment.

Design/methodology/approach: A literature review was carried out to find out the state of the research on the subject. It was conducted according to the research methodology proposed by J.W. Creswell (2013). A qualitative approach was used in the empirical part of the research. It had been chosen in view of the fact that the problem under examination was poorly recognised and, consequently, it would be difficult to extract variables or provide precise definitions of the relevant concepts.

Findings: Punishment is administered for any deviation from rules and standards, poor service, serious misconduct, non-compliance with health and safety regulations, and even criminal incidents. Punishments for poor quality account for a small proportion of all penalties. Employees accept punishment if it is based on objective criteria.

Research limitations/implications: A literature review is not a perfect way to obtain information. Previous research has been conducted in different organisations and in different cultures. Secondly, it is important to remember the limitations inherent in qualitative research. The interpretation of data obtained through interviews depends on the structure of interviews, the knowledge and skills of researchers and their ability to avoid bias.

Practical implications: Based on the presented research findings, people managing organisations gain knowledge of the negative consequences of punishment and the lack of objective criteria for quality assessment.

Originality/value: The problem of punishment for the poor quality of services or products has not been researched extensively so far.

Keywords: punishment, penalty, assessment, employees, quality.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Punishment has accompanied humans since the beginning of time. Both penalties and rewards have always been used in the process of disciplining employees.

In the literature on the subject, it is possible to distinguish several thematic groups regarding the punishment of employees. So far, researchers have been interested in the following issues:

- the types of punishment (e.g. Podsakoff, 1982; Podsakoff et al., 2006; Ostaszewski, 2000; Rubin, Bommer, Bachrach, 2010; Siang, 2012),
- the motives for punishment (e.g. Zheng et al., 2020; Kim, S.S., Kim, Y.J., 2021; Dhaliwal et al., 2022; Jannat et al., 2022; Sharot, 2022),
- the consequences of punishment (Zheng et al., 2020).

The problem of punishing employees for the poor quality of products or services has not been researched extensively so far. It is probably due to the fact that rewards, incentives and praise are more important in quality management than penalties. Penalties generate fear and this emotional reaction is what hinders quality improvement. Therefore, it is rightly assumed that punishment for poor quality is administered by the market and customers (Oakland, 2011).

Given the current state of the research on punishment for poor quality, the primary purpose of this paper is to identify reasons for punishing employees, with a particular focus on penalties for the poor quality of services, products and work. The author is also interested in employees' personal experience relating to the process of receiving punishment.

2. Punishment – the results of a literature review

The Bible describes the first case of punishment and since then penalties have constituted an integral part of human lives. In most cases, punishment has been used to discipline people. In the Middle Ages, the term “quality of punishment” was even used (Otis-Cour, 2002). In the 17th century, a philosophical view emerged according to which punishment served to protect society and to retribute victims, i.e. to restore the former state of affairs (Tuckness, 2010). Penalties and an elaborate system of control were meant to retain workers and prevent them from running away (Tyson, Oldroyd, Fleischman, 2005). Besides punishment, a system of mercy played an important role at different times, aiming to convince the populace of their rulers' infallibility and unlimited power. Hence the term “quality of mercy” (Wilson, 1990; Kollmann, 2006). Penalties were sometimes exceptionally cruel. In different historical periods, punishment included gang rape, cutting off the organs associated with pleasure (Groebner, Selwyn, 1995), flogging and imprisonment (Peté, Devenish, 2005), as well as executions (Kollmann, 2006). There is little information on the psychological forms of punishment,

although some authors describe cases of psychological abuse of contract workers (Wahab, 2011).

There are hardly any reports on penalties administered for the poor quality of work. However, the Code of Hammurabi of 1750 BCE contains a provision stating that an unreliable mason should be punished if the house built by him is of poor quality and thus collapses. Also, H. Drummond describes a scene in which vendors are punished for the poor quality of their fish (Drummond, 1998, p. 15).

It is common knowledge nowadays that where there is a culture of fear and employees are punished, gaining knowledge about the authentic causes of failure in quality improvement is very difficult (Craig, Lemon, 2008).

Punishing employees involves using various stimuli aimed to cause the employee to feel bad and uncomfortable. Such feelings are intended to make the employee comply with the standards existing in the organisation. The literature on the subject distinguishes the following types of punishments: formal (e.g. fine, warning, reprimand, disciplinary dismissal), informal physical (e.g. physical exercise, standing still), conditional and unconditional, direct and indirect (administered by third parties), intentional and unintentional (resulting from ignorance) and contractual (e.g. for each product that does not meet the specification (Podsakoff, 1982; Podsakoff et al., 2006; Ostaszewski, 2000; Siang, 2012; Rubin, Bommer, Bachrach, 2010).

Employees are punished for a variety of reasons, for example for unsatisfactory performance, insubordination or failure to comply with recommendations under existing policies (Podsakoff, 1982; Cooper, 2012). Motives for punishment vary and sometimes are of a deontological character. People tend to choose a milder penalty or even forgo punishment altogether if it can be more effective in deterring future wrongdoing. Under certain conditions, harmless punishments are imposed with a view to conveying a particular message to the offender (Dhaliwal et al., 2022).

Many studies show that punishments have less impact on changes in behaviour than rewards (Tremblay, Vandenberghe, Doucet, 2013). Even if there are some noticeable behavioural changes under the influence of punishment, they tend to be short-lived (Podsakoff, 1982). The administration of penalties does not automatically lead to improvements in employees' awareness and performance (Kim, S.S., Kim, Y.J., 2021). Punishing employees is not necessarily what influences their ethical behaviour. This is where other measures count, for example support provided to employees, including appropriately designed training (cf. Dominic et al., 2022). Thus, when we want to persuade someone to do something, we use rewards, but when we intend to discourage someone from doing something, a punishment can contribute to the achievement of the goal (cf. e.g. Sharot, 2022).

However, punishment does not have to serve only a negative function. It can serve to uphold the standards of cooperation (Dhaliwal et al., 2022). Penalties for non-compliance with established rules can prevent interpersonal deviant behaviours of employees (Zheng et al.,

2020). Nevertheless, an assessment of a punishment and reward system depends on employees' perception of fairness in the workplace (Podsakoff et al., 2006).

3. Punishment for the poor quality of services and products

The problem of punishment for poor service or product quality has not been researched extensively so far. It has been indirectly approached in publications on punishment and enforcement of codes of ethics to improve service quality (Schwepker, Hartline, 2005), the relationship between punishment and gains from holding a public office (Dal Bó, E., Dal Bó, P., Di Tella, 2006), the impact of leadership behaviour on quality management practice and quality performance (Laohavichien, Fredendall, Cantrell, 2011), the effectiveness of penalties and monetary incentives in managing product quality in a two-tier supply chain (Davis, Hyndman, 2018) and the introduction of a system of penalties and other sanctions to maintain different accreditation standards (Weske et al., 2019).

This state of affairs is due to, among other things, the fact that rewards, incentives and praise are more important than penalties in quality management. The forerunners of TQM, such as Deming and Ishikawa, advocated the removal of all actions and situations that cause fear, such as punishment for poor performance, employee rankings or merit-based remuneration systems (Ishikawa, 1985; Deming, 1986; Hackman, Wageman, 1995). E. Deming claimed that 94% of problems with quality resulted from poor management; thus it is managers and improper work organisation that bear responsibility for such problems. It makes no sense to punish employees if their influence on work results is insignificant. TQM rejects the fear of punishment and recommends a system in which employees, as process managers, are recognised and rewarded accordingly (recognition of individual competitive environment contributors and team contribution) (Matta, Chen, Tama, 1998). In TQM, it is rightly assumed that penalties are administered by the market and customers (Oakland, 2011).

4. Method

A literature review was carried out to find out the state of the research on the subject. It was conducted according to the research methodology proposed by J.W. Creswell (2013). The applied procedure also followed the principles of research conducted in the areas of management and business (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, 2015, pp. 133-134). The review comprised selected academic research publication databases (Academic Search Ultimate,

Business Source Ultimate, Education Resources Information Center, AGRICOLA, Open Dissertations, Green FILE, Eric, and Google Scholar).

A qualitative approach was used in the empirical part of the research. It had been chosen in view of the fact that the problem under examination was poorly recognised and, consequently, it would be difficult to extract variables or provide precise definitions of the relevant concepts (Creswell, 2013, p. 66). Also, the author did not want to impose any particular understanding of the concepts or processes under study on the respondents, as one of his objectives was to capture their subjective approach to the examined categories. This allowed for a better insight into the problem and a discovery of its new aspects (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, 2015, pp. 133-134). A qualitative procedure was applied (Creswell, 2013).

Respondents were deliberately selected based on criteria such as the size of the place of employment (micro, small, medium and large enterprises, according to the European Commission classification) and the type of business activity. The length of employment was not taken into account.

Interviews were conducted in 2020 and 2021 with a total of 201 individuals. The characteristics of the research sample are presented below (Table 1). The survey comprised 75 persons working in micro and small businesses (up to 50 employees), 44 persons from medium-sized companies (from 50 to 250 employees) and 78 persons from large organisations (more than 250 employees). Regarding the type of activity carried out by the respondents' employers, 133 employees represented the services sector, 41 persons worked in various branches of the industry and 20 respondents were employed in the public sector. Two persons declared that their employers conducted mixed service and production activities. One person indicated a non-profit organisation as their place of employment. Four respondents did not indicate the size and business profile of their employers.

The findings presented here constitute a part of a broader research project aimed at identifying the criteria for employee assessment and the methods of rewarding employees for quality.

Table 1.

The number of respondents in the particular categories of business size and business activity

| | Services | Industry | Public | Others | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Micro and small | 59 | 9 | 6 | 1 | 75 |
| Medium | 27 | 13 | 4 | 0 | 44 |
| Large | 47 | 19 | 10 | 2 | 78 |
| | 133 | 41 | 20 | 3 | 197 |

Source: the author's own research.

The main research technique applied to explore the respondents' points of view was semi-structured interviews. The primary objective of the research was to identify the reasons for punishing employees, taking into account punishment for the poor quality of services, products and work. The author was also interested in employees' personal experience relating to the process of receiving punishment.

Having conducted the literature review, the author formulated the following research questions:

1. What are the causes of punishment?
2. Is poor quality one of the causes of punishment?
3. What are employees' own experiences of punishment (why are penalties used)?

5. Research results

5.1. Causes of punishment

Regardless of the size of an organisation, punishments are imposed for several groups of offences.

The first group is any deviations from rules and standards. These include failing to comply with rules and regulations, failing to perform duties accurately or making mistakes, failing to meet sales standards or deadlines.

The second group includes various forms of poor customer service (as perceived by those who administer punishment). These are cases of unprofessional behaviour towards customers or complaints from customers.

The third group of reasons for punishment comprises serious misconduct and criminal offences (e.g. theft, working under the influence of alcohol, proven mismanagement). One of the respondents stated the following: "I remember once they caught an electrician working near me who was under the influence of alcohol, they measured two per mille of alcohol in his blood. That electrician got a 5,000 zloty fine straight away and the company was thrown out of the construction site. There were a number of similar situations, mostly related to alcohol consumption at work. As a result, sobriety tests were carried out, mainly before noon, and if someone had a high blood alcohol level they simply received very high fines" (male – 45-50 years old, medium-sized construction company).

The fourth group includes causes related to non-compliance with health and safety regulations, exposing colleagues to dangerous situations and, interestingly, negatively affecting the working atmosphere or humiliating subordinates. One of the respondents stated the following: "Another unpleasant situation was when I was offered a better managerial position for a sexual service. This was humiliating and shocking for me, I did not expect to hear such an offer from anyone, in any job. When the rumours of immoral proposals, vulgarity and humiliation of subordinates reached the owners, fortunately for me, interviews with the victims led to his removal from the company" (female, no age details, small industrial company).

5.2. Punishment for quality

Punishments for poor quality account for a small proportion of all penalties. In the case of small companies, such penalties appear in 13 out of the 119 collected statements; in the case of medium-sized companies, penalties for poor quality were mentioned in 9 out of the 72 obtained statements. Interestingly, in the case of large enterprises, a noticeable phenomenon is the absence of penalties for poor quality.

However, in order to have a good understanding of why this is the case, it is necessary to refer to how quality is measured and whether it is an important criterion for work assessment.

An assessment of quality depends not so much on an enterprise's size as on the character of work performed by employees and executed processes. An assessment of product quality is carried out rarely and only where there are specified technical requirements (in production).

Most often, there is a quantitative assessment (quantity of products sold, invoices booked, tasks performed). In corporations, an assessment of the quality of work is done on the basis of instructions and procedures, while in small private businesses, it is often superiors that assess employees' performance on the basis of subjective criteria.

In industrial enterprises, technical criteria (size, geometric characteristics) predominate. In a considerable number of the organisations mentioned in the interviews, a set of quality criteria has been developed; even individual positions have their technical specifications defining criteria for classifying products in terms of non-conformity.

What dominates in the case of service organisations is criteria such as time and punctuality, accuracy of performance (which can affect the quality of provided services), as well as subjective criteria relating rather to employees, for example conscientiousness, efficiency and initiative.

Penalties are mainly imposed for the poor quality of work, whose assessment is sometimes subjective. One of the respondents stated the following: "If the quality of the work is unsatisfactory then the employee gets support in the form of instructions or additional training. If poor quality is due to low commitment, then a frank talk about this takes place, and if there is no change, the company gets rid of such employees" (male, no age data, medium-sized industrial company). In the case of services, it is important that procedures be followed to the letter under pain of dismissal. One of the respondents stated the following: "In case of direct complaints from the customer about unfulfilled procedures or product quality, a talk is held with the employee responsible for this and the regional coordinator (that is me) is asked to exercise more control over such a person" (male, no data available, medium-sized service company).

5.3. Employees' experiences of punishment

Typical formal punishments provided for in the Labour Code are used quite rarely. This is due to two reasons: the first is that situations requiring a formal punishment hardly ever occur in the work environment. The second reason is that imposing a formal punishment requires some effort on the part of those who are to punish. This is because such punishments are entered in official personnel documentation and must be administered in accordance with the applicable legal regulations.

In the case of penalties provided for in work regulations, employees often take advantage of appeal procedures. Below is one of the more interesting statements: "There was an attempt to punish me for undermining the authority of my superior. I was even given an official reprimand, which I appealed against to the court. The court upheld my appeal, finding that the reprimand had had no legal basis, had been issued too late and had not referred to any cause-and-effect relationship" (male, aged 30-34, medium-sized service company).

However, other forms of punishment do occur, for example verbal admonishments, cautions, suspension of bonuses, disciplinary talks. One of the respondents stated the following: "Another example of punishment was certainly very unpleasant talks with the management when I wanted to find out how to do a certain task correctly, in the right way, because I was doing it for the first time. I was then reprimanded for not knowing such things and bothering my superiors, whose minds were preoccupied with things much more important than my trivial problems" (female, no data, large service company).

Unfortunately, there are also penalties that can be regarded as inconsistent with the applicable regulations (e.g. the lack of remuneration for overtime). In the group of small companies, 26 out of the 71 respondents received penalties. In the groups of medium-sized and large enterprises, it was 16 out of the 43 respondents and 25 out of the 79 respondents, respectively.

In most cases, the survey participants perceived their penalties as incomprehensible and unfair. The penalties that had obviously resulted from employees' negligence constituted an exception. Punishment is related to work assessment. Employees perceive the work assessment process as unfair if it does not take into account objective criteria and possible deviations from them, or is conducted in a disrespectful manner.

6. Discussion

The actual impact of penalties is very difficult to measure. As T. McNamara (2022) rightly points out, many researches on relationships between organisational punishment and productivity used different theories of motivation and learning. However, the process of

imposing punishment depends on many other variables, including perceptions of punishment, ways to monitor punishment or freedom of choice and, obviously, many exogenous variables (McNamara et al., 2022).

It is a fact that when there is a shortage of suitable candidates for employment in the market, any violations of work discipline are less susceptible to punishment. Sometimes lateness and even alcohol consumption are tolerated. The ways of both punishing and rewarding depend on management styles, economic models and needs of business owners (Dur, Kvaløy, Schöttner, 2022).

Thus, administration of punishment, like any other process relating to managing people, does not take place in vacuum and depends on many situational, contextual, organisational, legal and psychosocial variables.

What draws attention is the fact that little attention is paid to quality issues. This is due to a number of reasons.

In many cases, quality is difficult to measure objectively, as it is not always based on hard data such as physical or chemical characteristics. In services, quality is perceived in terms of customer satisfaction. Services provided directly to the individual customer and those provided by businesses to other businesses constitute two different models. What counts is timeliness, accuracy and quantity. However, it is difficult to determine to what extent these quantitative criteria support the quality of services.

Assessments made by superiors indicate that what counts is the rather vaguely defined quality of work. Punishment refers to subjective relationships or, more precisely, interactions among employees. It is rarely related to quality because either quality is regarded as being of little importance or no objective criteria have been established for its assessment.

7. Further research

Further research should address the issue of motivation for punishment. Previous research clearly shows reputational benefits for those who use consequentialist reasons for punishing an employee (Dhaliwal et al., 2022).

Another interesting topic is refraining from the imposition of punishment. Indeed, some studies have found that employees whose punishment is mitigated or waived become incredibly disciplined.

It could also be interesting to focus on those who seek to use punishment solely to combat pathological employee behaviours.

And last but not least, what deserves attention and is rarely addressed in the literature on the subject is punishments imposed on managers by employees. It is a special case of informal punishments.

8. Limitations

First of all, the adopted method of literature review is not a perfect way to obtain information. Previous research has been conducted in different organisations and in different cultures. Secondly, it is important to remember the limitations inherent in qualitative research. An interpretation of data obtained through interviews depends on the structure of interviews, the knowledge and skills of researchers and their ability to avoid bias (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson, 2015, p. 141). In the future, research on this subject should be conducted on a larger group of employees and preferably with the use of an additional research method.

9. Conclusion

Penalties are imposed for several groups of offences. The first group is any deviations from rules and standards. The second group includes different forms of poor customer service. The third group comprises serious misconduct and criminal offences. The fourth group is violations of health and safety regulations. Punishments for poor quality account for a small proportion of all penalties.

Employees accept punishment if it is based on objective criteria, for example they are aware of having forgotten or overlooked something, having violated occupational health and safety regulations, etc.

Punishment for quality makes no sense if there are no methods of assessing quality objectively and the final quality of products or services depends on collective effort.

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