Professional performance within a Romanian police force in the context of change

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to provide a better understanding of police performance, more specific, to examine how police officers perceive their professional performance and performance management procedures, to find out possible differences between hierarchical levels and to identify factors that could explain these differences. 40 police employees were interviewed individually and 29 of them provided the quantitative data also. The results suggested that, although the police force was passing through a very dynamic and pressing period, levels of professional performance were kept at the highest level, in the perception of its employees, due to performance management procedures.

Keywords: performance; performance management; police force; change;

1. Introduction

Within the context of a unified Europe and efforts to ensure free movement of all European citizens, the police performance became important especially in Romania, due to its instrumental role in achieving political goals like entering the Schengen Area. The achievement of these goals can act both as an opportunity and a threat due to the fact that entering the Schengen Area brings along important changes in the organization of the border police.

Moreover, Romania provides an interesting context for the study of police organization for several reasons. First, in recent decades, as an Eastern European country, initially totalitarian in nature, has reorganized its state and adopted market economies with democratically elected governments. Second, changes were introduced at various levels in the police organization in order to become a European
police. These efforts, noticed in other similar countries as well, include shifts in organizational responsibilities, supervision, job challenges, and innovation in work, all of which could potentially influence the performance and police officers’ satisfaction with work (Gorenak, 1996; Nalla, Rydberg & Mesko, 2011). Third, prior research on Romanian police performance and its relationship to the factors that lead to various levels of performance is limited.

Despite its importance, the scientific literature on police organization is scarce and little is known about the management processes police departments use to carry out their daily responsibilities and the relationship between those processes and intended outcomes (Shane, 2010).

2. Theoretical framework

In the context of rapid change and evolution of the society, a proper understanding of what ‘performance’ really means is very important for police officers and staff at all levels in a force responsible for the safety of the community. The correlates and determinants of performance are also significant to ensure that the right actions are taken to improve the police performance.

Furthermore, the economic, political and social changes the European countries had passed through led to a shift in studying the public organizations. Beginning with 1980, public administration organizations have assumed a more business-like approach due to the pressure towards the reform of the traditional command and control management style (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000; Sugarman, 2010). Consequently, performance and performance management became central constructs in policing, as these constructs are priority in business organizations.

In the meantime, the police changed its mission in terms of developing a greater openness and responsiveness to citizens’ needs and demands and it also had to perform more efficient, economical and effective (Barton & Beynon, 2011). As a result, there has been an increased focus on resource usage given the budget cuts and a pressure for the police to prioritize the efficiency. So, the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) becomes a useful approach for the study of performance and the way the needs and expectations of external stakeholders are met by police forces. Developed in the context of commercial organizations operating in competitive marketplaces (Maijoor & van Witteloostuijn, 1996), the resource-based view posits that performance, however defined, arises from within the organization. Linking performance to the budget also engenders a sense of accountability among the police officers by emphasizing outcomes and the quality of the services the police delivers to the community.

Given these challenges facing the police and the need for deeper understanding the ways to improve the performance, the present study aims to explore the professional performance as it is perceived by the officers at different levels within a focal Romanian police force. We will focus both on levels of perceived performance and on identifying the performance management procedures that facilitate performance in order to suggest possible implications for practice.

3. Methods

This study used a mixed-method approach. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were mixed with near-survey data (Creswell, 2003) collected at the same time. This enabled to provide both qualitative analyses as well as quantitative testing of certain relationships.

3.1. Instruments

For the interviews, a standard interview protocol with specific interviewer instructions was developed, including questions related to more aspects relevant for the focal police force functioning. For the present study, we have used only answers to theme 6 – Performance.
Quantitative data were collected using a 4 item score sheet. Items measured perceptions of performance in relation to different expectations but also perceptions about the way internal priorities are aligned with requirements, on a scale from 1 to 7 (1= Strongly disagree and 7= Strongly agree).

3.2. Participants

40 employees of the focal police force have been interviewed individually. Participants came from all organizational levels of the police force – top level (N=1), senior level (N=8), supervisory level (N=4) and operational level (N=27).

During interviews, the same participants have been asked to fill in the survey sheets. Due to time and work-related constraints, only 29 of them provided the quantitative data also; 26 were valid for further analysis.

3.3. Procedure

Interviews took place within the police units, during working hours. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The duration of the interviews and data collection averaged 1 hour and a half. Interviews were audio-recorded and then fully transcribed for further analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Analysis of both qualitative data obtained in interviews and quantitative score sheets data, showed that employees of the focal police have positive perceptions regarding the level of their units’ professional performance (Table 1). Policemen evaluate the lowest level of performance regarding the alignment of internal priorities to the requirements set by authorities and, most important, external stakeholders. It is in this area that they can also identify possible improvements, mostly related to the police partnership with citizens and society.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the performance items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Correlations1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We perform very well on the requirements set by the formal authority</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We perform very well according to our internal priorities</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.69**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our internal priorities are well aligned with the requirements set by the formal authority</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our internal priorities are well aligned with the expectations of our external stakeholders</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.88</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Rho Spearman correlation

“It’s about the partnership with the community. We all need to talk a little bit more with the people in the area, and to find out some information’s about human traffic. But the people are reticent to talk with the police officers, if we are not able to give them rewards, we don't get any information from them” (officer at senior level).
Most interestingly, the item measuring the alignment of internal priorities with requirements coming from formal authority is the only one that does not correlate significantly with the other measures. This might suggest possible conflicts between recent requirements coming from formal authorities and the internal priorities, but the fact that the performance is high on both types of standards could indicate functional duality (Chirica, Andrei, & Otoiu, 2010) that should be investigated in the future.

In order to identify procedures that ensure this high level of performance, we analyzed the qualitative data by open coding the answers to the questions regarding performance. Our analysis revealed three main themes related to the procedures for performance management that ensure the high performance levels. Most of the time, regular assessment procedures (based on job descriptions and set by top structures) are mentioned. These assessments take place at certain intervals in all structures of the focal police force using specific indicators. These procedures are complemented by procedures of performance monitoring and discussion at the unit level. They can be less formal and structured than regular assessments as they are not designed to identify outstanding performance but to gain a picture of the work progress.

The main challenge for both of these procedures is given by the limited motivational consequences. Due to existent regulations and the difficult economical period that generated significant budget reductions, evaluations cannot be associated with financial rewards. They are most of the time correlated with punishment if performance is below standards or with non-financial rewards.

“There is no financial stimulation for performance; the only way to reward performance is through written congratulation letters which do not really work... There are special coercive measures for people that do not comply with rules and regulations”.

The fact that positive rewards are minimal and non-financial supported a shared vision of performance and training as duty.

“If we see that somebody doesn’t answer correctly then we might consider sending them to training. We consider it is everyone’s personal duty to stay well prepared in terms of knowledge, so if they perform well for these tests they are not rewarded extra money, or anything”.

Associated with this main themes regarding performance management, the analysis of answers to questions related to sources of performance showed an increased emphasis on the qualities of the human resources (well trained and qualified personnel, team spirit, experienced personnel, very motivated). Financial and technical resources appeared to be second to personnel, mostly due to important economic changes taking place recently but maybe due to the fact that the inability to use them as rewards makes them less visible as motivators.

Not at last, the factors that are influencing performance are situated mostly at the level of human resources (personnel training, need for continue training and updating, professional expertise, professional experience, dedication, work engagement, the ability to communicate in foreign languages) and organizational resources (cooperation with foreign partners, the management, mutual trust, cooperation with other police forces in complex illegal cases, the support from the supervisors and colleagues, cooperation in complex situations). A certain focus on the internal factors can be observed in situating all resources and factors affecting performance within the police force.

The differences in perspectives of performance at the superior levels led us to examine in more detail possible differences using the quantitative data. The analysis indicated no significant differences between operational and superior levels (Man-Withney U). Further exploratory analysis revealed significant regional differences but only regarding the alignment of internal priorities to formal and stakeholder requirements (U=38, p=0.044), with employees in regions more vulnerable to the reorganizations perceiving a lower degree of alignment (mean rank = 9.30) than those in the other regions (mean rank =14.08). As it was expected, the news of a future reorganization of their structures was not associated
with a decrease in the employees’ focus on performance, but with an increased perception of discrepancy between the unit’s internal priorities and the formal and external requirements.

5. Conclusions

The study offers insights into the increasing influence of the changes (economic crises, social development, technological innovations) on the police organisation and into the major trends that impact its performance. Despite the challenges the Romanian police had to face, recent procedures for entry into the Schengen Area gave a clearer view on its activity and constantly striving to improve the quality. The data showed that police also learned to change the way it managed its resources (mostly internal) to accomplish the tasks and the way it monitored the progress against objectives.

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References