

## **INVESTIGATION OF THE VIEWS OF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICIALS ON THE NECESSITY OF THEIR PARTICIPATION IN TRAINING PROGRAMS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper attempts to investigate the views of the administrative officials of the Municipality of Larissa on their participation in training programs relating to their competencies. In specific, it investigates whether they consider training necessary, the reasons why they choose to be trained and the issues in which they feel they need to be trained. The analysis of the findings highlights, first of all, the great need for training officials. The most important reasons are considered to be the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and the addressing of shortcomings, to allow them to solve problems of their daily working life. As regards the subjects covered by the training, they primarily select programs related to the organisation and administration of local government services and to the interpretation of the legislative framework.*

**KEYWORDS:** Local Self-Government, Administrative Officials, Training, Reasons, Subjects

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, in most countries of the world there has been a strong trend to decentralise the machinery of government and public administration. This trend is supported by the principles of modern management and the adoption of new Total Quality Management methods (Mihalopoulos, 2003). It concerns a new culture of public administration, based on the continuous effort to improve efficiency, benefits and services, while encouraging individual initiatives (Fazel, 2003; Boaden, 1999). Thus, local self-government is called upon to take on an increasing number of actions as regards the allocation of resources, responsibilities and public sector officials.

According to the findings of a research in OECD member countries, local self-governments employ 60% of public sector officials (OECD, 2014). This means that they can play a major role in tackling administrative problems and in a country's reorganisation. Given that an organisation's most important asset is its staff, self-government should strengthen the knowledge and skills of its officials, transforming its services into learning organisations (Ramat & Pantazis, 2008; Boud, Cressey & Docherty, 2006).

In the context of increasing its competitiveness, cost-efficiency and the effectiveness of its services, the Municipality of Larissa has paved the way for the cooperation and networking of local, national and international bodies dedicated to lifelong learning, aiming at supporting the local community. In 2017, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning included Larissa in the sixteen (16) cities across the world to which it awarded the "Learning City" award for outstanding progress in promoting education and lifelong learning in local communities. In the light of the changes brought about for local government by the "Kallikratis" program, the Municipality of Larissa cooperates with various public and private institutions that plan and implement training programs, aiming at upgrading its human resources.

It is therefore necessary to assess the effectiveness of the programs attended by the Municipality's administrative officials after the launch of the "Kallikratis" program, as the Municipality is required to develop its own administrative culture, focusing on the principle of respect and support for citizens, providing quality services in line with modern administrative trends, aiming to highlight lifelong learning as a guiding principle for an organisation's productivity and efficiency.

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

### **The establishment and evolution of the institution of Local Government**

The foundations of the institution of local government in Greece were originally set by Ioannis Kapodistrias in 1828, with the establishment of the Community and Provincial Councils of Elders (Dimogerontia). The first reference to the structure of the 1st Grade of Local Government appears in article 107 of the 1927 Constitution (Stebilis & Grigoriadou 2010), while, in the first years after the restoration of democracy, the majority of Local Government Authorities were exclusively dependent on central government funding. However, Greece's accession to the European Union and the adoption by the Greek Parliament of Law 1850/1989 "on the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG)" highlighted the need for decentralising its powers and greater citizen participation in taking Community-level decisions through cooperation networks of European cities and regions to address common problems (Nugent, 1991; Athanasopoulos, 1995).

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) significantly strengthened the institution of Self-government, giving it autonomy in the regional decision-making process. Local Government Authorities see the European community as an opportunity for both their upgrading and their financial improvement (Besila, 2007).

The first major public-sector reform to strengthen the administrative and financial autonomy of Local Government Authorities began in 1997 with the "Kapodistrias Plan" reform program (Law 2539/1997). This program unified municipalities and communities, and strengthened the role of Local Government Authorities, which now regulated and managed all local affairs. On 1 December 2009, the Lisbon Treaty came into force, promoting the active role of citizens in decisions of the local government (Chrysomallis, 2010).

Aiming to serve public interest, properly distribute wealth and strengthen citizens' trust towards the state, an administrative, economic, political and moral reestablishment of self-government was attempted with Law 3852/2010 - "Kallikratis Program". This program led to the creation of new, robust Municipalities, Decentralised Administrations and elected Regional Administrations. The decentralised state administration, the regional self-government and the 1st grade self-government now had administrative autonomy, with distinct responsibilities and functions. This created strong administrative units, decentralising state power more than ever. In addition, new consultation institutions were introduced, such as the Immigration Integration Council and the Municipal and Enterprise Ombudsman.

In the context of this new trend, the self-government's mission is to take drastic measures for its administrative reform. Its reorganisation must include administrative productivity measures, based on staff performance assessment and benchmarking indicators. Through the quality of the services provided, expressing a new administrative concept that enhances flexibility,

knowledge, transparency and autonomy, self-government services can become efficient and learning organisations.

### **Role and responsibilities of Local Self-Government officials**

Local self-government should provide high-quality services to cover local affairs (Drousta, 2001; Kontiadis & Chekos, 2008). Consequently, the role of self-government officials is particularly important. The administrative culture of Local Self-government officials is shaped by the Municipal Code, in conjunction with the “Local Self-Government officials Code of Conduct”. This administrative culture is influenced by and influences citizens, politicians, employees and executives, “by expressing, through their osmosis, the manner of perception, communication, thinking and reaction of the administration's cultural identity” (Parthenopoulos, 1997: 28). In their dealings with citizens, they should exhibit patience, courtesy and a conduct worthy of citizen trust, taking every measure to serve them. Citizens wish to receive high-quality services (Grigoroudis-Siskos, 2005).

The responsibilities of administrative officials are defined by the legislative framework on local self-government, and in particular by the Internal Services Agency, according to which officials are placed in directorates and departments corresponding to their qualifications. However, the officials often face many and insurmountable difficulties in performing their duties.

### **Problems faced by Municipal officials in performing their duties**

In their effort to perform their duties, the officials often face great difficulties, which impede the entire administrative work (Makridimitris, 2008). One of the greatest problems concerns the extensive red tape involved in administration. The bureaucratic system, structured on staff hierarchy, is now an all-invasive problem in everyday business issues in the workplace. Excessive bureaucracy and adherence to official rules and formalities reduces the efficiency of the administrative operation (Parthenopoulos, 1997) As a result, the organisation is disoriented, its organisational culture suffers and its human resources lose their competitive advantage and motivation for renewal (Xyrotiri - Koufidou, 1997).

In an impersonal context of operation, personal contributions are abolished by the actions of the organisation (Avgenakis, 2010; Fanariotis, 1999), while negative emotions prevail (Bourantas, 1991) and a lack of trust, communication, justice, motivation and interest is observed (Aktivos & Koutras, 2009).

At the same time, overlapping laws, in conjunction with added duties and the all-too-oft supplementing and adjustment of legislation, have created confusion and insecurity among self-government officials. If we add to this the retirements and the suspension of appointments and recruitments in the public sector due to the economic crisis, it is understood that the role of administrative officials is becoming increasingly difficult.

Lastly, this list of problems would be incomplete without a mention to the elected administration's involvement in the daily workplace routine of officials. Particularly in Local Government Authorities, where the elected administration is involved in decision-making, maladministration to satisfy political interests is oft observed, plaguing officials with work-related stress, adversely affecting their mood and work mentality. This stress has also increased by Greece's inclusion in the Joint Support Mechanism, which led to changes in labour relations and cuts in remuneration (Piperopoulos, 2007).

## **Municipalities as Learning Organisations**

Public and private sector enterprises and organisations are increasingly interested in the concept of the learning organisation, as they understand that, in order to be sustainable, innovative and competitive, they should promote the education, training and retraining of their human resources. In addition, as Peter Senge (1990) argues, businesses will be happier in the future if they transform into learning organisations, open to change.

This means that local self-government should make the most of its potential and strategically design to give value to both staff development and training, which are key elements of human resource management (Beardwell & Holden, 1994; Pfefer, 1994; Chytiris, 2001). Personnel development is directly linked to quality, efficiency and effectiveness (Dodgson, 1993; Grantham, 1993, Kontoni, 2010).

The quality of a service can be represented by a subset of its characteristics, like reliability, and is seen as a key tool for maximising service efficiency and competitiveness. Efficiency can be measured by the ratio of output quantities to input quantities and is related to the organisation's ability to attain the specific and predetermined objectives set by the business. Effectiveness can be usefully conceptualized in terms of the degree to which services achieve the objectives of the organization (Karkatsoulis, 2004; Sudit, 1996). Efficiency concerns the way in which the results of administrative action are measured and evaluated as a set of interdependent processes (OECD, 1994:16), but also the consequences of the attainment of the expected objectives set by the organisation within the business (Alexiadis & Peristeras, 2000).

Thus, local self-governments are now called upon to develop mechanisms of short-term and long-term objectives for their organisational needs and to implement corresponding training programs. It is a difficult effort, which undoubtedly requires time and money, both of which it is not easy for an organisation to allocate. It requires both the absence of the employee from work, in order to attend the training program, and a financial burden on the business for its organisation (Xyroteri-Koufidou, 1997).

## **The institutional framework for training Local Self-Government officials**

The training of self-government officials is regulated by article 54 of Law 3584/2007 and is divided into initial education and training and continuing education and training. Initial education and training includes preliminary and introductory training for officials, while continuing education and training includes training throughout the official's career, specialisation, promotional education, advanced training and further education (Ministry of Administrative Reform and Electronic Governance, 2011).

More specifically, preliminary training is provided by the National School of Public Administration and Self-Government following entrance examinations. It is mainly addressed to individuals who are interested in working in the public sector, but also to public officials who have acquired the status of official and wish to follow a career as senior executives in the public sector. Introductory training is the first stage in the decasualisation of newly appointed officials. It is held during the two-year probationary term of newly appointed self-government officials and its successful completion is considered mandatory. The competent authority for holding these programs is the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government, which, in cooperation with the Human Resources Departments of each municipality, develops training programs for introductory training aiming at introducing newly

appointed officials to the environment of the legislative framework of state organisation, providing them with the knowledge and skills required to perform their duties more effectively.

Continuous training is an obligation of every organisation and is addressed to all self-government officials. Interested officials are required to submit a written or electronic application form and, if selected, are provided with training leave from their service. Most training programs are held by the National Centre for Public Administration, universities, institutes and private bodies that allow certification of the knowledge acquired by the officials following certification examinations. The subjects covered by the programs vary according to the knowledge and skills that the officials are seeking for their personal and professional development.

Promotional education is mandatory and addressed to University and Technological Education employees who have served for at least three years as department heads and are to take over posts as heads of division. Its purpose is to prepare these employees, providing knowledge and skills appropriate to the leadership tasks they are to undertake. It is organised and supervised by the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government.

Advanced training concerns officials who have served for at least three years in self-government. The term “advanced training” means additional training, advanced training or training in management issues for executives who have studied another science and want to specialise in administrative matters. Its aim is to broaden their scientific or technical knowledge and while developing techniques and skills to improve the performance of their duties. Advanced training takes place in public or private universities, both inside and outside the country, either by personal attendance or via distance learning.

Further education is addressed to University and Technological Education employees who have completed their two-year probationary term and wish to specialise in specific areas, to follow a future career as senior executives in self-government. It takes place either by personal attendance or via distance learning at recognised higher education institutions in Greece or abroad.

### **The educational policy of the Municipality of Larissa for the training of administrative officials**

Drawing on Herzberg’s motivation theory (Koutouzis, 1999; Everard & Morris 1999; Hatzipandeli, 1999) for the personal development, administration and occupational safety of its officials, the Municipality of Larissa included the training of its officials in its strategy.

Initially, it incentivised the Heads of Divisions and Departments to adopt a charismatic style of administration, whose main features are enthusiasm and dedication (Koutouzis, 1999). It then organised the “Learning City” program, in partnership with the Scientific Union of Adult Education. While doing so, it also made sure to inform its officials on the benefits of lifelong learning by means of information letters and workshops, motivating them to undergo substantial training to meet any biological and social needs and also the needs for self-esteem and self-realisation (Maslow, 1954). It informs every day, through the human resources department, all directorates and departments about the forthcoming programs to be implemented as well as their subjects. All employees have access to these programs through personal email.



Subsequently, the Directorate General in conjunction with the elected administration and its senior hierarchical superior (Mayor) set the objectives of the organisation. Afterwards, the directors, in cooperation with the heads of departments, submit the requests of each department on training to the Directorate General, after determining that their supervising personnel has knowledge, experience or competence shortages through an interactive discussion with their officials. The requests are fully justified and in accordance with the objectives of the service. The Directorate General then approves or rejects these requests. Finally, the human resources department takes the necessary steps to include the employees in the training programs.

Two main education categories can be noted in the municipality of Larissa. On-the-job training where officials are trained in the performance of their duties with the assistance of an experienced official and off-the-job training. This can be intra-corporate training with external service providers of the Municipality as trainers and extra-corporate in cooperation with public and private organisations that put together training programs within the scope of the Municipality's interest and feature specially designed training areas.

As regards the newly appointed officials, the Municipality of Larissa, apart from the phase of preliminary training that it makes sure they attend, applies the mentoring method. The "mentor" monitors and trains the new official on a voluntary basis in order to be able to join his duties in a short time.

The agencies that support, plan, organise and implement the training programs are the National Centre of Public Administration and Self-Government with its main educational structures, the National School of Public Administration and the Institute for Training, the Social Policentre, the Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Self-Government, and individuals as well. The programs take place both by personal attendance and via an electronic platform.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research aim**

This paper attempts to investigate the views of the administrative officials of the Municipality of Larissa on their participation in training programs relating to their competencies after the introduction of the "Kallikratis" program (2011). Specifically, through quantitative data analysis, it is investigated whether training is considered necessary, the reasons why training is selected and the subjects of such training .

### **Research sample**

The research was carried out on administrative officials of the local self-government at the Municipality of Larissa, one of the largest municipalities in Greece. 75 permanent and temporary administrative officials participated, given that no administrative officials in a fixed-term employment relationship were employed in that municipality, when the research was carried out. The sample includes University Education, Technological Education and Secondary Education officials. The sample was selected following the method of convenient sampling, according to which the researcher selects participants because they are willing and available for research" (Creswell, 2011).

## Structure of the Questionnaire

Questionnaires are an impartial way of collecting data from the researcher's point of view and is considered a method to be selected when the researcher is expected to determine "what people think, feel and what they believe" (Robson, 2010: 265). This research is part of a wider one for which a structured questionnaire was drafted consisting of nineteen open and semi-open questions - phrases. Five out of the nineteen questions relate to this research. The first one is compiled based on divided questions, the second, fourth and fifth one are based on the five-point likert scale (not at all to very much), while the second one is based on a semantic differential scale from 1-10 (less important than the most important). The questionnaire was compiled on the basis of questionnaires drawn up by the training program evaluators, on data derived from literature references studied and on data from the official websites of agencies that undertake the training of self-government authorities.

Its completion time did not exceed 10-15 minutes, while emphasis was given on using simple language and selecting distinct and comprehensible questions. The questionnaires were delivered to the participants between February and April 2017, in order to provide additional instructions on their completion and to avoid any errors due to misconceptions (Creswell, 2011; Robson, 2007). A total of 72 questionnaires were completed and returned (96% response rate). However, five questionnaires were rejected due to incorrect completion.

The forms accompanying the questionnaire included the information note for the purposes of the research, the consensus form to ensure participation and anonymity of participants and the information note with full details for contacting the researcher. Before the final distribution of questionnaires, it was deemed necessary to be distributed on a pilot basis to a small sample of ten (N = 10) of the participants in order to check the range of assessment and response.

## Data analysis

Upon receipt of the replied questionnaires and the removal of invalid ones, their codification was finalised by entering the values in a computer. The use of SPSS 18 statistical program has ensured the technical credibility of this research (Roussos & Tsaousis 2006; Emvalotis & Katsis 2008).

## Research results

The processing of results show that the administrative officials have all attended at least one training session from the time that the "Kallikratis" program was implemented until the date that they filled out the questionnaire. In particular, 46.3% of respondents have completed over five training sessions, while 23.9% have completed only one. In examining the need for participation in training programs, 85% consider it quite necessary (very much to very) to participate in training programs, while only 3% consider it less necessary to participate in training (table 1).

**Table 1. Frequency allocation of the need to participate in training**

	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Very much	30	44.8
A lot	27	40.3
Enough	8	11.9
A little	2	3.0
Total	67	100.0

As regards the reasons for the officials' participation in the training seminars, the most important ones seem to involve acquiring new knowledge and competencies as well as solving problems of daily working life, while the less important one seems to involve updating their knowledge after the changes that the "Kallikratis" program brought.

Investigating the rate of covering deficiencies in the field of tasks covered by the training for the administrative officials of the Municipality of Larissa, we observe that the majority of officials is fairly to very covered from training at 37.3% and 38.8%, respectively.

In addition, the participants select training programs related to the organisation and administration of self-administration authorities on a "quite" to "very much" scale, followed by the interpretation of the legislative framework, subjects on communication, teamwork, conflict/administration crisis management, standardisation of public documents and finally a smaller percentage selects subjects related to the use of new technologies (table 2).

**Table 2. Investigating the selection of training subjects**

	Not at all	A little	Fairly	Very	Very much
Subjects related to the use of new technologies	9.5	25.4	28.6	19.0	17.5
Subjects on the organisation and administration of Self-Government Authorities	0	3.0	28.8	42.4	25.8
Interpretation of the legal framework	0	15.6	25.0	29.7	29.7
Subjects on communication, teamwork, conflict/crisis management	4.7	14.1	26.6	29.7	25.0
Subjects on the standardisation of public documents	9.7	16.1	40.3	17.7	16.1

## Discussion

This research investigated the views of administrative officials of the Municipality of Larissa as regards the need for training, the reasons why they select training and the subjects on which they themselves feel they require further training. The officials in this particular municipality are positive towards training and its use in their workplace. They believe that it is important to cover any shortcomings in their field of work so that they meet the organisation's requirements and needs and also contribute to achieving its objectives. This leads us to the conclusion that they are not indifferent employees but officials who link their work needs to training. Similar findings can be found in Karalis' research (2013).



At the same time, the strategy of the Municipality of Larissa for motivating officials to get training seems to have qualitative results, making this a competitive advantage for the organisation. Moreover, as Erven & Milligan (2000) points out, the high degree of motivation of officials is a competitive advantage for every business.

Officials, convinced of the benefits of training, followed the strategic planning of the business, confirming according to the views of Kaminaris (2006) and Kretsos (2009) the necessity of accepting learning from the business' human resources and its importance in the organisation's learning. After all, learning is not just a process of knowledge accumulation but a process that changes people's behaviour and course of action in the future by overcoming every part of their existence (Illeris, 2016).

### **Implication for Research and Practice**

The usefulness of this research lies first of all in the fact that it provides useful literature information on the establishment and operation of self-administration authorities and on the role and training of its administrative officials. Self-administration authorities can significantly influence the smooth or not functioning of the local community. Strengthening them, through the training of their personnel, can also contribute to strengthening the broader society. Officials in training are the key to dynamically influencing the reform process (Pechlivanidis, 2010).

At another level, this research study is considered important because it enriches the field of relevant researches. At this point, however, it is important to point out some methodological limitations of this research. This study was based on a specific sample of administrative officials, so we cannot talk about generalisation of its results. Further research is needed on a larger sample to examine the validity of findings.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this research derive from a specific Municipality that has integrated training according to the analysis of the theoretical framework in its strategic planning, aiming to increase the efficiency of its officials and the organisation's viability. However, according to Dendardt (2000), this presupposes a combination of values in the public sector, cultivating at the same time personal values and interests in human resources. In other words, the official has to be convinced of the benefits of his/her training by the business, combining his/her willingness to learn with the benefits he/she can obtain. These are personal benefits that relate to personal integration that a person who loves his/her job feels and to a sense of accomplishment that he/she has done his/her work having at the same time the opportunity for personal development and also non-personal benefits related to his/her promotion to higher hierarchical levels.

In local self-government, over-regulation and knowledge are running at a rapid pace. With the introduction of "Kallikratis" program, in addition to the new responsibilities that municipalities have been called upon to undertake, the principles of modern management have entered into their administration and intra-corporate philosophy. As a result, some officials' sectors were unable to cope with the new requirements. Training is intended to fill these gaps, as it provides, according to Cochz & O'Donnell (1980), the opportunity to administrative executives to learn about the concepts and techniques that will improve their efficiency.

## Future Research

The case of the municipality of Larissa is a good practice. The results of this research could also be spread to other municipalities in order to initiate a broader discussion on the subject. The role of educators of adults could also not be omitted in this discussion. In addition, the views of administrative officials on the necessity of training, the reasons and the subject of training could also be investigated in other municipalities in the country of similar size. Also, the link between training and the professional and personal development and the course of local self-government officials could be investigated and linked to objective setting and judgements of superiors. Quantitative methodology could also be combined with the use of quality methods, such as interviewing, in order to look into these issues in a multidisciplinary way and to obtain stronger results.

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