
**TRAINING AND EFFICIENCY: A QUANTITATIVE SURVEY OF
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICIALS IN LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT
AUTHORITIES**

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ABSTRACT: *This paper presents the results of a quantitative survey that was conducted on local self-government officials of the municipality of Larissa, with the aim of exploring their views on the contribution of training to their job performance. It also investigated whether these views differ according to the officials' gender, age and seniority. The research results showed that officials recognise the benefits of training, in terms both of their personal efficiency and of the efficiency of the organisation where they work. These views do not appear to be statistically significantly different, on the basis of predefined variables.*

KEYWORDS: Administrative Officials, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Local Self-Government

INTRODUCTION

In modern society, which is marked by rapid developments, Public Administration is an important factor in socio-economic development, as it contributes to the regulation and control of the distribution of functions of the modern state (Kefis, 2005).

In recent years, a general trend to decentralise public administration is noted, based on the principles of modern management and the adoption of new administration models (Total Quality Management, Fiscal Federalism Theory). According to these models, the economic and social functions of a state are more effectively administrated by a decentralised administration (Jamet, 2007). Thus, self-government is called upon to undertake ever more actions in the allocation of resources, competences and public sector staff, with the main objective of continuously upgrading the quality and effectiveness of its services (Fazel, 2003; Boaden, 1999).

Within the framework of the above competencies, the quality and effectiveness of services are factors that local self-government cannot afford to ignore. In recent years, research has highlighted that the state is oft criticised as ineffective in the administrative function of its public services (Ladi & Dalakou, 2008; Spanou, 2008).

Human assets, which must evolve, be strengthened, educated and trained, can make a significant contribution to changing this culture, as imposed by the new public administration model.

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 as one of the top ten cities in the world that received the "Learning City" award. 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 (from 2011 onwards), as the Municipality is required to develop an 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 progress and effectiveness.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The evolution of the institution of local self-government in Greece

The foundations of the institution of local self-government in Greece are linked to the establishment of the first Independent State in 1828, when the first Governor of Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias, proceeded to the establishment of the "Community and Provincial Councils of Elders (Dimogerontia)". Subsequently, the first reference to the structure of the first tier of local self-government appears in Article 107 of the 1927 Constitution. The head of administration in each prefecture was the commissioner, as representative of the Government (Stempilis & Grigoriadou 2010).

Thereafter, and until the first years after the restoration of democracy, the majority of local government authorities lacked economic autonomy and were exclusively dependent on central government funding.

The adoption of Law 1850/1989 "on the ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECLSG)" highlighted once again the institution of local self-government. According to the preamble of the ECLSG, the safeguarding and reinforcement of local self-government in the different European countries is an important contribution to the construction of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and the decentralisation of power, giving local self-government an active role, with a highly conscious understanding of the need for greater citizen participation in Community-level decision-making (Nugent, 1991; Athanasopoulos, 1995).

The above reasons led the Greek state to the need for legislative regulation, to create financially autonomous and functionally independent organisations, which, utilising the advantages of decentralisation, can design, plan, implement and control local development initiatives, as imposed by European reality.

The clarification of the structure of the first and second tier of local self-government was established and enshrined in Article 102 of the revised Greek Constitution in 2001. Subsequently, the Maastricht Treaty (1992) significantly strengthened the institution of self-government, giving it autonomy in the regional decision-making process. The effort towards the convergence of Greek local self-government with European reality required local authorities that would be able to undertake effective local development initiatives. In Greece, however, where local self-government presents distinct weaknesses, Local Government Authorities see the European community as an opportunity for both their upgrading and their financial improvement (Besila - Vika, 2007; Explanatory Report, 2010).

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 separated the two tiers of self-government. The reorganisation effort of the “Kapodistrias Plan” for local self-government significantly improved its functioning, but did not create organisationally robust and financially autonomous Municipalities.

The strengthening of the Institution of Local Self-Government - The “Kallikratis” program

In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty came into force, promoting the active role of citizens in decisions of the local self-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”. The new architecture of self-government and decentralised administration laid the foundations for the reformative division of the Greek territory into new self-government boundaries, radically changing the country’s administrative structure. This created 325 new robust municipalities, 7 decentralised administrations and elected regional administrations. The restructuring was accompanied by decentralisation through the transfer of competencies, staff and resources from the regional state government to the primary and secondary local self-government.

The objectives of the program, which came into force on 1 January 2011, are both to save taxpayers’ funds, by cutting operating costs through the reduction of the number of local government authorities and to enhance economic growth by undertaking local-level initiatives. In addition, the powers that were assigned only to the mayor are distributed, as administration is now exercised through a collective coordination body. Municipal-level decentralisation is strengthened through the appointment of local deputy mayors. At the same time, new consultation institutions are introduced, such as the consultative committee, the immigration integration council and the institution of the municipal and enterprise ombudsman. Furthermore, the introduction of the obligatory posting of all acts concerning decisions of the municipal bodies of Municipalities and their legal entities on the Internet through the “Diavgeia” program and the prohibition of any recruitment outside ASEP procedures promote transparency and meritocracy towards citizens, through accountability for and control of self-government actions (Explanatory Report, 2010). Finally, Municipalities are assigned new responsibilities concerning the environment, quality of life, education, public health and the development of sport, culture and social policy.

The contemporary role of local self-government officials

In such a framework of reorganisation of the state in general and of local self-government in particular, the role of administrative officials becomes of major importance and needs to be adapted in order to help restore citizens’ trust in self-government and institutions, strengthen social cohesion through the implementation of policies geared to the real needs of the local community and upgrade the level of services to citizens, primarily by building relationships of trust.

Officials are now the agents of varied changes and are called upon to adapt to a new framework of local self-government, characterised by accountability, transparency, reliability, cost-efficiency, meritocracy and legitimacy.

The process of training contributes significantly to the optimal use of the human resources of local self-government. In order for all officials to become competent, efficient and productive, they must acquire a corpus of knowledge, skills and competences, as dictated by current local, national and international circumstances.

The knowledge provided to officials is not strictly predefined and does not concern a traditional approach, aimed simply at familiarising administrative officials with the main legal tools of administration and the interpretation of legal provisions. On the contrary, it is the product of a multilateral interaction, dictated by the priorities of each public policy field, by the institutional and functional characteristics of the policy-making level, by the specificities of the implementing bodies, and by scientific theory and methodology (Passas & Tsekos, 2004).

According to Hanushek & Woessmann (2008), cognitive skills relate mainly to a person's ability to apply critical thinking and to solve problems in a scientific and systematic way, while according to Pink (2005) and Sternberg (1996), they concern the ability of creative and even unorthodox thinking. That is, persons should learn to think differently, to challenge existing situations, to create new scenarios, to design and lay out strategies. In such a context, they experiment, transform superficial knowledge into deep understanding, use pre-existing knowledge and experience to build new knowledge, teach others and learn from others, and ultimately contribute to the diffusion of this knowledge mainly through training and job rotation (Garvin, 1993).

The recognition of the key personality traits of officials, which in turn contribute to their effectiveness and productivity, is equally important. Such traits include extraversion, openness, empathy and flexibility.

Extroverted individuals are communicative, eager, positive, bright, expressive, voice their opinions and are characterised by emotional stability and high self-confidence (Costa & McCrae, 1995; Barrick & Mount, 1993). In addition, extraversion has been found to be related to job performance in occupations where there is interaction with others (Barick et al, 2003).

Openness relates to creativity and adaptation to change, which is associated with the positive evolution of a given situation (George & Zhou, 2001; Miller, Johnson & Grau, 1994). It also includes an internal process, through which the individual discovers personal beliefs, values and attitudes (Fowers and Davidov, 2006). Open individuals think critically, can distance themselves from a situation, look beyond the facts and expected results, are creative, polite, optimistic and positive (Barrick & Mount, 1991). However the debate about openness in administrative organizations raises a number of ethical issues about the rights and power of the state in relation to its citizens and about the protection of information given in confidence to the local administration. Ethics concerns either the right actions and rules of conduct or the interpretation by an individual of what is acceptable or not (Chapman, 1993).

Empathy has an anthropocentric basis and creates systems that are adequate for people who are part of the system or who are using it (Deserti & Rizzo, 2014). It concerns an individual's ability to enter in the position of another, to understand his thoughts, feelings, principles and values, preferences and needs (Fulton - Suri, 2003). Recent research recognises empathy as a way to develop future public services and implement change in the public sector and in the individuals within (Mattelmäki et al. 2014, Hyvärinen et al. 2015).

Finally, flexibility is directly linked to openness, and is a trait that helps individuals adapt to new situations. The term flexibility has now become associated with working hours, exercising duties, payroll issues, the workplace, policies and administration (Hardiman, 2003).

Training, effectiveness and efficiency

According to the principles of modern management, human resources are the most important factor in ensuring the progress and effectiveness of a healthy organisation. This means that, for an organisation to grow, it must be flexible, seeking to develop the knowledge, skills and creative thinking of its officials, creating highly trained, motivated and qualified officials. Besides, the concepts of staff development and training are key elements of human resource management (Beardwell & Holden, 1994; Pfefer, 1994; Chytiris, 2001). Let us take a more detailed look at the concepts of training, effectiveness and productivity.

According to Abiodun (1999), training differs from education, since it concentrates on raising abilities and skills required by employees to perform adequately on a given task or job. On the other hand education represents a rising in knowledge and abilities that are not necessarily related with particular work. Training also changes beliefs, ideas and knowledge, individual's behavioral aspects in their relationship with work groups in the organization. In addition, according to Peteraf (1993), it is one of the major mechanisms that help organizations or services achieve their targets and find a competition feature.

Economists classify training into special training, that equips employees with specific skills that lead to raising their productivity with a specific employer and into general training that aims at raising the skills of employees and productivity that fit with the similar organizations (Garibaldi, 2006).

There are different methods of training. A first method is on-the-job training, where officials are trained in performing their duties with the help of an experienced official. This can be intra-corporate training with external trainers or extra-corporate, in cooperation with public and private organisations that hold training programs within the scope of the officials' interest and feature specially designed training areas. Another method is induction / orientation. This seeks to familiarise new officials with the regulations, values, ethics, culture and rules of the service. Apprenticeship is a method in which an unskilled person closely follows a skilled person in order to understand the task. Finally, there is also formal training, which is based on a theoretical and practical teaching process, which can be done inside and outside the workplace.

In Greece, the agencies that design, organise, support and implement the training programs can be universities, 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.

The design of training programs is based on several theories, especially those on adult education and group dynamics. Some have a cognitive and others a behavioural dimension. In any case, however, the key purpose of the training process is to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of officials and, consequently, of organisations (Amisano, 2010).

Effectiveness in general is associated with the achievement of specific, desirable and predetermined objectives. In particular, according to Daft (2010), factors that can lead to the

design of effectiveness and productivity strategies include a service's resources, i.e. the capacities, skills, the structure of the organisation and information. In addition, he argues that effectiveness refers to the degree to which an organization or service has achieved its goals, while Mondy et al (1990) argue that it refers to the degree to which an organization or service produces the output that is intended. Furthermore, according to Frøkjær et al (2000), effectiveness measurement indicators include both the quality of results and error estimation. Efficiency, however, relates to the precise assessment of the actions on the basis of which the objectives will be achieved, but also to the allocation of the resources that will be used in the interest of achieving objectives (Bernadin et al, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

Research aim

This work comes to investigate the views of the administrative officials of the local self-government in the municipality of Larissa on the contribution of training to job performance and whether these views are differentiated by variables such as gender, age and years of service.

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. The sample included officials of university education, technological education and secondary education. The sample was selected following the method of convenient sampling, according to which the researcher selects participants "who are willing and available for research" (Creswell, 2011).

The questionnaires were delivered to the participants from February to April 2017. A total of 72 questionnaires were completed and returned (96% response rate). However, five questionnaires were rejected due to incorrect completion.

Structure of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was selected as methodological tool. This tool was selected primarily because it is used often in social sciences for exploratory, descriptive and interpretive purposes (Robson, 2007). In addition, it is often used in surveys using the individual as a unit of analysis and is the best available method for social researchers interested in collecting personal data to describe a large population that cannot be observed directly (Babbie, 2011; Javeau, 2000). According to Cicourel, quantitative research is more explanatory and unpredictable in its results than is supported by the advocates of qualitative research (ibid, Bryman, 1992). Drafting a questionnaire is a complex matter and, as Oppenheim (1992) tellingly reports, good knowledge and proper handling of language are not enough. It requires discipline and precision at all stages, from the choice of questions, to its design, the pilot research, its distribution and return (ibid, Bell, 2005).

A structured questionnaire was drafted for this survey, consisting of nineteen open and semi-open questions - phrases. These questions are factual questions and questions concerning opinions, beliefs and judgements, which are more difficult to compile and answer (Gillham, 2007).

This questionnaire consists of three parts. In the first part, the questions are structured as divided questions, while there is also a semi-open question. In particular, the first six questions concern gender, age, years of service, the status of the officials and the department where they work. In the second part, the questions identify the resources and benefits of the training process. The seventh question is structured as a divided question. Questions 8,10,11,12,13 were measured in a five-point Likert scale, with a rating scale of “not at all to very much”. In the third part, the questions identify the contribution of training programs to job performance and professional development. In particular, questions 15,16,17,19 were measured in a five-point Likert scale with a rating scale of “not at all to very much”, while question 14 in a five-point Likert scale with a rating scale of “not important to very important”. Finally, Question 18 measured the degree of positive training outcomes in a semantic distinction scale from 1-4.

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 providing training to 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 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

The questionnaires were processed by SPSS 21. As far as the reliability of the scale, the Cronbach’s Alpha, the statistical index of internal consistency, as a whole was 0.826, which represents satisfactory quality of the measurement.

Research results

The research results can be separated in two categories: demographic data and opinions. Regarding the demographic data, women make up 74.63%, while men 25.37% of the population. 79.10% are administrative officials, most of whom are employed in the revenue, licensing and advertising department (28.36%) and in the human resources and support department (20.36%). Regarding their level of education, the majority have university education (58.21%), while only 11.94% and 3% hold a postgraduate degree and a PhD respectively. In terms of chronological age, most participants are between 41-50 years old (53.7%), while in terms of years of service, the majority ranges between 11 and 20 years (44.8%).

Regarding the evaluation of the contribution of training programs to their job performance, they consider that, at the level of knowledge and skills, the provision of training was quite to very significant, by 31.8% and 33.3% respectively. An important finding is that not even one official considered the contribution of the training programs to be insignificant.

In addition, most officials consider the assistance received from the training programs in matters concerning both services to citizens (77.8%) and the speed of processing cases (78.2%) as very important.

Regarding the contribution at the level of service expectations (departmental and organisation-level objectives), 43.8% believe that the objectives of the department as well as the strategic objectives of the Municipality are sufficiently covered by the training that they receive. In addition, 42 out of the 67 participants consider that training contributes a lot (40.3%) to very much (22.4%) to the effectiveness of their service, while only 6 consider the contribution of training to service effectiveness be of little importance. 51 out of 67 consider that their training helps them a lot (35.8%) to very much (40.3%) in executing any task assigned to them by the service, while the majority of participants (51 out of 67) considers the contribution of training quite to very important for increasing their competitiveness. Only 10 of the 67 participants consider that training does not give them a competitive advantage in their work.

Furthermore, 45.5% of participants consider that their self-esteem has grown significantly due to their participation in the training programs, while a similar percentage (43.9%) also shows an increase in trust between colleagues and citizens. Subsequently, a strong majority (58.5%) considers that training has a positive effect on increasing productivity in their department.

Regarding the contribution of training to addressing administrative changes, the majority (51.5%) considers it has benefited to a rather large extent.

Finally, as regards the contribution of training to the organisation's progress, 48 of the 67 participants stated that through their personal training they contributed a lot (56.7%) to very much (14.9%) to the progress and effectiveness of their service.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the views of the administrative officials of the municipality of Larissa on the contribution of training programs in their job performance. The general conclusion drawn based on the findings is that the administrative officials in this municipality are in favour of training and its use in their workplace. They acknowledge the value of the knowledge and innovation offered by training programs, associating the benefits of training with personal effectiveness and the effectiveness of the organisation. The conclusions lead to an association between training and employee performance. These findings agree with those of Michalopoulos (2011), Glaveli (2010), Griva (2005), Switzer (2006), Deros (2012) and Karalis (2013).

By covering their job-related inadequacies through training, the officials meet the organization's requirements and are able to perform their tasks more effectively. Department and organisation-level results are encouraging. The support of their superiors, who seem to listen to the officials' wishes and needs and to assess the needs for improving their skills, encouraged the officials more to participate in training.

In conclusion, these findings come from a specific municipality that has integrated training in its strategic planning, to increase its officials' effectiveness and the organisation's sustainability. The survey findings do not appear to be influenced by variables such as age, gender and years of experience.

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-government 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. To date, there have been several studies on the results of training for civil servants. However, based on the research review, it was found that the number of studies on the contribution of training to the professional and personal development of municipal administrative officials after the introduction of the “Kallikratis” program is extremely limited.

Finally, we should point out some methodological limitations of this study. This study was based on a specific sample of administrative officials, so we cannot talk about generalising its results. Further research is needed on a larger sample, to control the validity of the 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 effectiveness 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 Koontz & O’Donnel (1980), the opportunity to administrative executives to learn about the concepts and techniques that will improve their effectiveness. In this way, as functionaries of local society, they will also contribute to the cohesion and proper functioning of society.

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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