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DELPHI METHOD APPLICATION TO FIND A MORE EFFICIENT MODEL FOR EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF ADMINISTRATIVE SERVANTS

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to evaluate the problems and challenges arising from the application of the process of evaluation of administrative servants and to identify the possibilities for changes in the process, in order to find a more efficient model that would maximize the benefits of the evaluation. The research is conducted by using the method of qualitative forecasting – the Delphi method, with the application of survey questionnaires in three rounds. Participants in the study are nine managers employed in a state institution, who answered the questionnaires between April 22 and May 12, 2020. The results of the research show that the evaluation procedure is not applied as imagined and thus does not give the intended results for which it was introduced. It is necessary to change the system for evaluation of administrative servants, either by revising some of the provisions in the current legislation, or by introducing a completely new system.

Keywords: qualitative forecasting, Delphi method, administrative servants, management of the effect, evaluation, work competencies

1. INTRODUCTION

The proper implementation of the process of evaluation of the work of administrative employees is an important requirement for the establishment and functioning of a merit-based system in the public administration. The model for evaluating the work of the administration based on competencies, popularly called "evaluation 360°", was introduced in North Macedonia in 2015, and since 2016 it is mandatory for all institutions in the public sector. The motivation for introducing a competency-based evaluation system is that, it should be an objective judgment of the individual work and the effect of the employee, in the context of his role and contribution within the organization, and the needs for professional improvement and career development (Ministry of Information Society and Administration & Center for Change management, 2016).

The subject of this paper is the system for managing the effect of administrative employees (evaluation, rewarding, punishment), regulated in the current Law on Administrative Servants, with an emphasis on the process of evaluation of the performance of employees. The need for research on the subject of the paper is understandable, given the

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importance and relevance of the topic. The system for evaluating the effect of administrative employees is one of the most discussed aspects of the Law on Administrative Servants. According to certain researchers, the current evaluation system in our country corresponds to the modern practices at European and world level. The main challenge facing the evaluation system is the large discrepancy between the evaluation results which are on average quite high, on the one hand, and the negative general perception and dissatisfaction of citizens with the work of administrative employees, on the other hand (Jahija, 2018).

The main purpose of the study is to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of the system for managing the effect of administrative employees, to identify the problems and challenges arising from its application, as well as to offer opportunities for improvement or to find a more efficient model that would maximize the benefits of this process. The main hypotheses that this paper is trying to prove is the following: The evaluation procedure is not applied as intended and does not give the expected results. In the empirical analysis we are using the method for qualitative forecasting – the Delphi method. The choice to use the Delphi method is due to the fact that it is considered one of the most important and most used methods of expert evaluation, which offers a significant improvement of the classical ways of obtaining forecasts achieved by joint consultation of a group of experts on a particular phenomenon (Cvetkoska & Dimovska, 2019).

Instead of the introduction part, in section 1 is explained the performance management system of the administrative employees in North Macedonia. Section 2 explained the used methodology and data. In Section 3 the results obtained from the Delphi method are presented and analyzed, followed by the conclusion.

2. THE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE EMPLOYEES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

The Ministry of Information Society and Administration (2016) defines the management with the effect as a process that encompasses the overall work and performance of administrative employees employed in public sector institutions, in order to achieve a high level of work results. The purpose of the process of management with the effect is to provide an overview of what is expected of each individual in terms of tasks performed and competencies demonstrated, to evaluate employee performance, to promote learning and development, and to take measures to reward, improve and punish employees based on facts and arguments (Ministry of Information Society and Administration & Center for Change management, 2016).

In North Macedonia, the management with the effect of administrative employees is regulated in the Law on Administrative Servants (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 27/2014, 199/2014, 48/2015, 154/2015, 5/2016, 142/2016, 11/2018, 275/2019 and 14/2020), in Chapter X, articles 61 to 67. According to the Law, each institution is obliged to establish a system for managing the effect of administrative employees. The system consists of the processes of identifying the work goals and tasks and the determination of the individual plan for professional development, as well as the procedure for the evaluation of the effect of the administrative employee.

The evaluation process is conducted annually and is mandatory for all administrative employees, with the exception of managers in institutions and cabinet staff. The performance of the employees is evaluated with a grade from 1 to 5. The process is led by the immediate supervising officer. As part of the process of continuous monitoring of the effect of the

administrative employee, the immediate supervising officer conducts a semi-annual interview with the employee, no later than May 31.

The evaluation of the immediate supervising officer comprises the main component of the annual evaluation of the administrative employee, with 65% share in the total grade. Additionally, the evaluation process includes internal and external evaluators, i.e., four employees from the same institution (two at a lower position and two at the same position) and two evaluators who are not employed in the institution, but with whom the administrative employee had direct cooperation. The share of the assessment of the other evaluators in the total grade is 35%. Internal and external evaluators are selected by the employee, in agreement with his/her immediate supervising officer.

The Law lists the job competencies in relation to which the performance of administrative employees is evaluated. These are the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the work, compliance with deadlines and the level of fulfillment of the work objectives and tasks, the level of involvement and commitment to the work, the contribution to the realization of the strategic plan of the institution, the realization of the individual plan for professional development and the behavior of the employee.

After the completion of the evaluation process for all employees, the manager of the institution prepares a ranking list of annual grades for all evaluated administrative employees in the institution for the current year. The law sets a limit on the number of employees in an institution that can be evaluated with the highest grade, ie up to 5% of the employees can be evaluated with a grade of "5", for the fulfillment of which the manager of the institution coordinates the evaluators. This is important because the Law provides for all employees who are evaluated with the highest grade to be awarded a bonus for their successful work in the amount of one salary.

One of the main objections to the system is that the evaluation procedure itself is too complex and does not contribute to the achievement of the goals for which it is applied and does not give the intended effects due to which the evaluation is introduced (Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje & Center for Economic Analyses, 2019). Other shortcomings in the system include the practice of not keeping records of the performance of employees and the absence of a meeting between the employee and the immediate supervising officer to jointly discuss the performances in the current year and determine the work objectives for the next (Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje & Center for Economic Analyses, 2019).

In his doctoral dissertation, Jahija (2018) notes that the main problem with the evaluation process is not so much in the rules themselves, but in their application. This stems from the low level of ability of top managers, which in turn leads to the emergence of subjectivism and conformism. This situation has a negative impact on career development and the evaluation system, which undoubtedly reduces the quality of functioning of the entire public administration.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The research was conducted by using the method of qualitative forecasting – the Delphi method, by examining nine respondents using survey questionnaires in three rounds. Details for the Delphi Method could be found in Cvetkoska and Dimovska (2019, p.p. 345-348) Participants in our research were nine managers employed in the Service of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. The original idea of the authors was to cover all managers who occupy the position of head of department in the Assembly, given that they are directly

involved in the evaluation process, both as evaluators of their employees, but also being evaluated for the effect of their work. In those sectors where there is currently no manager in the position of head of department, it was decided that the next highest manager in the organizational unit will be included in the research (occupying the position assistant heads of departments). The Service of the Assembly is composed of 13 departments and is headed by a Secretary General. Regarding the Secretary General, who is the chief manager of the institution, it was decided not to be included in the research, given that the position of Secretary General falls into the category of elected and appointed persons and as such is not subject to the standard evaluation process provided for administrative employees.

All potential participants were interviewed in order for the authors to explain to them the main purpose and the way in which the research will be conducted. The anonymity of their participation in the research was emphasized, in order to enable the respondents to freely express their opinions and views. The idea was met with positive feedback from most of the interlocutors. Out of a total of 13 heads of departments, nine agreed to be part of the survey. The three rounds of the research were conducted between April 22 and May 12, 2020.

3.1. FIRST ROUND OF THE RESEARCH

The first questionnaire was sent to the participants on April 22, giving them a period of seven days (including April 29) to submit their answers. All nine participants answered the questionnaire within the set deadline. This survey questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions, in order to allow the respondents to be creative and freely express their opinion. The first questionnaire asked the respondents to express their general opinion regarding the current procedure for evaluating the performance, to identify the problems and challenges they face during the implementation and to define the reasons why the procedure is not always applied as imagined. Also, the goal of this questionnaire was to collect proposals regarding the possibilities for improving the process in order to maximize the benefits of the evaluation.

3.2. SECOND ROUND OF THE RESEARCH

The second questionnaire was sent to the participants on April 30, and they had six days (up until May 5) to answer them. This questionnaire was also answered by all participants. The second questionnaire consisted of four closed-ended questions, in which the respondents were asked to either assign a grade from 1 to 5 or to circle one of the proposed answers, depending on the question asked. The questions from the second questionnaire were based on the answers and results obtained from the respondents within the first round of the research. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants in the research, but also so that each respondent could identify their answers in the next round, each participant was marked with a different color that only he/she knew.

3.3. THIRD ROUND OF THE RESEARCH

In the third round of the research, the respondents were once again asked the same questions from the previous questionnaire, but they had the opportunity to see the answers of the other respondents from the second round. In this round, the respondents had to decide whether they will keep the answers given in the second questionnaire or change them. Those respondents who decided to change their opinion on a particular issue were asked to explain why they decided to make such a change. The survey questionnaire was delivered to the

respondents on May 6 and they had six days (up until May 12) to send their answers. In the third round, three of the respondents chose to change some of their answers, while the other six decided to keep the answers given in the second questionnaire.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From the answers received to the first question from the first questionnaire, that asked the respondents to comment on the positive and negative aspects of the current procedure for evaluating the effect of the administrative employees provided in the Law on Administrative Servants, the negative comments prevail regarding the procedure. Out of a total of nine respondents, none decided to list only positive aspects. In contrast, four respondents chose to cite in their answers only negative aspects of the current procedure. In the answers of five respondents, both positive and negative aspects of the procedure are listed. As the main positive aspects of the evaluation process, the respondents point out:

- the activity is an indicator of the performance in regard to the work competencies of each employee;
- it is a motivational or a corrective tool that influences the future performance;
- the process establishes a framework in relation to the work goals and tasks according to which the employee is evaluated;
- it offers a possibility to identify the work tasks that the employee performed outside the standard job description in the act for systematization of work positions;
- the semi-annual interview leaves room for improvement of the performance the employee.

The negative aspects of the process, stated by the respondents, are elaborated in detail in the next question that examines the problems and challenges faced by the participants during the implementation of the evaluation process.

The results to the second question, which asked respondents to list the problems and challenges they face while evaluating the effect of the employees in their sector/organizational unit, are shown in Table 1.

The results in Table 1 point to a total of 11 problems or challenges faced by the respondents in their experience with the evaluation process. The problems/challenges with the highest frequency, with four received answers, are the answers that procedure is perceived as a pure formality (filling out forms) and burdens managers with unnecessary bureaucratic work and that the evaluation done by external evaluators is problematic having in mind that in most cases the employees do not cooperate directly with the evaluators, so there is no way they could know how the employee performs his/her duties, so the evaluation often relies on friendly relations or a previous agreement. Three respondents each listed as main problems/challenges the fact that managers are forced to evaluate everyone with the same grades, in order to avoid punishing certain employees, that managers are limited in the number of their employees that can be assessed with the highest grade, as well as that the process disrupts the atmosphere and affects the relationship between employees and managers.

Table 1. Problems and challenges and their frequency

Problem or challenge	Frequency
The procedure is perceived as a pure formality (filling out forms) and burdens managers with unnecessary bureaucratic work.	4
Evaluation done by external evaluators is problematic having in mind that in most cases the employees do not cooperate directly with the evaluators, so there is no way they could know how the employee performs his/her duties; the evaluation often relies on friendly relations or a previous agreement.	4
Managers are forced to evaluate everyone with the same grades, in order to avoid punishing certain employees.	3
Managers are limited in the number of their employees that can be assessed with the highest grade.	3
The process disrupts the atmosphere and affects the relationship between employees and managers.	3
The grade often depends on the subjective will of the manager.	2
The evaluation procedure is too general and does not correspond to the type of work performed in the specific institution.	1
Some of the organizational units do not have a manager who closely monitors the work of the employees and can give a realistic evaluation on their performance.	1
Job descriptions, individual work processes and expected results from each employee are not precisely defined.	1
The employee himself/herself selects the people who evaluate him/her from the employees at a lower and at the same position, which affects the evaluation process.	1
There is pressure on the manager from a higher instance or other factor to evaluate an employee contrary to his/her objective assessment.	1

In the second questionnaire, the 11 answers received regarding the problems and challenges faced by the managers in the evaluation process were presented to the respondents, and they were asked to assess how often they have faced the specific problem/challenge during the evaluation of the effect of the employees in their department/organizational unit. The answers received were calculated in order to obtain an average grade for each problem/challenge. The results show that one problem has an average score corresponding with level 5 (problem or challenge that they face very often), five problems with level 4 (faced often), three problems with level 3 (faced sometimes), two problems with level 2 (faced rarely), while no problem has an average score corresponding with level 1 (faced very rarely). The problem with the highest score and the only one that the respondents face very often according to its average score, is the limitation that the managers have in terms of how many of their employees can be assessed with the highest grade. On the other hand, the two problems, that according to their average score the respondents face rarely, are the pressure exerted on the managers from a higher instance or other factor to evaluate an employee contrary to his/her objective assessment and the dependence of the evaluation on the subjective will of the manager.

From the answers to the third question from the first round, which referred to the adequacy of the job competencies listed in the Law, it can be concluded that the prevailing opinion is that the job competencies established in the Law are good and appropriate. Four of the respondents answered that they fully agree with the competencies set out in the Law and would not change them; four believe that the competencies are suitable, but suggest some changes, while only one respondent answered that the competencies are too general and not at all appropriate for evaluating the effect of employees, given that each job position is specific

and requires different job competencies that are suitable to the job description and the individual work processes. Within the proposed changes, one of the answers is that the competence regarding the level of involvement and commitment to the work should be revised, one refers to the removal of the competence regarding the realization of the individual plan for professional development and the behavior of the employee, while five answers propose the addition of few new work competencies. The following are mentioned as suggestions for amending the job competencies in relation to which the work of the administrative employees should be evaluated: willingness to work overtime, prudent financial operations, showing initiative by proposing additional work, taking on goals and tasks that go beyond the pay grade, as well as reducing work risks.

In the second round of the research, respondents were asked to assess the job competencies on a scale of 1 to 5 according to their significance to the process of evaluating the work of employees (1 = job competence of very low significance, 5 = competence of very high significance). Both the competencies stated in the Law and the competencies proposed by the participants in the first round were evaluated. The results indicate that two job competencies have received the highest possible average score, ie all of the respondents consider that these competencies are of very high significance (level 5). These are the competencies that refer to the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of the work and compliance with deadlines and fulfillment of task and objectives. Additionally, two other competencies have an average score corresponding to level 5 (competence of very high significance). Six competencies are assessed as being of high significance (level 4), one competency is considered as being of moderate significance (level 3), while none of the competencies is assessed with an average score corresponding to levels 2 or 1 (competence of low or very low significance). In general, almost all of the job competencies have received quite high average scores. Only the job competence for prudent financial operations is not assessed as a competence of high or very high importance. It is worth noting that the four highest rated competencies are job competencies that are already stipulated in the Law, indicating that the respondents consider the existing competencies more significant than the ones proposed by them in the first round.

The fourth question from the first questionnaire aims to provide the research with the reasons why the received grades do not always reflect the real performance of the employees and the factors influencing the evaluation procedure to not be applied as intended and to not give the expected results. The answers to this question are shown in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 show seven factors that influence the evaluation process. The respondents stated that the most common factor is the lack of objectivity in the evaluation and formalization of the whole process, due to which all employees receive the same grades. This answer was given by four respondents. Second most common factor is the legal limitation of up to 5% employees that can be assessed with a highest grade of "5". Two respondents chose this answer.

Table. 2. Factors influencing the process of evaluation and their frequency

Factor	Frequency
lack of objectivity in the evaluation and formalization of the whole process (all employees receive the same grades)	4
the legal limitation of up to 5% employees that can be assessed with a highest grade of "5"	2
the lack of accountability in managers	1
the lack of control over the evaluation process	1
the personal relationship between the employee and the manager	1
the desire to avoid dissatisfaction and negative reaction from the employees	1
insufficient familiarity or interest of the manager in the work of the employee	1

The answers received in the first round regarding the reasons why the evaluation procedure is not applied as intended and does not give the expected results, were given to the respondents in the second round, and they were asked to assess how often each factor influenced their work in their previous experience with the evaluation process. According to the average scores, the respondents believe that they have faced one factor very often, two factors often, one factor sometimes, three factors they have faced rarely, while for no factor did they estimate that they have faced very rarely. The factor with the highest score, ie which the respondents faced most often, is the lack of objectivity in the evaluation and formalization of the whole process, due to which the tendency is for all of the employees to receive the same grades. On the other hand, the factor that according to the respondents least influenced the evaluation procedure is the insufficient familiarity or interest of the manager in the work of the employee.

Regarding the fifth question, which referred to the changes that should be implemented to the system for managing the effect of the administrative employees in relation to the evaluation procedure, in order to improve this process and achieve the intended effects of the evaluation, the answers are listed in Table 3.

Table 3 shows a total of 11 proposed changes to the evaluation process. Most answers were received that propose that the employees should be obliged to submit a detailed report on the work done during the evaluation period. Three respondents proposed this change. Two respondents each proposed the changes regarding the complete change of the evaluation process in the law and regarding the need to define in detail the job description, the work processes and the expected results for each employee, based on which the evaluation would be performed. The figure shows that most of the proposals for change, a total of eight, have an average score corresponding to level 4 (change with high priority). For one proposal the respondents consider it to be of a very high priority. It is the proposal that refers to the fact that the other evaluators (internal and external) need to be directly related to the work process of the employee they are evaluating. On the other hand, according to the average scores, the respondents estimated that two proposals for change are of medium priority. Those proposals refer to the reduction of the scope of employees covered by the evaluation and the reduction of the share of the superior manager in the final grade to 50%. None of the proposed changes are rated as being of low or very low priority.

Table 3. Proposed changes to the evaluation process and their frequency

Proposed change	Frequency
The employee should be obliged to submit a detailed report on the work done during the evaluation period	3
Complete change of the law	2
Define in detail the job description, the work processes and the expected results for each employee, based on which the evaluation would be performed	2
Define in detail the job description, the work processes and the expected results for each employee, based on which the evaluation would be performed	1
Reduce the scope of employees covered by the evaluation	1
Reduce the share of the superior manager in the final grade to 50%	1
Evaluators should be obliged to describe in detail the grade they have assigned to the administrative employee	1
Other evaluators (internal and external) to be directly related to the work process of the employee they are evaluating	1
Remove the external evaluators from the evaluation process	1
The final grade should be based on the assessments made by all of the employee's supervisors (head of unit, head of department and the secretary general)	1
Put greater emphasis in the evaluation process on the contribution to the implementation of the strategic plan of the institution when selecting the employees who will be evaluated with the highest grade	1
Changes should be aimed at altering the awareness of all involved in the process	1

5. CONCLUSION

The evaluation process is a key segment of the system for managing the effect of the administrative employees. The importance of the process of evaluation can be seen in its role in providing real and objective indicators of the work performance of the employees, their role and contribution in achieving the goals of the organization, but at the same time in determining the needs for professional and career development of each administrative employee. In North Macedonia, the model for evaluating the work of the administration based on competencies, popularly called "evaluation 360°", is implemented since 2016. The main challenge facing the evaluation system is the large discrepancy between the negative general perception and dissatisfaction of citizens with the work of administrative employees and the very high evaluation results that the employees receive in the evaluation process. It seems that the problem is more in the application of the rules than in the rules themselves.

The main purpose of the study is to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of the system for managing the effect of administrative employees, to identify the problems and challenges arising from its application, as well as to offer opportunities for improvement or to find a more efficient model that would maximize the benefits of this process. In the paper, first an overview of the process of performance management of employees in North Macedonia was given, regulated in the Law on Administrative Servants, with special reference to the evaluation process. Then, the results of the research were presented, conducted in one state institution by applying the method of qualitative forecasting – the Delphi method. The goal of the research was to identify the possibilities for amending the Law on Administrative Servants in regards to the evaluation of the effect of the employees with the goal of finding a more efficient model that would maximize the benefits of the evaluation.

The general impression gained from the conducted research is that the evaluation process is seen mostly as a formality that must be executed (filling in forms), mainly due to the tendency for all of the employees to receive the same grades regardless of their actual performance and achievements in the work process. Respondents cited several reasons why this is the case, including the avoidance to punish certain employees who are underperforming in order not to disrupt the atmosphere in the workplace and the relationship between managers and employees.

The problem that managers most often face when evaluating their employees is the limit in the law on the number of employees in an institution who can be assigned with the highest grade, due to which the top manager of the institution coordinates the evaluators and, in most cases, the directive is that only one employee from an organizational should receive the highest grade. This causes revolt and contributes to the lack of motivation of certain employees, who feel that they deserve the highest grade with their performance, but do not receive it due to the legal restrictions.

Another problem that often occurs during the process is the unrealistic assessment done by the other evaluators (internal and external), mainly due to the fact that they are selected by the employee who is being evaluated, so in many cases these persons have no real contact with the evaluated employee and there is no way they could know how the employee performs his/her duties, so the assessment often relies on friendly relations or a previous agreement.

Some of the respondents emphasized that many of the problems arise from the low level of awareness and self-criticism of the employees for their efforts and performance. Most employees tend to overestimate their performance and expect to get the grade they believe is realistic. Therefore, receiving a lower grade is viewed with discontent and is often interpreted as a personal intolerance or punishment by the manager.

Regarding the job competencies on the basis of which the work of the administrative employees is evaluated, the general impression is that, although certain additions to the list are possible, the competencies established in the Law are appropriate and there is no real need to change them. Analyzing the reasons why the grades do not always reflect the real achievements of the employees, the most common factors that influence the process are the lack of objectivity in the evaluation and the legal limitations. On the other hand, subjective factors such as the personal relationship between the employee and the manager, the lack of control over the process itself, as well as the manager's insufficient knowledge or interest in the employee's work, rarely appear as reasons why the evaluation process is not applied as imagined and does not give the intended effects.

Regarding the search for a more efficient model that would maximize the benefits of the evaluation, the proposals range between completely changing the existing system and revising certain aspects of the current procedure where the main problems and challenges in its implementation are identified. One of the proposals with the highest priority for change refers to the evaluation done by other evaluators (internal and external), for which the respondents believe that, either it should be abolished completely, or it needs to be changed considerably. Additionally, the obligation for submission of detailed reports by the employees on the work done in the evaluated period is emphasized, in order for the evaluation process itself to be based on facts and arguments. One proposal refers to the fact that only a revision of the regulation is not enough, and a significant effort should be made to change the awareness of everyone involved in the process, in the direction of greater self-criticism of the employees and willingness to accept criticism and constructive suggestions for improvement of their performance within the work process.

Overall, the results of the research show that the performance evaluation of administrative employees is not applied as imagined and does not give the intended effects due to which it was introduced. Hence, it is necessary to change the system, either by revising some of the provisions in the current legislation, or by introducing a completely new system.

The Law on Administrative Servants covers a wide range of employees in the public sector, for which the same procedure for managing employee performance applies. Having in mind the specificity of the work of different institutions and organizational units and the diversity of individual work processes, it is logical to expect that the problems and challenges that arise as part of the process of performance evaluation in different institutions, differ significantly from one institution to another. Considering that the research was conducted on respondents from only one state institution, in the future the scope of the research needs to be extended to several state institutions at different levels (central and local), in order to get a more complete picture of the posed problem and to identify possibilities for improvement.

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