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REMOTE RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EMPLOYEES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ZDALNA REKRUTACJA I *ONBOARDING* PRACOWNIKÓW ADMINISTRACJI PUBLICZNEJ W DOBIE PANDEMII COVID-19

Abstract: During the fight against the coronavirus, public administration has struggled with the same problems as the private sector, reducing the scope of services provided and extending administrative deadlines. The pandemic has forced organizations to change drastically the way they operate. The necessary modifications of the applied procedures should also include recruitment and onboarding processes. The article presents the results of extensive research conducted at the end of 2020 in public administration bodies located in the Dolnośląskie Voivodeship regarding the impact of the pandemic on the recruitment and adaptation processes. The study shows the forms and tools used, and the scale of their implementation in offices. The results of the verification of the impact of the size of the organization on transforming the selection and onboarding processes of new local government employees are also discussed.

Keywords: remote recruitment, remote onboarding, COVID-19, public administration.

Streszczenie: Administracja publiczna w czasie walki z koronawirusem borykała się z tymi samymi problemami, z którymi mierzył sektor prywatny, redukując w efekcie zakres świadczonych usług lub wydłużając terminy administracyjne. Pandemia wymusiła na organizacjach zmiany w sposobie funkcjonowania. Niezbędne modyfikacje stosowanych procedur powinny również obejmować procesy rekrutacyjne i onboardingowe. Artykuł prezentuje wyniki szeroko zakrojonych badań przeprowadzonych u schyłku 2020 r. w organach administracji publicznej zlokalizowanych na terenie województwa dolnośląskiego, które dotyczyły wpływu pandemii na procesy rekrutacji i adaptacji pracowniczej. Opracowanie ukazuje formy, stosowane narzędzia oraz skalę ich implementacji w urzędach. Dyskutowane są też wyniki weryfikacji wpływu wielkości organizacji na metamorfozę procesów selekcji i onboardingu nowych pracowników samorządów terytorialnych.

Słowa kluczowe: zdalna rekrutacja, zdalny *onboarding*, COVID-19, administracja publiczna.

1. Introduction

Currently, there is no need to look for further arguments underpinning the claim that human capital is the driving force and guarantees the achievement of the goals of each organization (Cyran, 2017, p. 24). The above regularity is emphasized by management practitioners and theorists alike. Any organization that wants to be perceived as modern and innovative must invest in its employees, because the quality of the processes taking place in the organization is significantly determined by the human factor (Kamińska, 2016, p. 170). For this reason, the ability of an organization to acquire and retain in its own structures the most predisposed employees, from the point of view of the specificity of the organization and the type of activity conducted, is of paramount importance (Cynk, 2016, p. 73). This is not an easy task in itself and requires many complex and coordinated processes, and the current pandemic reality significantly hinders recruitment processes and the adaptation of new employees. An additional barrier concerning public administration units is the insufficient level of computerization of these organizations (Kuzionko-Ochrymiuk, 2018, p. 160). Public administration wishing to effectively compete on the labour market, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, should remodel the methods of operation in this area and use the available technologies, with the help of which it is possible to reach a larger number of potential employees and increase the level of protection of citizens' life and health.

An alternative to the traditional form of recruitment, typical for public administration, is e-recruitment with the use of modern methods and tools that enable the verification of knowledge and competencies much faster and more effectively, and thus the acquisition of valuable employees (Gzowska, 2016, p. 80). In addition to sending a CV, and providing on-line tests, e-recruitment also allows to conduct interviews which can take place using platforms designed for audiovisual communication, virtual meeting rooms (cloud meeting, cloud room), and/or instant messaging. All the interviewing tools enable not only dialogue but also eye contact with

the interviewee. Obviously, the market offers even more technologically advanced tools and methods for acquiring and selecting candidates, such as: recruitment portals, organization websites, blogs, social networks (relational and professional), Internet forums, virtual job fairs, multimedia presentations, storytelling, chatbots, recruitment videos, Assessment Center, gamification, and computer simulations (Graczyk-Kucharska, Spychała, Goliński, and Szafrański, 2020, p. 51-54, 60).

The successful recruitment of employees with the preferred profile does not guarantee their retention in the organization. It is necessary to implement onboarding activities, the importance of which is perceived as strategic (Karambelkar and Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 5), and include the process of preparation, orientation, integration, and other follow-up activities that ensure the effective adaptation of the employee in the organization (Wąsek, 2020, pp. 109-110). These elements should overlap, thus creating a stable platform supporting the new employee and enabling the most effective shaping of the onboarding process.
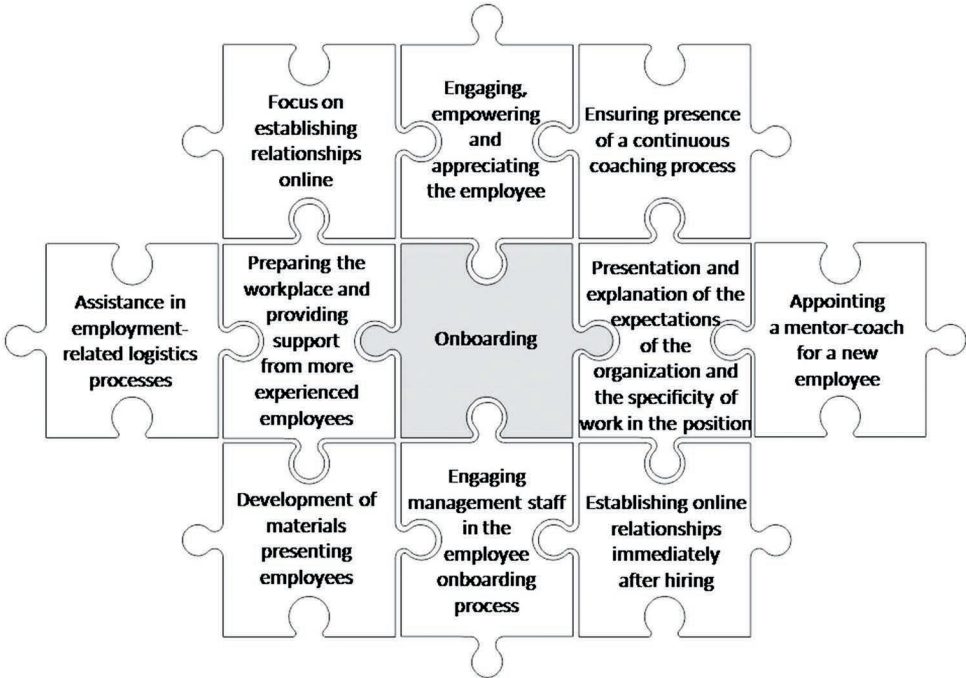

Fig. 1. Onboarding model

Source: author's research based on (Caldwell and Peters, 2018, pp. 7-9).

The above model can be developed further. Getting to know the individual and the current needs of an employee allows for the far-reaching individualization of the

employment relationship, and in doing so by the organization may obtain further benefits. The adaptation process is supported and at the same time, the organization signals to the employee that his/her individual needs are important to it. If the needs of the organization change, a feedback loop can be expected. As a result of positive empirical experiences, the employee will be ready to meet the changing needs of the organization. Further work will probably enrich the onboarding model for other important elements.

The condition for the effective and efficient adaptation of new employees is therefore the implementation of activities covering all four stages of onboarding: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer, 2010, p. 4). In the first (compliance), the employee is familiarized with the applicable standards, principles, and general assumptions of the organization. The second stage (clarification) allows one to learn about the requirements and specifics of the workplace. The third (culture) introduces the employee to the culture of the organization, and the last (connection) is dedicated to creating interpersonal relationships and information networks. Innovative onboarding instruments enable a faster and more effective breakdown of barriers and the acquisition of loyal and dedicated employees (Kaźmierczak, 2017, p. 97). The final selection of tools and methods used for this purpose should, however, depend on the specific nature of the organization.

The article aimed to present the results of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the recruitment and onboarding processes in public administration, the forms it employs, and the tools used in the above processes, and to verify the impact of the size of the organization on the changes in the recruitment and adaptation processes of employees.

2. Methodology

The method of indirect measurement in the form of the electronic questionnaire technique was adopted as the research method. The research tool was a questionnaire consisting of seventeen closed and semi-open, single and multiple-choice questions, which concerned remote recruitment and the onboarding of public administration employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was carried out in the second half of December 2020 and was preceded by an analysis of the literature regarding the topic; 140 public administration offices located in Lower Silesia, which together employ approximately 10,000 people, participated in the research.

3. Research results

The offices examined represent various units of local government and administrative division (counties ('powiat'), cities with district rights, urban, urban-rural and rural communes). The most prominent group comprised the offices of rural communes ('gmina') (35.71%). The next places in the quantitative distribution were taken by

the offices of urban-rural communes (27.86%), the offices of municipal communes (over 17.86%), and county ('powiat') offices (13.57%). Other offices, for example, of cities with county status, constituted the smallest group (about 5%). The surveyed offices also differed in the number of employees. The smallest of them, employing up to 29 employees, made up 17.86% of the surveyed group. Those employing up to 59 people constituted 43.57% of the surveyed entities, whilst 20% of the surveyed offices have up to 99 employees. The last, relatively large group of offices (12.86%) is made up of units whose staff does not exceed 149 people. The least numerous groups included those with 150 to 199 employees (2.86%), 200 to 249 (0.71%), 250 to 299 (0.71%), and the offices employing more than 300 people (1.43%).

Research on recruitment processes in public administration units showed that in 2020 their number decreased by almost 36% compared to 2019 (in 2019 there were 1418 and in 2020 – 910). The number of offices that stopped recruitment in 2020 increased by over 157% compared to the previous year. Recruitment was not carried out despite the existing vacancies, but fewer than 16% of all the surveyed offices indicated the coronavirus pandemic as the direct cause of this state of affairs. A diametrically different picture was presented when the issue of the pandemic, viewed through the prism of limitations in the recruitment processes, was narrowed to the group of offices in which a reduction in recruitment was found. In this group, almost 73% of units indicated the pandemic as the reason for maintaining vacancies and limiting the number of new employees, which ultimately indicates that the coronavirus should be perceived as the main cause of the significant decrease in the number of employees newly engaged in offices in the entire province.

Despite the recommendations and the assumed high awareness of the risk on the part of heads of administrative units, the form of accepting applications for vacant positions, despite the general reduction of recruitment processes, has not changed. Studies showed that the most common methods of delivering documents were traditional mail/courier (46.24%) and personal delivery (40.71%). At the other extreme, there was the electronic method of sending applications (4.35%) and the electronic transmission of documents with a certified electronic signature or a signature confirmed by an ePUAP trusted profile (4.35%). The obtained results show the lack of flexibility and adaptation skills of offices to the related restrictions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of the safety of employees and citizens, it can be concluded that despite the widespread access to the Internet, the methods of collecting documents offered have not been modified, and continue to pose problems for potential employees.

The research also showed that the most commonly practiced form of knowledge and skills testing of potential employees during the COVID-19 pandemic was a standard interview at the offices of the local administration. Detailed research results are presented in the table below.

The information obtained proves that public administration is still very willing to use the least effective and safe form of verification of candidates' competencies, i.e.

a standard interview at the seat of the potential employer. However, a detailed analysis of the collected data allowed to establish that in order to verify the competencies of candidates, offices with more than 100 employees increasingly often and more willingly use means of distance communication, which does not change the fact that they are rarely implemented. In one case, the recruitment process was limited only to the verification of application documents.

Table 1. Forms of checking the knowledge and skills of recruited employees in public administration in Lower Silesia in 2020

Forms	Results [%]
Standard interview at the office of the local administration	65.90
Written tasks to be solved at the employer's premises	21.59
An on-line interview	5.11
A telephone interview	4.55
A written task for an on-line solution	1.14
Verification of application documents	0.57
A task to be solved at home sent/made available electronically	0.57
A task prepared at home and presented in the interview	0.57

Source: author's study based on research.

Despite recommendations on limiting physical contacts during the COVID-19 pandemic, public administration units still prefer a personal form of interviews and tasks to check the knowledge of potential employees (53.74%), while 19.05% of the respondents have a problem with identifying the correct method of candidate verification, and 17.01% of the responses indicated that, due to the risk of coronavirus infection, it is most appropriate to conduct both online and offline activities. Only a small percentage of the respondents (4.76%) demonstrated social responsibility, indicating that these activities should only be carried out remotely, and 5.44% of public administration offices refrained from expressing their opinion on this subject. On analysing the results, it was found that the vast majority of the surveyed entities (66.67%) that opted for a remote or hybrid form of checking potential employees, employ fewer than 100 staff.

The conducted research also aimed at verifying the forms used in onboarding processes and the tools currently implemented in public administration. Half of the surveyed offices indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic they have been conducting onboarding processes. Other offices do not use the instruments of employee adaptation (48.57%) or have not responded to this issue (43%). The public administration located in the Dolnośląskie Voivodeship to a large extent does not perform the extremely important function of employee adaptation. Out of the offices that use onboarding tools, over 75% stated that the pandemic does not and has not had an impact on the form of conducted activities. Only 21.43% of the respondents

opposed this statement, while 2.86% refrained from disclosing information on this issue. It should be noted here that 64% of administrative units that believe that the pandemic influenced the process of employee adaptation employ a maximum of 59 persons. This means that smaller organizations in the area of public administration pay more attention to employee adaptation and are flexible enough to adapt management processes to the new, complex reality.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the overwhelming majority of public administration offices (57.14%) implementing onboarding activities, conducted them in a form requiring personal contact. Around 28% of the respondents recruit or have recruited new employees using the methods and tools used in both real and virtual environments. Only 8.57% of the units transferred their activities to the ICT network, and the remaining (7.15%) did not respond to the above-mentioned issues. All the offices conducting remote onboarding processes employ no more than 99 employees.

The integration of a new employee with the team is one of the fundamental issues of effective onboarding. Nevertheless, the heads of public administration offices do not seem to be aware of this fact. Over 24% of respondents indicated that they do not or did not carry out any teambuilding activities during the pandemic. A good team atmosphere is important only for 18.57% of units. The number of offices (over 57%) that refrained from providing information on integration activities is also worrying. It can be concluded with a high degree of probability that they also do not carry out any activities in this field.

In order to build a bond between the new employee and the team, the most frequently used instruments were telephone calls and teleconferences (50%). Electronic distribution of information about colleagues and a newly hired employee (e.g. photos, short descriptions, videos, contact details) – 20%, as well as video conferences and webinars (20%), were used much less frequently. In this respect, offices with a staff of fewer than 99 people also turned out to be in the lead (66.67%), however this does not change the fact that team building activities are used only in 10% of the examined offices.

Another crucial element of onboarding a new employee is supplying them with the necessary knowledge enabling the effective and comfortable performance of their official duties. The recommended restrictions on personal contact during the pandemic have forced many organizations to use remote training. The conducted research showed that only 41.43% of offices use e-learning tools, and 8.57% do not use any ICT tools to educate the newly employed personnel. Half of the respondents failed to answer, which may indicate the use of traditional training forms or the lack of developed standards and tools in this area. Detailed analysis allowed to state that offices employing from 30 to 59 employees most often (42.86%) use remote education methods. Over 70% of electronic training forms, from the group identified in all the units, are offered in offices with a staff of no more than 99 people. Out of the range of training tools targeted at new employees, on-line training is the most frequently used. Detailed research results are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Use of training tools targeted at new employees

Training tools	Results [%]
On-line training	33.90
Electronic manuals	20.34
Videoconferences/webinars	20.34
Teleconferences	11.85
Instructional videos	10.17
Web directories	1.70
Employee portals	1.70

Source: author's study based on research.

Regardless of the detailed distribution, however, the small scale of their application is disturbing. The conducted research showed that only 17.86% of all the surveyed entities use any e-learning tools.

In the course of the conducted research, other implemented activities in the field of remote onboarding were also identified, which, however, are only used by approximately 18% of offices. In this group, approximately 30% of public administration units provide new employees with electronic information, regulations, and procedures of the office. Around 23% provide remote assistance on the computer of a new staff member, and over 12% send information about tools to be used in their current work. The same percentage regarded electronic work plans, tasks to be performed for the next period, e.g. a day, week, month. The distribution of other identified tools and the frequency of their use is as follows: electronic transmission of employment-related documents (9.09%), the appointment of an employee who remotely helps a newly hired person in the acclimatization process (7.57%), remote delivery of tools for work, e.g. by courier, post office or office employee (4.55%) and an electronic list of training courses (1.52%).

Table 3. Remote onboarding instruments used in public administration in Lower Silesia

Instruments	Results [%]
e-mail	32.18
Telephone	28.74
Remote Assistance Applications on the Other User's Computer, e.g. Teamviewer	18.39
On-Line Messaging, e.g. Skype	10.34
Comprehensive Tools for Communication, Creating and Sharing Information and Documents, e.g. Office 365	4.60
Virtual Drives, e.g. Google Drive, Onedrive	3.45
Web Directories	1.15
Employee Portals	1.15

Source: author's study based on research.

Remote onboarding was used by only 20% of offices. The studied units most frequently used the instruments presented in table 3.

In the small group of offices implementing remote onboarding tools, the most numerous (over 66%) include units employing up to 99 employees. As a result of the research it was also found that the need to reduce personal contact during a pandemic was largely ignored by offices, and the possibility of remote onboarding of employees was not very popular among their management. Over 46% of respondents stated that onboarding processes in the times the coronavirus pandemic should continue only through personal contact, whilst almost 24% of offices had no opinion on this matter, and around 21% declared a preference for a hybrid form of onboarding processes; only fewer than 3% were in favour of them being completely remote. The remaining surveyed offices, i.e. over 6%, did not fully respond to these issues. All the responses regarding the online form of onboarding came from offices employing fewer than 100 persons.

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the number of recruitment processes conducted in public administration units located in the Dolnośląskie Voivodeship. Nevertheless, it did not bring about a far-reaching transformation of the selection and adaptation processes of new employees. During the last year, offices most often used typical forms of recruitment for administration (traditional paper-based applications provided by the candidate to the office) and used ineffective tools for evaluating the declared competencies, skills, and knowledge of potential employees. The contribution of modern verification methods adapted to the pandemic situation can be considered rudimentary. Despite the proven effectiveness and the universality of ICT solutions, the studied offices are still content to use traditional and, in the context of the pandemic, the potentially dangerous to the health and life of their employees and citizens tools, that are also less effective in many respects. This may indicate a lack of flexibility and adaptation abilities of offices, resulting from the insufficient competencies of their management and the lack of skills in using modern IT tools. The examined public administration offices seem to have ignored the dangers of coronavirus infection. Even putting aside the pandemic reality, which cannot be ignored at present, the above-mentioned practices may result in a decrease in the number of potential candidates interested in taking up employment in public administration structures.

Offices in this area also have significant problems with the use of resources that enable remote onboarding. Additionally, within the region, the available solutions are implemented sporadically. The limited concern for the effective onboarding of employees to their future duties and work environment might be deemed by some incomprehensible. The consequence of neglecting or even abandoning onboarding activities can be the low productivity of employees, lack of job satisfaction, lack of

a sense of belonging to the organization, lack of acceptance by their colleagues, and, in many cases, even a decision to leave. Each of these factors translates into a reduction in the effectiveness of performing tasks entrusted to public administration, together with a real increase in personnel costs, financed from public funds.

The conducted research also allows to conclude that smaller organizations are clearly more adaptable to the new conditions. It is this group of offices that sees the greatest need to use remote forms of communication to verify the knowledge and competencies of candidates for official posts. Local government units with fewer than 100 employees also more often implement tools of remote communication with both current and potential employees. They also manifest greater care for the effective implementation of the employee onboarding process with the use of modern tools. This demonstrates a higher degree of flexibility and computer skills, compared with large public administration units. Despite this established tendency, the scale of using modern management processes adapted to the current reality cannot be considered sufficient or inspire optimism. The research allows for the formulation of the conclusion that even a serious threat to the health and life of employees and other citizens, including the introduced restrictions and regulations that in the first place should be fully respected by the administration are not enough in the short term, to change the established ways of operating ingrained in public administration units.

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