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## Employability Enhancement in Public Organizations Providing Social Services: Evidence from Labor Offices and Social Welfare Centers

This paper strives to analyze individual factors that determine the employability of employees in public organizations providing social services, practices of employability enhancement in such organizations, and the fundamental results of such actions on the employees and organizations. Building on insights from interviews carried out with managers of labor offices and social welfare centers, key dimensions underpinning employability and the conditions of its enhancement in public organizations are discussed. The obtained data indicate that employability is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses not only professional knowledge and skills, but also generic competences. Moreover, the research suggests that public organizations should enhance the employability of their employees because this makes it possible to align employee and organization benefits subject to the new conditions of employment relations in the public sector.

**Key words:** Human Resource Management, employability, public organizations, social services

### Introduction

Organizations striving to limit employment costs, the difficult situation on the labor market, and the spread of flexible forms of employment have made the issue of employability enhancement a popular subject in HRM literature over the last decade. Today, employee careers are characterized by frequent changes of organizations, roles, and required skills. Moreover, the traditional public sector long-term employment model has been gradually replaced by temporary, more flexible arrangements. Contemporary Polish public organizations no longer guarantee job security and

“lifelong” employment. Moreover, some researchers maintain that there is a gap between the level of public sector employee competencies, the requirements of the labor market, and the needs of public organizations. Simultaneously, budget cuts, accompanied by changes in employment relations and high unemployment, create the necessity to pay special attention to employability enhancement practices in Polish public organizations.

It should also be noted that the issue of employability enhancement takes on a double meaning in public organizations providing social services. On the one hand, it concerns the employees of these organizations, but on the other, it is also an important area of activity of public organizations—e.g., labor offices and social welfare centers [Frączkiewicz–Wronka and Marzec, 2012, p. 219]. Moreover, employability in public organizations providing social services is also determined by various special competences on the part of employees, because the employees of these organizations have to meet specific demands. The conditions of employability enhancement in public organizations also differ from those in the private sector. However, the problems of employability and its enhancement are still rarely analyzed in the context of public organizations providing social services. Hence, there is a strong need to better recognize this issue through theoretical studies and empirical research.

This paper tries to answer the following questions: What individual factors determine the employability of public sector employees? What are the conditions of its enhancement? What are the key outcomes of public employee employability enhancement in public organizations providing social services? These aims are achieved through a presentation of the results of semi-structured interviews carried out with managers of labor offices and social welfare centers. Simultaneously, these organizations are important public institutions realizing social goals in the area of employability policy.

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### **Employability: A Theoretical Framework**

Over the last twenty years, employability has become a popular issue considered not only in the contexts of unemployment and labor market policy, but also in HRM literature. However, the complexity of the employability concept results in a plethora

of definitions. In simple terms, employability can be understood as “the ability to get a job,” “the ability to be employed,” or “the chances of getting a job.” This simplified interpretation of the concept emphasizes its objective aspects, which are external and independent of any individual and stem from the situation on the labor market. On the other hand, today, many researchers stress the subjective aspects of employability and associate it with the diverse features of an individual. The sense of this notion can also be clarified through a historical overview of the evolution of concepts, where four essential periods can be distinguished—i.e. the first period encompassing the beginning of the twentieth century up to the late nineteen–fifties, the second from the end of the nineteen–fifties to the late nineteen–seventies, the third from the end of the nineteen–seventies to the nineteen–nineties, and the last, fourth period encompassing the end of the nineteen–nineties up to now [Marzec et al., 2009a, pp. 475–476].

In the first period, employability was understood as an individual’s ability to work. The term was introduced by Beveridge [1909, pp. 215–216] in 1909 with reference to individuals who are able to work, i.e. they are “employable,” in contrast to individuals who are not able to work, hence “unemployable.” At this time employability was mostly analyzed in the context of the problem of unemployment. In the nineteen–thirties, along with the economic downturn, interest in the concept declined. It became popular again at the end of the nineteen–fifties. In the second period employability started to be analyzed from two different perspectives—i.e. macroeconomic and individual. The macroeconomic perspective focused on labor market policy and employability was usually defined as the probability of finding a job [Thijssen and Van der Heijden, 2003, pp. 154–170]. Simultaneously, researchers who took the individual perspective tried to recognize individual barriers to the employment of marginalized social groups such as qualifications, skills, and abilities.

In the third period, which started in the late nineteen–seventies along with globalization, recession, and growing competition, the interest in the problem of employability increased. At that time companies tried to limit costs connected with employment, hence traditional, long–term employment started to be replaced with flexible forms of employment [Marzec et al., 2009a, p. 454; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006, p. 451]. Due to the difficult situation on the labor market, professional knowledge and skills stopped guaranteeing long–term employment. In the context of employability, some researchers started to indicate the significance of general competencies and the employee ability to adapt to the needs of employers [Doyle, 2003, pp. 275–278; Marzec and Van der Heijden, 2003].

Since the end of the nineteen–nineties, growing unemployment accompanied by threat of job loss among many employees, the spread of flexible employment

forms, and new career models have resulted in rising interest in the issue of employability, not only among theoreticians and practitioners of management, but also the employees themselves. Moreover, due to high unemployment, this subject has also gained great social and political importance. At the same time, the concept of employability has started to be understood in a more diversified way.

Today, many researchers indicate that the probability of getting and keeping a job, to a great extent, depends on individual factors. Some also maintain that employability is an important factor influencing the career success of an employee and should be understood as the “career potential” of an individual. From this point of view, employability is defined as the specific features of the individual that allow him or her to identify and realize opportunities for career development on the internal and/or external labor market [Marzec et al., 2009b, p. 91]. It is associated with the competitiveness of an employee on the internal and/or external labor market as well as the importance of specific, generic competences, which determine the employability of an individual and are stressed more and more strongly. This is the approach proposed by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden [2006] who present a competence-based model of employability. In their opinion, employability is “the ability of continuous maintaining, acquiring or creating work through optimal use of professional competences” [Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2005, p. 143]. Their model of employability includes five dimensions that are a combination of occupational expertise and general competences—i.e. personal flexibility, optimization and anticipation, corporate sense, and balance [Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006, p. 453]. Furthermore, Fugate and Kinicki [2008, p. 523] connect employability with individual characteristics and maintain that employability is a multidimensional phenomenon representing those features of an individual that enhance chances for employment and career success. They introduce the notion of “dispositional employability,” which they define as “a constellation of individual differences that predispose individuals to (pro)active adaptability specific to work and careers” [Fugate and Kinicki, 2008, p. 503]. They claim that employability encompasses openness to change at work, work and career resilience, proactivity at work and in the career, career motivation, and work identity [Fugate and Kinicki, 2008, p. 507]. It should be noted that the model of employability proposed by Fugate and Kinicki [2008], like that of Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden [2006], was verified through empirical research. Nowadays, individual approaches start to gain more ground among researchers into these issues. However, at the same time, the approaches that present employability from the macroeconomic perspective and focus mainly on labor demand are still popular.

Employability enhancement enables individuals to free themselves of subordination, which is characteristic of the traditional employment relationships because highly employable individuals are able to independently manage their careers [Gautié and Gazier, 2003, p. 13]. Researchers taking the individual perspective assume that many diverse factors may influence employability—i.e. individual factors (e.g., demographic characteristics, personality features, etc.), organizational factors, and macroeconomic factors—but they focus on individual and organizational factors, which may be intentionally shaped. Therefore, this approach allows the taking of planned actions by employees or/and organizations aimed at employability enhancement. Empirical research carried out in the private sector suggests that the organizational factors that significantly affect employability include job content, leadership style, networking, employee evaluation system, etc. [Marzec et al., 2009b, pp. 92–93; Marzec, 2015]. However, little empirical research on employability and conditions for its enhancement has been carried out in the public sector so far.

Employability enhancement may also bring diverse, positive results not only for employees, but also for the public organizations by aligning their mutual interests. In a new psychological contract, when public organizations do not guarantee security of employment, it becomes a difficult task to build employee organizational commitment. If the organization enables employees to enhance their employability, this will probably increase employee commitment because they will perceive this support as caring about their future career. According to Social Exchange Theory, in return they will reciprocate through higher organizational commitment, which is considered as key behavioral leverage enhancing quality of work, productivity, and innovativeness [Borkowska 2009, p. 10; Marzec, 2015].

### **Specificity of Social Services Provided by Labor Offices and Social Welfare Centers**

There are various definitions and ways of understanding the notion of social services. According to Fitzpatrick [2006, p. 1300], in the broad sense, social services concern all activities and administrations that relate to the social needs of citizens. However, in the narrow interpretation, they concern only benefits in kind and specialized social welfare services [Szarfenberg, 2010, p. 17]. In the opinion of Bywalec [1993], social services are socially useful actions directly aimed at human beings and whose results are intangible. In turn, Elfring [1989, p. 412] emphasizes the specificity of social services, which differ in their non–market character from other services. Social services are provided by public organizations, commercial organizations, and

non-profit organizations—i.e. organizations belonging to what is referred to as the third sector. However, as Elfring [1989, p. 412] notices, in the case of non-profit organizations and commercial organizations, the provided social services are mostly state-subsidized.

The process of transformation of the Polish economy, the low effectiveness of the public sector, and the budget deficit led to significant changes in Polish social policy in the late nineteen-nineties. Demonopolization and commercialization of social policy, which among other things arose from a striving to limit public finances assigned to social tasks, led to the transfer of the part of social services previously provided by public organizations to commercial and third sector organizations [Grewiński, 2011]. The idea of commercialization and privatization of social services has gained a lot of followers convinced that it will result in the higher quality of social services, their increased access to citizens, and the higher effectiveness of spending public funds. In practice, total privatization of numerous social services seems to be impossible for political, social, and economic reasons [Iwankiewicz-Rak, 2012, p. 27]. First of all, commercial organizations are only interested in providing social services if it gives them opportunities for profit [Iwankiewicz-Rak, 2012, p. 27]. Therefore, a system of public contracting has been applied to introduce free market mechanisms into the social services sector. Theoretically, these actions should lead to an increase in the effectiveness of spending of public funds. Unfortunately, in practice, it often results in poorer quality social services and limited access to them. This in turn has raised many protests and fear, particularly among the poor members of the society who do not have the possibility of making use of alternative services provided by commercial organizations. This problem particularly concerns people with low employability, who are socially excluded and/or facing a high risk of job and social marginalization, and who use the services provided by labor offices and social welfare centers. Consequently, the idea of commercialization and privatization of specific services provided by labor offices and social welfare centers may raise many ethical and substantive concerns. Moreover, there is a real danger that such action may lead to limiting access to these services for many people who will not meet the assumed market criteria. On the other hand, high unemployment and increasing poverty point to the necessity of changes in the contemporary system of public services. These changes may enable better performance of labor offices and social welfare centers and more effective support for the most deprived persons.

Both the labor offices and social welfare centers provide social services aimed at the integration of low employability persons on the labor market. A contemporary system of social welfare and the rules of the functioning of social welfare centers

are regulated by the Act of March 12, 2004 on Social Assistance [Journal of Laws of 2004, No. 64, item 593, with subsequent amendments]. The existing system of social welfare is based on the rule of helpfulness according to which the state cannot replace actions by particular persons and families who should meet their own existential needs by way of their own efforts and means. The state should help them only when they are not able to overcome their difficult life situation on their own [Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2014, p. 3]. Presently, it is strongly stressed that the actions of social welfare have to be aimed at the mobilizing of people who use social security benefits to take on the effort to improve their life situation as well as their vocational activation. Over the past few years, new tendencies have appeared to extend the range of actions aimed at professional activation in the Polish social welfare system. These tendencies are contradictory with respect to the former model that was mainly focused on short-term assistance for deprived persons [Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2014, p. 4]. Therefore, an important task of social welfare centers is to support the professional development of people who are in a difficult life situation due to their low employability, which will allow a long-term improvement in their situation. Numerous social welfare centers take various initiatives targeting the vocational activation of people getting social security benefits that support their employability enhancement. They encompass career counselling, training, help in preparing applications, meetings with potential employers, etc.

Labor Offices (*powiat* and *voivodeship*) are public employment services that, to the extent as determined by the Act of April 20, 2004 on the Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions, perform tasks within the scope of employment promotion, mitigation of the effects of unemployment, and vocational activation [Journal of Laws of 2004, No. 99, item 1001, with subsequent amendments]. In this domain, *Powiat* Labor Offices undertake actions such as the conducting of activities in job placement for registered persons as well as providing vocational counselling and guidance services, initiating, organizing and financing training, apprenticeship for adults and work practice, funding scholarships, initiating and co-financing the creation of additional jobs, initiating and financing other labor market measures to the extent as specified by the Act, and granting and paying allowances and other benefits for the unemployed [Act..., Article 34]. The changes introduced in the Act of May 27, 2014 were also aimed at the enhancement of cooperation between labor offices and social assistance organizations as well as an increase in the effectiveness of employment services [Flaszyńska, 2015, p. 23]. Many new instruments were introduced that are intended not only to facilitate the access of employers and entrepreneurs to assistance provided by labor offices, but also encompass actions supporting the employability enhancement of labor office

clients—e.g., financing training and the counseling of persons who received loans for starting economic activity from resources held by the Labor Fund. These actions are aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the implemented employability enhancement policy. On the other hand, the changes in labor offices and social welfare are a big challenge for their employees who will be able to face them only if they enhance their own employability.

### Empirical Research Method

Empirical research was carried out from June to August of 2015 as the first stage of a two-year research program.<sup>1</sup> Semi-structured interviews with the top management of sixteen public organizations providing social services aimed at social and vocational integration were conducted—i.e. seven Municipal Social Welfare Centers and nine Powiat Labor Offices (one interview with one representative of management was conducted in each organization). Municipal Social Welfare Centers and Powiat Labor Offices operating in the south, north, center, east, and west of Poland were targeted in order to get a more complete view of the situation. The presented study focuses on the analysis of employability policy practices in these organizations because they also play a key role in resolving and preventing problems connected with low employability at the social level. They are fundamental public institutions supporting people with low employability, encouraging them to become self-dependent through employability enhancement and vocational activation. Therefore, it can also be assumed that their managers have practical knowledge on the employability issue and the significance of its development in the organization. The preliminary literature study indicated that there is a lack of knowledge on employability and the practices of its enhancement as applied in the public organizations. The main goals of the interviews were answers to the following questions:

- What factors determine the employability of employees in the examined public organizations providing social services?
- What are the conditions for its enhancement in the examined organizations?
- What are the key results of employability enhancement in the examined organizations?

Interviews were conducted in line with a scenario prepared by the project team. This allowed control over raised issues as well as the acquiring of the necessary

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information. The interviews started with the discussion agenda, explanation of the research aims, subjects to be raised, and the notion of employability. The interviews included thirty-two questions concerning the general situation in the public sector, HRM strategy, factors determining the employability of employees, and conditions and results of employability enhancement in public organizations. The interviews lasted about forty-five minutes. All interviews were recorded after getting the approval of the interviewees. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed in full and analyzed. A coding schema, in which similar statements made by the interviewees were grouped together, was used in their analysis. This created categories representing answer patterns [Baarda, de Goede, and Teunissen, 1995]. The categories had not been assumed in advance, but emerged as a result of the process of content analysis of the respondents' answers. In line with this method, the answers were divided into key categories in which similar statements were grouped together. The categories allowed the creation of a coding schema, which was used to analyze the interviews. It should be noted that this paper only presents the results of the analysis of the respondents' opinions on specific factors determining employability and actions undertaken in public organizations aimed at employability enhancement as well as their key results.

## Research Findings

All interviewees claimed that the management pays attention to the issue of maintenance and enhancement of employability in their organizations (sixteen persons). However, simultaneously some stated that they try to support employability enhancement, but they do not always have the possibility due to financial limitations and the high costs of such actions (four persons). Also, in the view of some, employability enhancement is guaranteed by law in public organizations, because of the specific role of these organizations in society (two persons). The interviewees emphasized that their organizations provide various opportunities to employees—i.e. learning and competence development to enhance employability on the external and internal labor market (four persons). Training in order to maintain and enhance employability was the most frequently mentioned of activities undertaken in the examined organizations (sixteen persons), but in some organizations only internal training was offered because of limited financial resources (two persons). Moreover, the importance of self-education (four persons) and the exchange of knowledge among employees was strongly stressed (two persons). In two organizations, the managers declared that their organizations support employees in studying. The interviewees also claimed that the employee appraisal system encourages employability enhancement

(two persons). The other listed activities aimed at employability enhancement in social welfare centers and labor offices included study leaves (two persons), training planning (one person), and participation in conferences (one person). It should be noted that some of the respondents claimed that employees have the possibility of professional development in their organizations only generally. One of the managers also stated that employees want to work in the labor office because of employment security and the stability provided by the organization.

The limited financial resources of public organizations result in the search for new methods and tools for employee development and their employability enhancement. In this context some researchers stress the importance of proper job content design because the extent to which occupational knowledge and skills can expand in one's job is acknowledged to be a vital factor influencing employability [Van der Heijden and Bakker, 2011, p. 234]. Proper job design provides employees with opportunities to enrich their job experience, to learn, and to improve their skills. Complex work content as well as diverse and challenging job tasks enhance employability. However, the answer to the question concerning frequency of changes in job content and job tasks as given by the vast majority was that in their organizations job content was (rather) constant (eleven persons). Some explained that changes in job content are impossible because of legal regulations in the public sector (two persons) or the rigid structure of the organization (one person). A few interviewees maintained that despite the constant job description, the scope of employee tasks and responsibilities is growing because of new challenges (two persons) and employee participation in new, additional projects (one person). Only in the case of two organizations (one welfare center and one labor office) were job tasks sometimes changed. At the same time, most of the respondents expressed the opinion that job redesign positively influences the employability of employees (ten persons) because it creates the possibility of learning, development, and enrichment of professional experience (three persons). One of the managers stated that such a practice "develops organizational human capital."

In topical literature, it is currently often emphasized that supervisors and subordinates should be partners in continuous processes of knowledge exchange [Waterman, Waterman, and Collard, 1994, p. 90]. Participative managers encourage employee learning and professional development. They share their knowledge and experience with subordinates, often becoming their mentors and coaches. Many empirical studies carried out in private organizations indicated that the high quality of the relationships between supervisors and subordinates positively influences employability, facilitates employee career success, and increases their job satisfaction and performance [Chiaburu, 2005; Kinicki and Vecchio, 1994; Epitropaki and

Martin, 1999]. Moreover, the quality of the relations between the supervisor and subordinates was recognized by the majority of the managers as an important factor in employability enhancement (fourteen persons) in the examined organizations. According to some of them, a supervisor should be a mentor and a teacher who supports the professional development of subordinates through advice, knowledge, and the choice of proper training (three persons). One of the interviewees indicated that “a relationship between a supervisor and employees develops skills and it contributes to employees’ remaining in the organization.”

The participation of employees in decision-making enables them to enrich their job experience and develop competences. It empowers employees and encourages processes of “learning in action.” In most of the examined organizations employees participate in decision-making processes (thirteen persons), but this participation is often limited and depends on the position of the employees or the types of decisions (nine persons). Most managers claimed that they delegate responsibilities to employees in such way so that they can develop their competences and enhance employability (ten persons). Only one of the interviewees said that it was impossible due to the legal regulations existing in the public sector.

Also, professional networking is considered an important factor of employability enhancement. An extensive network provides an employee with access to the knowledge of its participants. Moreover, due to the spread of the new career models, its impact on employability and the career success of an employee is growing. Empirical research revealed that a professional network is related to the objective and subjective career success of employees [Bozionelos, 2003, p. 41–66]. In the examined social welfare centers and labor offices, managers emphasized that their organizations intensively cooperate with many other organizations in their environment. Hence, employees have many opportunities to extend their professional network (thirteen persons). Only in two organizations, in the opinion of the interviewees, such contacts were limited. According to the respondents, the need for this extensive cooperation is the result of the specific role of social welfare centers and labor offices in society. They also expressed the belief that it impacts positively on employability (fifteen persons) because it facilitates the development of knowledge as well as the competencies of employees (fourteen persons). Furthermore, as they stated, the organization “extends the social network of the employee, which he or she can use when looking for a new job,” thus increasing “the sense of security.”

In the opinions of the interviewees, the possibility of employability enhancement positively influences not only employee job satisfaction, but also their career success (thirteen and eleven persons, respectively). Some explained that it increases the chances of an employee’s advancement (four persons) and employees can use

the achieved competences in other organizations (two persons). However, at the same time respondents expressed the opinion that “it depends on the employee.” A manager of a labor office explained: “Not everybody is focused on development (...). It will be additional value for persons who are oriented towards development.” The managers also complained that subjective success is not connected with financial success in public organizations (two persons). One of the interviewees was convinced that financial satisfaction is most important for employees. A few interviewees also said that the chances of advancement are very limited in their organizations. This results in employee frustration and disappointment (two persons).

Today, some researchers indicate that an organization also gains benefits from employability enhancement because it influences employee performance. Most managers confirmed that employability enhancement positively impacts on employee work outcomes (fourteen persons). In their opinion, better performance is related to competence development (six persons). Moreover, some claimed that employees feel grateful for the possibility of development and they want to reciprocate by doing their jobs better (two persons).

Employee performance appraisal systems have become a commonly used HRM instrument in labor offices and social welfare centers due to existing legal regulations and high pressure on effectiveness. The majority of managers stated that the criteria used in employee appraisals in their organizations translate into their employability enhancement (fifteen persons). They maintained that job appraisal determines the directions of competence development, training, bonuses, etc. (six persons). However, some also noted that this impact is limited because of legal regulations, rigid organizational structure, subjectivity of the criteria applied, and employment stability (five persons).

Change of employment relations result in blurred boundaries in the case of traditional HRM in organizations. Hence, employability enhancement can also be considered a part of employee career management, which overcomes the borders of contemporary organizations. Regarding the question of elements of career management supporting employee career development outside the organization, interviewees listed a variety of elements that were directly and sometimes very indirectly connected with career management—e.g., the possibility of training, study, and advancement (seven persons) as well as the opportunity for cooperation with other people and organizations (two persons). However, relatively numerous interviewees stated that there is no career management in their organizations (six persons). One of the managers maintained that the flattening of the organizational structure limits opportunities for advancement in his organization, but at the same time, it enables advancement outside the organization.

Regarding features that generally determine an employee's ability to deal with the situation on the labor market, the significance of education and professional knowledge were most frequently mentioned by respondents (ten persons). Listed next were adaptability, flexibility, and the openness of employees to changes (nine persons) as well as social competences, including communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, self-presentation skills, etc. (eight persons). Due to the quick pace of knowledge obsolescence, the value of the ability and willingness of an employee to learn was also strongly stressed by some of the managers (five persons). Other mentioned factors included proactivity and creativity (four persons), professional experience (two persons), self-confidence (one person), computer skills (one person), reliability (one person), etc.

Most interviewees expressed the strong belief that specific knowledge, skills, abilities, and competences determine the employability of employees in the public sector (thirteen persons). They indicated that employees not only have to meet formal requirements, particularly regarding educational profile (four persons), but they should also possess specific social competences (e.g., assertiveness). In some opinions, work in public organizations requires a willingness to serve other people and a high level of empathy (five persons). One of the managers explained, "in the public sector a job is perceived as a service and mission, not just doing a job." The most desirable individual characteristics of an employee of such an organization encompassed professional knowledge and qualifications (thirteen persons) as well as social competences (e.g., communication skills, empathy, interpersonal skills, coping with stress, etc.). Other listed factors included motivation and commitment (two persons), professional experience (two persons), willingness to work in such an organization (two persons), flexibility and self-reliance (two persons), high performance (two persons), ethical competences (one person), soft skills (one person), willingness to learn and develop (one person), etc.

Subsequently, the importance of some specific competencies as factors that can determine employability in the public sector was examined. They encompassed ethical and civil competencies, social competencies, adaptability, professional knowledge and skills, willingness to learn and develop, and the ability to achieve a balance between work and home life. With respect to ethical and civil competencies, adaptability, and the willingness to learn and develop, all the interviewees recognized that they were important aspects of employability. The significance of ethical and civil competencies was strongly emphasized as a specific factor that determines employability in a public organization due to its mission and special role in society. The manager of a labor office explained: "We are very oversensitive about suspicion of any partiality and what we are allowed to do as public officials (...)." Another

stated: “We are under the special oversight of district and city authorities (...). Being a public institution means we are being ‘reviewed’ at every step.” In their turn, adaptability and proactiveness were found to be the key factors determining employability regardless of the sector because, as the interviewees said, “on the contemporary labor market adaptability is expected from all employees” (five persons). Another manager of a social welfare center indicated that “it is necessary to take the initiative and cope with diverse situations. Such an employee has bigger chances of maintaining employment.” Moreover, another manager of a social welfare center stated: “Perception of social welfare is changing and we should take the initiative to come out to residents.” The interviewees also emphasized that the quick pace of changes and knowledge obsolescence results in a necessity for continuous learning in order to stay employable on the labor market. Hence, a willingness to learn and develop is expected of all employees. Simultaneously, the manager of a social welfare center was convinced that “It is very important, but people are aware that they should develop.”

It should be noticed that in the opinion of the respondents, professional knowledge and skills are factors that mainly decide as to the getting of a job during the process of recruitment and selection. A few interviewees also stressed that, in the case of public sector employees, the proper level of professional knowledge is required by law (three persons) and the specificity of these jobs (three persons). Additionally, they maintained that a high level of expertise is necessary because, as the manager of the social welfare center explained, “without it, it is easy to hurt somebody due to the nature of this job.” An appropriate profile of education and professional experience were frequently treated as an indicator of professional knowledge and skills. In the context of the specificity of work in social welfare centers and labor offices, the significance of the ability to reach a balance between work and home life was strongly stressed because “this work is very hard” and “it is necessary for psychological well-being.” However, as the interviewees stated, “it is difficult to keep a balance in this kind of work” (six persons). It is noteworthy that this thread was particularly visible in the statements of managers of social welfare centers.

The conducted interviews showed that social competences are also listed among important factors that determine the acquiring and maintaining of jobs in public organizations providing social services (fifteen persons). At the present time, social competences are among employee competences most desired and expected by employers. In some opinions, they are even crucial competences for social welfare center and labor office employees whose work is mostly based on direct contacts with people in a difficult life and job situation (five persons). Hence, one of the interviewees ironically stated that “somebody who does not have these skills must

look for a sector in which there is no contact with the others.” In this context, the value of communication skills and empathy were frequently indicated.

At the end of the interviews, the subjects of employee perceptions of job insecurity and their situation on the labor market were raised. Generally, in the examined organizations, managers maintained that employees were afraid to lose their job (ten persons). The reason was mostly the situation on the labor market (four persons). Additionally, budget cuts in the public sector were listed as a motive behind job insecurity. On the other hand, some respondents are still convinced that the public sector does offer job stability and do not fear for their jobs (six persons). Moreover, they think that if employees lose their jobs they will easily find a new job in another organization (seven persons). Conversely, some interviewees emphasized that in their organizations employees are aware of the difficult situation on the labor market and they know that it would not be easy to find a job (six persons). In this context, one of the managers also paid attention to the discrimination of older employees on the Polish labor market, for whom it is more difficult to find a job than for younger employees.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The interviews that were carried out made it possible to better understand the essence of employability, its elements, and the context of its enhancement in public organizations providing social services. The interviews also demonstrated the diverse emotions, attitudes, and opinions of respondents regarding this subject. It has been observed that the employability issue is of concern to management in the examined public organizations. This tendency, characteristic of current HRM policy in the public sector, is best explained by the fact of changes in employment relations and the difficult situation on the labor market. However, activities undertaken are mainly focused on training oriented at the enhancement of internal employability. It should be noted that public organizations planning to enhance the employability of their employees may partly replace expensive training with other developmental activities—e.g., job redesign, mentoring, encouraging employees to attempt self-education, etc. Moreover, supervisors should support these actions by creating relations based on mutual trust and respect with regard to their subordinates. They also ought to encourage employee professional development, enabling them to participate in decision-making processes, and delegating tasks that can improve their competences and enhance their employability. They may encourage employees to extend their professional network outside and inside the organiza-

tion, which will contribute to the exchange of knowledge and information bringing benefits to both employees and the organization. Also, at the organizational level, employee appraisal systems may contribute to employability enhancement by taking into account the long-term improvement of the general competences of employees. Employee appraisal mainly focuses on current competence needs as stemming from the employee's organizational role. The character of employee appraisal oriented at employability enhancement is more general and takes into consideration the broad development of general competencies and their usefulness for the organization in the long run.

The research suggests that employability is a complex phenomenon encompassing several key dimensions—e.g., professional knowledge and skills, social competences, adaptability, the ability to find balance between work and home life, and the willingness to learn and develop. Moreover, some of the competences determining the employability of employees may differ in the public and private sectors. These differences stem from the role, structures, and processes characteristic of public organizations, which also impose specific requirements regarding employee competences. The particular role of ethical and civil competences as a factor determining the employability of public sector employees should be emphasized due to high expectations regarding these features of employees in public organizations.

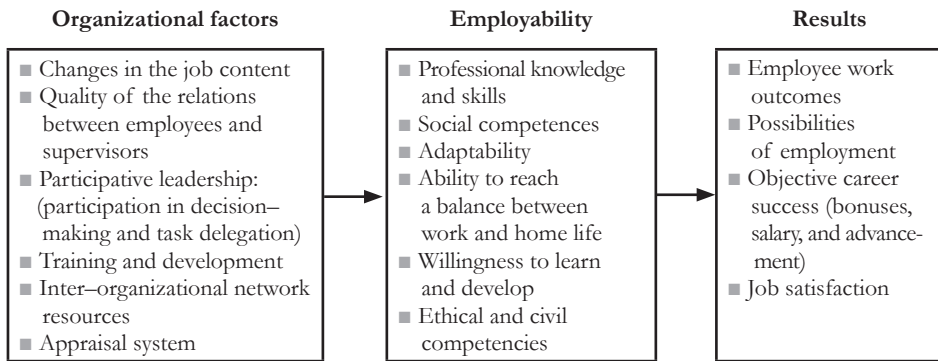
It should also be mentioned that there were no significant differences in the expectations of managers regarding features of employees as well as the activities undertaken in social welfare centers and labor offices. Only in the case of the ability to maintain a balance between work and home life, was there greater stress applied by social welfare centers because of the specificity of the jobs. In the opinions of managers, this is connected to the high level of psychological stress.

Summarizing, on the basis of the conducted interviews, some of the relations between employability, its predictors and outcomes can be proposed (Figure No. 1). However, the legitimacy of these relationships should be examined in further literature study and subsequently, if possible, in future quantitative research. Furthermore, measurement instruments of employability adjusted to the specific needs of employees in public organizations should be constructed and validated in quantitative research.

Further empirical research in this area should allow the filling of the existing knowledge gap in HRM theory regarding problems connected with the professional development of employees in the new employment relations emerging in the public sector. This should contribute to the building of a practical basis for effective employability enhancement in the case of public organization employees.



**Figure No. 1.** A concept for selected relations between employability, its predictors, and results in public organizations.



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## **Rozwój zatrudnialności w organizacjach świadczących usługi społeczne na przykładzie Urzędów Pracy i Ośrodków Pomocy Społecznej**

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza czynników indywidualnych, które określają zatrudnialność pracowników w organizacjach publicznych świadczących usługi społeczne, praktyk rozwoju zatrudnialności w tych organizacjach, jak również ich podstawowych rezultatów dla pracowników i organizacji. Bazując na wglądzie uzyskanym z wywiadów przeprowadzonych z kadrą zarządzającą ośrodków pomocy społecznej i urzędów pracy, przedstawiono kluczowe wymiary stanowiące podstawę zatrudnialności i warunki jej rozwoju w badanych organizacjach. Otrzymane dane wskazują, że zatrudnialność jest zjawiskiem wielowymiarowym, które obejmuje nie tylko wiedzę i umiejętności fachowe pracowników, lecz również kompetencje ogólne. Ponadto badania sugerują, że organizacje publiczne powinny rozwijać zatrudnialność swoich pracowników, ponieważ działanie to pozwala łączyć interesy organizacji i pracowników w nowych warunkach zatrudnienia w sektorze publicznym.

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