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ONGOING MONITORING OF THE PERFORMANCE OF THE INTERNAL AUDIT ACTIVITY IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

BIEŻĄCE MONITOROWANIE WYNIKÓW DZIAŁALNOŚCI AUDYTU WEWNĘTRZNEGO W SEKTORZE PUBLICZNYM I PRYWATNYM

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Summary: The purpose of this article is to present how internal auditors in the public and private sectors define ongoing monitoring of internal audit activities. The empirical material for analysis was gathered from interviews conducted in Poland with 28 internal auditors employed in 30 organisations. The gathered data revealed many similarities and differences between internal auditors' perception of the essence of this term. The results show that ongoing monitoring of internal audit activities is most often understood as supervising internal auditor by the CAE to ensure that an audit engagement is performed in accordance with the International Standards for Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, the objectives of the engagement are reached, and the work program is realized.

Keywords: monitoring, control, quality, internal audit, improvement.

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie, w jaki sposób audytorzy wewnętrzni w sektorze publicznym i prywatnym definiują bieżące monitorowanie działań audytu wewnętrznego. Materiał empiryczny do analizy został zebrany za pomocą wywiadów przeprowadzonych w Polsce z 28 audytorami wewnętrznymi zatrudnionymi w 30 organizacjach. Zebrane dane ujawniły liczne podobieństwa i różnice w postrzeganiu istoty tego pojęcia. Bieżące monitorowanie działalności audytu wewnętrznego jest najczęściej rozumiane jako sprawowanie nadzoru przez zarządzającego audytem wewnętrznym nad audytorem wewnętrznym w celu zapewnienia, że zadania audytowe są wykonywane zgodnie z międzynarodowymi standardami profesjonalnej praktyki audytu wewnętrznego, cele tych zadań są osiągnięte, a programy tych zadań są realizowane.

Słowa kluczowe: monitorowanie, kontrola, jakość, audyt wewnętrzny, doskonalenie.

1. Introduction

The meaning of the term “monitoring” is generally well known. In the common understanding of the word, monitoring (from Latin *monitor* – warner) is the constant observing and controlling of given processes and phenomena or a constant supervision of a particular protected site [*Słownik języka polskiego* 2017]. In management, the term is used to refer both to operations of an entire company and to individual processes, projects, and organisational units. The problem is that we often apply the term “monitoring” with little consideration of what it represents. What is the essence of monitoring?

It should be reminded that the concept of monitoring stems from two praxeological rules. The first rule pertains to minimising intervention, whereby we aim at making the things we want to happen take place without our personal input. The second rule concerns preventing damage. The rule advocates intervening in the course of events immediately when a negative process begins, as evil tends to grow with time. It must be then nipped in the bud, as it requires significantly less effort than tackling the evil that has become stronger, still, it is best to prevent the very emergence of a detrimental process before it begins [Kotarbiński 1982, p. 388].

Research suggests that ongoing monitoring has a significant impact on the effectiveness of internal audit [Bednarek 2018]. The importance of monitoring has also been underlined in the international standards for the professional practice of internal auditing. Standard 1310 requires that the quality assurance and improvement program must include both internal and external assessments. Standard 1311 continues that the internal assessments must include both ongoing monitoring of the performance of the internal audit activity, and periodic self-assessments or assessments by other persons within the organization with sufficient knowledge of internal audit practices [IIARF 2012]. In the literature, however, the concept of monitoring is understood differently. In one context, it means observing, and in another context, collecting reliable information about the course of a given phenomenon, measurement, analysis, evaluation or form of control. This diversity of definitions is poorly perceived by practitioners, because it hinders effective communication.

The presented article is an attempt to organise the knowledge in this field. It encompasses an attempt to learn how internal auditors in the public and private sectors define monitoring of internal audit activities. The answer to the above question will be provided based on experiences carried out by 28 internal auditors employed across private enterprises and in the public administration in Poland in 2017.

Second section of the article presents definitions of monitoring from the perspective of different concepts of management and control. Third section concerns the research methodology. The last section involves a presentation of the obtained findings. The said deliberations end in a summary of the key conclusions obtained as a result of the conducted research.

2. Definitions of monitoring in a theoretical approach

Due to the fact that the term “monitoring” has not yet been defined in the internal audit context, it was formulated based on the analysis of the most prevalent explanations of the term in light of different concepts of management and control. A review of the major publications on process and project management shows that the term monitoring is understood in different ways. The analysed explanations clearly suggest that the term most commonly signifies ongoing observation of the course of a given phenomenon, which ensures continuity of insight into its course [Kardasz, Szczerbiński 2001; Romanowska, Wachowiak (eds.) 2006, p. 404; Mytlewski 2007]. For some scientists, the continuity of the process is relative and conditioned by the frequency of the observations made, and not by the passage of time [Kardasz, Szczerbiński 2001; Romanowska, Wachowiak 2006, p. 404; Mytlewski 2007]. One can thus agree that monitoring has a systematic nature [Mytlewski 2007; Grucza 2015, p. 209; Grzeszczyk 2009; Jeruzalski 2009]. In the context of the activity of accountability centres, monitoring is understood as the measurement of parameters specifying a phenomenon that is investigated and signalling the reaching or surpassing of limit values [Kardasz, Szczerbiński 2001, p. 100; Romanowska Wachowiak, 2006, p. 404]. In the field of project management, monitoring is identified as the gathering of reliable quantitative and qualitative information that allows not only for the course of phenomena to be observed, but also analysed [Grzeszczyk 2009; Grucza 2015, p. 209; Jeruzalski 2009] and assessed [Cybulski 2004; Romanowska, Wachowiak 2006, p. 404]. In particular, monitoring allows for a comparison of the registered data with the standard data and for early identification or prediction of phenomena that can be a threat or bring an opportunity for new activities. The purpose of monitoring is to provide the decision-makers with information that supports the decision-making process [Grzeszczyk 2009; Kardasz, Szczerbiński 2001; Mytlewski 2007; Walas-Trębacz 2010, p. 54], so that a future threat can be prevented, the consequences of an existing risk can be limited, and the arising opportunities can be exploited [Mytlewski 2007]. Thus, monitoring functions as an early warning system. A similar role is assigned to the concept of control [Kałużny 2008, p. 21], which some authors see as equal to monitoring [Cybulski 2004; Mytlewski 2007] or consider an element of monitoring [Grucza 2015, p. 209; Grzeszczyk 2009]. However, unlike monitoring, not all control is carried out throughout the whole period of implementation of a project, and sometimes also after its completion [Grzeszczyk 2009]. Follow-up control, which refers to already completed actions and is fragmentary by nature, cannot actively manage improvements in activities that have been wrongly completed beforehand [Kałużny 2008, p. 29]. Its purpose is to reveal flaws and anomalies that were not prevented by the initial and ongoing inspections and devise improvement proposals to avoid making mistakes in the future [Kałużny 2008, p. 30].

Monitoring is also an element of formalised management systems that allows for following one of the most fundamental rules of quality management, i.e. continuous

improvement [Brzozowski 2011, p. 158; Stadnicka, Pacana 2015, p. 25]. Already W.E. Deming noticed that by limiting quality control to inspections of the end product, the responsibility for its quality is shifted solely on a department responsible for conducting the tests and inspections. However, during quality control of the end product one can only specify the state of the product and it is too late to take any preventive measures. Here, an alternative is to control the quality “at the source.” The employees should be responsible not only for their own work but also for conducting adequate tests at each stage of the production process [Karaszewski 2005, p. 107]. According to Juran, quality improvement is an endless process of looking to perfect not solely the quality of the product or service, but, above all, the processes [Karaszewski 2005, p. 115]. This idea is based on a precise identification of the client and his needs and improvement of the product or service and the processes to meet the needs of the clients. According to a model called the Deming circle, the process unfolds as a repetitive cycle of four stages [Copeland et al. 2013, p. 20]. During the “plan” stage, expectations concerning the course of the process are defined, the meeting of which leads to the achievement of certain direct and general objectives of the process. During the “do” stage, the process is realised and data about its course is gathered for analysis and taking adequate measures during the further stages of the cycle. During the “check” stage, the achieved results are controlled, potential divergences are identified, and the need for changes is analysed. On this basis, during the “act” stage, feedback is forwarded to the operator of the process with the purpose of increasing expectations during the “plan” stage and identifying possible improvements to the process for implementation during the “plan” stage of the next cycle. Though according to T. Brzozowski [2011, p. 158], monitoring only occurs during the “check” stage of this cycle, all stages can be considered necessary to reach the objectives of monitoring.

Monitoring is also one of the five mutually interactive elements of the internal control model [FRR 1999, p. 41]. According to the recommendations, the control environment, risk assessment, control activities, as well as the information systems and communication must be subjected to an assessment of operational quality. Once designed, after some time they start to become ineffective due to the changing circumstances of operation [FRR 1999, p. 119]. The monitoring process entails the assessment of the quality and the functioning of control and taking the necessary measures [FRR 1999, p. 120]. As a result of the performed assessment, “shortcomings”, weaknesses of the internal control system are identified, understood as potential or real deficiencies or possibilities of improvement of the internal control system in order to ensure higher probability that the objectives of a unit are met. Monitoring can be conducted on an ongoing or periodical basis by means of individual assessments [FRR 1999, p. 120]. Unlike periodical assessment, ongoing monitoring allows for a quick response to changes in operating conditions and is an element of management routines, and not an additional task. Specifically, ongoing monitoring is a result of adequate supervision and distribution of responsibilities. Specific individuals are controlled by different persons. Moreover, ongoing monitoring concerns comparing operational

and financial reports, analysing feedback received from clients on their satisfaction with products or services, and comparing data gathered in information systems with material resources. Ongoing monitoring is conducted through meetings between the board and its subordinates, during which the board receives information concerning the effectiveness of the internal control. Ongoing monitoring also consists in employees being periodically requested to give a clear statement that they understand the code of ethics of a given company and obey its rules [FRR 1999, p. 120].

An analysis of the concepts of process and project management, quality management, and internal control shows that defining the term monitoring still remains a difficult task. The complexity of the problem is caused by the diversity of actions necessary to reach the objectives of monitoring.

The analysed concepts clearly show that monitoring is most commonly understood as ongoing observation, measurement, and collecting of reliable data concerning the course of a given phenomenon for the purposes of its analysis and assessment. However, limiting monitoring solely to the obtaining and analysing information does not reflect the nature of this concept, since monitoring should not only follow the rule of minimising intervention, but also the rule of preventing damage. Therefore, in cases where the actual course of a phenomenon is significantly divergent from what is expected, the decision-maker should be informed about the need to take urgent and necessary measures to eliminate the unwanted phenomena, limit their negative impact or exploit the arising opportunity. Moreover, monitoring requires former adoption of some assumptions on how a given activity should be executed so that its specific indirect and final objectives can be met.

The actions identified above, which can be described as fundamental, do not exhaust the spectrum of possible monitoring methods. For the time being, it should also be noted that the continuous analysis of practices in the form of the conducted research should serve as an important source of information about said actions, which will undoubtedly significantly complement the list devised based on theoretical assumptions.

3. Methodology of research

The purpose of this article is to present how internal auditors in the public and private sectors define monitoring of internal audit activities. The formulated definitions provide the basis for the answer to the research question: what are the similarities and differences between internal auditors' perception about the essence of ongoing monitoring of internal audit activities in the public and private sectors.

Interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect in-depth responses about 28 internal auditors' perceptions. The research group was selected from the members of the Polish Chapter of the Institute of Internal Auditors. The aim was to choose a diverse research group. The organisations which took part in this study included universities, companies listed on the stock exchange, companies not listed

on the stock exchange with the State Treasury as the majority shareholder, marshal's offices, banks, audit firms, pharmaceutical companies, ministries, agencies and central institutions, courts, municipal offices, hospitals, and organisational units of local governments. There were 23 organisations from the public sector and 7 organisations from the private sector. There were 14 organisations with audit committees and 16 organisations without audit committees. In the study took part 19 CAEs and 11 internal auditors. There were 4 respondents with 5 or less years of experience in internal audit, 6 respondents with 6 to 10 years of the experience, and 20 respondents with more than 10 years of the experience. There were 8 internal audit departments, which employ only one internal auditor and 22 internal audit departments, which hire two and more full-time internal auditors.

The interviews were conducted between 9th of March and 10th of April 2017, and, on average, lasted approximately 30 minutes. The number of respondents was dependent on the achievement of a sufficient level of saturation of the gathered research material. After conducting 30 interviews, the observed increase in knowledge was minimal [MacQuarrie 2010, pp. 928–929; Eisenhardt 1989, p. 545].

The research tool used in the study was a partially structured interview questionnaire built in such a way that the number, order, and form of the questions asked were predetermined and constant (see Appendix). To help the respondents share their experiences and views on the nature and objectives of ongoing monitoring, the questions included in the questionnaire were predominantly open-ended.

Due to the respondents' reported will to remain anonymous members of the research group, the names and surnames were encrypted as [Rx], where x is a specific number assigned to a given speaker. On the request of the respondents, the names of organisations for which a given respondent works were not revealed either. The accepted symbol of a respondent is used with every statement of the given respondent referred to in the paper.

4. Monitoring of internal audit activities – the Polish practice

The statement regarding the difficulty of defining the term monitoring included in section 2 is also confirmed by the respondents' attempt to answer the following question: What does it mean that the internal audit activity realises ongoing monitoring in accordance with the 1311 standard? The answers show a wide spectrum of diverse approaches and irregular understanding of the term by internal auditors both in the public and private sectors. To illustrate this, definitions of monitoring of internal audit activities obtained during the conducted interviews are presented in Table 1.

An analysis of the definitions contained in Table 1 shows that internal auditors in the public and private sectors generally distinguished similar elements of the process of monitoring of internal audit activities. Based on their own experience, more than half respondents indicated that monitoring means supervising internal auditor by the chief audit executive (CAE) to ensure that an audit engagement is performed in

accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, the objectives of the engagement are reached, and the work program is being realised [R15]. The CAE should assess and approve each step of audit engagement [R11] based on information acquired through discussions with internal auditors and the analysis of working papers [R17]. Moreover, the CAE should guide internal auditors on certain issues that they might not pay attention to [R26]. He should discuss together with the auditor results of preliminary review, work program and observations [R18]. The CAE should participate in the opening conference, the working conference in the audited department and the official closing conference with senior management [R18]. Finally he should read the audit report, confront it with the evidence contained in the working papers, and then sign it [R7]. Surprisingly two internal auditors, who work in the public sector were convinced that monitoring of internal audit activities meant supervising internal auditors by the chief executive officer.

Table 1. Definitions of monitoring of internal audit activities in the public and private sectors

Key elements of the definitions	Public sector	Private sector
	Number of responses	
Ongoing supervision of the internal audit process by the CAE or (CEO)	16 (2)	6 (0)
Analysing the post-audit survey's results	8	2
Recording and analysing time spent on each activity	5	3
Verifying the recommendations implementation	6	4
Peer reviews of working papers after the audits are completed	4	0
Self-control	5	0
Total	23	7

Source: own study.

One third of the examined auditors both in the public and private sectors regarded monitoring also as a survey or an interview, which should be conducted after closing the engagement. The aim of the inquiry is to learn the opinions of the audited departments about the usefulness of audit observations and the quality of methods with which the engagement was performed. An analysis of the gathered responses allows for establishing to what extent the expectations in relation to the given engagement of the organisation were met, confirming of internal assessments, and searching for causes behind negative responses. In cases of their identification, possible solutions to the given situation are implemented with the purpose of receiving positive responses in regard to the given field in the future [R19].

One fourth of the examined auditors both in the public and private sectors understood monitoring as measuring the time they spend each day on the individual

activities that encompass the performed engagements. This should be used to assess timeliness, regularity and discipline in keeping to time for particular activities [R15] and possible investigation of why this time is exceeded [R17]. The CAE should monitor the way the task is carried out and the progress of the task on a current basis, to know at what stage this task is and if someone else can accomplish this task [R28].

Although there is another standard, which is particularly related to the system of monitoring the disposition of results communicated to management (standard 2500), one fourth of the examined auditors in the public sector and more than half of the respondents in the private sector perceived monitoring of internal audit activities as verifying whether the audit recommendations were implemented by the audited departments according to the agreed deadlines.

To summarise the key elements of monitoring of internal audit activities, which are common in the public and private sectors, a definition formulated by respondent [R18] ought to be quoted: The CAE and his team perform tasks that ensure for the audit team that its activity is compliant with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing. It should also be added that the key elements of the definition of monitoring of internal audit activities characterised on the basis of the views of the participants of the research are compliant with the assumptions of all three concepts of management and control.

Opinions of internal auditors in the public and private sectors differ in two regards. Firstly, one sixth of the examined auditors in the public sector regarded monitoring also as periodical review of the compatibility of the working papers with the accepted rules and procedures, which should be conducted after the performance of engagements. To ensure greater objectivity, the auditor who carried out the given engagement should take part in it, but also one that did not take [R3]. Secondly, one sixth of the examined auditors in the public sector stated that monitoring can take the form of self-control, if there is only one internal auditor employed in the organization [R14]. The internal auditors in the private sector, who took part in this study, did not share these opinions.

5. Conclusions

The search for an answer to the question of what does it mean that the internal audit activity realises ongoing monitoring in accordance with the 1311 standard revealed a definite difficulty in explaining how monitoring of internal audit activities should be understood. Most of the respondents would agree with the definition that monitoring should mean supervising internal auditor by the CAE to ensure that an audit engagement is performed in accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, the objectives of the engagement are reached, and the work program is being realized. Less than half of the respondents would supplement this definition with: analysing the post-audit survey's results and/or recording and analysing time spent on each activity. Although verifying the recommendations implementation is also regarded as ongoing monitoring by the

internal auditors in the public and private sectors, it is required by the standard 2500, and not by the standard 1311.

The gathered data also revealed two cases in which the perceptions of monitoring by the internal auditors in the public and private sectors differ. Firstly, one sixth of the examined internal auditors in the public sector is convinced that monitoring should involve peer reviews of working papers after the audits are completed. The internal auditors in the private sector, who took part in this study, did not share these opinion. These results may imply that internal auditors in the private sector assess the quality of working papers on ongoing basis, while one sixth of the examined internal auditors in the public sector assesses the quality of working papers periodically. In the light of the praxeological rule of preventing damage it is not correct to do it periodically. If significant working paper deficiency is revealed after the final audit communication, then the CAE will not be willing to disclose it, because of potential damage to internal audit department reputation. Secondly, one sixth of the examined internal auditors in the public sector is convinced that monitoring could involve self-control. These results may imply that if a public sector entity employs only one internal auditor, the auditor understands monitoring as self-control. However, in the light of the praxeological rule of minimising intervention it is not correct to treat monitoring as a self-control. Monitoring should be performed by the other internal auditor and/or audit software mainly because of the difficulty in maintaining the self-control in practice [Zatoń 2014].

It should also be added that the results of this research can be seen as the next step in broadening our knowledge of an internal audit quality assessment. Moreover, they are an interesting supplement to the existing research conducted by, inter alia, such researchers as P. Bednarek [2015, 2018], A. Bartoszewicz [2015], and E.I. Szczepankiewicz [2012]. It should be stressed that former research was predominantly focused on determining the practices that are used by internal auditors in the public and private sectors in Poland in relation to monitoring and self-assessment. This study allowed for identifying the similarities and differences in the internal auditors' perceptions of the essence of ongoing monitoring of internal audit activities in the public and private sectors.

Finally, it must be emphasized that this research has its limitations. First of all, the data were collected only in a single moment of time. It is not possible to record the learning process and its internal dynamics for each individual organization. In addition, the data were collected only from one source. Conclusions were drawn exclusively based on what was said by the internal auditors during the interviews. Future studies should additionally confirm these conclusions by performing multiple case studies.

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Appendix – questionnaire

Basic information about respondents

1. Please select the type of organization for which you currently work:
 - Private enterprise (not listed on the stock exchange)
 - A company listed on the stock exchange
 - Public sector / public administration

- Non-profit organization
 - Other please specify: _____
2. Please select the industry of the organization for which you work:
- Banks, financial institutions and insurance companies
 - Public utilities
 - Health protection
 - Energy, oil and gas
 - Production companies
 - Public administration
 - Social security institutions
 - Transportation
 - Wholesale and retail trade
 - Communication and telecommunications
 - Advisory services
 - Other please specify: _____
3. What position do you currently hold in the internal audit unit?
- Internal audit manager
 - Internal auditor
 - Other please specify: _____
4. Does your organization have an audit committee or its equivalent?
- Yes
 - No
5. For how many years do you work as internal auditor? _____
6. Please enter the number of employees in your internal audit department (full-time equivalents): ____

Ongoing monitoring

1. What does it mean that the internal audit activity performs ongoing monitoring in accordance with the 1311 standard? _____
2. For what reasons should the internal audit activity dedicate its time and other resources to ongoing monitoring in accordance with the 1311 standard? _____
3. Does your internal audit activity carry out ongoing monitoring in accordance with the 1311 standard?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. No, but it will be implemented within 12 months
4. What are the obstacles that hinder the internal audit activity of ongoing monitoring in accordance with the standard 1311 or prevent the internal audit activity from devoting their time and other resources to this end? _____
5. What does it mean that the internal audit activity carries out periodic self-assessment in accordance with the 1311 standard? _____