

Professional Activity as Social Process of Human Resource Development in Self-Directed Learning (Case of Public Administration)

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Abstract

Research problem. The problem presented in this research consists of the following questions: What is the mechanism of competence improvement and development in self-directed learning at work environment? What premises do situations and contexts of activities of public administration sector create for development of competence structure and its expansion?

Research subject is competence development in professional activity in the self-directed learning in public administration sector.

Research aim is to identify the sources of different level changes that influence the development and improvement of competences of public administration sector specialists by describing the activity contexts.

Research objectives are to highlight the dynamics of practical competence structure and the contextuality of the competence development by integrating the activity change and self-directed learning; to describe the model of competence development in self-directed learning at work environment.

Sample. The focus group consisted of six employees of public administration sector.

Methods. To *collect data*, the focus group interview was used. The *data were analyzed* by applying the qualitative content analysis.

Keywords: competence, competence development, holism, human resource development, self-directed learning, social constructivism.

Introduction

Research problem and relevance. The conception of *self-directed learning* became the research focus for many researchers, scientists and practitioners in Lithuania and other countries especially in the end of 20th century (Bjornavold, 1999; Stasiūnaitienė, 2006). Most of the published research are theoretically conceptualized, but not substantiated by empirical evidence. Here is a lack of empirical facts that substantiate and prove the structure and mechanism of self-directed learning. Learning at work environment in social research was the primary premise to substantiate the structure of the competence and develop the new conception of competences that are divided into various levels, types, categories, etc. (Doran,

2002; Creswell, 2003; Campbell, 1998; Nolan *et al*, 1998; Benner *et al*, 1996; Lankshear *et al*, 1996). But there is no research in Lithuania and other countries that would integrate the conceptions of competence, development, self-directed learning and learning in work environment by connecting them to internal organizational resources for changes as premises for competence development. This is why the relevant research problem arises as contradiction between the two aspects: the rapid changes in activities of public administration; the need for competence development of specialists working in public administration sector. The presented research strives to highlight, how an employee him/herself perceives the relationships between self-directed learning and development of general (professional) competence. The research is oriented to learning as directly influencing the development of competence and improvement of activity management as a positive outcome. The research treats the improvement of professional activity management as project with positive connotation, but the main research focus becomes the relationship between self-directed learning and competence development. Despite various research into competence, it is obvious that development of competence in self-directed learning in work environment is still under question: the mechanisms of self-directed learning (especially in work environment) are not substantiated empirically, the structure of general competence is not clear and is quite often presented on the basis of structural-empirical standpoint.

The results of research carried out in practical environments, e.g. Alsop (2001), Smith, Dugan, Trompenaars (1996), give premises to doubt about the rigid standpoint about the competence that it could be divided into clusters, categories and etc., and all of them include the traditional elements such as knowledge, skills, capabilities, values, expectations, personal characteristics. The importance of these aspects cannot be ignored but in this context are not shown the dimensions of situativity and contextuality that influence essentially the development of competence in work environments in activity changes, when employees interact between themselves or em-

ployees and clients interact, and they collaborate inside or outside the organizations. In this research the problem is presented that consists of the following questions: “*What is the mechanism of competence improvement and development in self-directed learning in work environment? What kind of premises do contexts and situations of public administration sector create for development of competence structure and its expansion?*”

Research subject is competence development in professional activity in the context of self-directed learning in public administration sector.

Research aim is to identify the sources of different level changes that influence the development and improvement of competences of public administration sector specialists by describing the activity contexts.

Research objectives are to highlight the dynamics of practical competence structure and the contextuality of the competence development by integrating the activity change and self-directed learning; to describe the model of competence development in self-directed learning in work environment.

Theoretical background

The research is based on the following conceptions:

Competence, which in research is treated with holistic attitude (Velde, Svensson, 1996; Sandberg, 1994; Otter, 1992), as including the distinctness of individual characteristic, values, knowledge and capabilities¹.

Self-directed learning (SDL) (Beckett, Hager, 2002; Brockett, Hiemstra, 1991) in research is treated as uncontrolled, accidental, unconscious and spontaneous learning form, which is unidentified by the individual².

¹ Competence is seen from the structural point of view with the insight into its distinct characteristics in activity context. This substantiates the dynamics of competence construct in various social interactions. The holistic competence is seen from the standpoint of social evaluation and its analysis discourse (Mažeikis, 2007), when the distinctness of competence accumulates different social meanings in various activity contexts. It is possible to observe the repeating characteristics of competence in activity contexts, then the competence is identified as general competence as connected to transferring capabilities that incorporate the relationship between general competence and activity context.

² The SDL is connected to self-managed learning as learning method or strategy (Moore, 1980; Knowles, 1974 a, b; Tough, 1971) and these conceptions are both analyzed as integral conception, because one of their shared characteristics is the autonomy of the learner (Candy, 2004). The self-managed learner perceives and manages by him/herself the personal learning consciously and purposefully

Development represents the individual duty to answer the questions that arise in practical context by reflecting: “Who or what ensures that the personal obligation and enthusiasm influences the adequate development?” (Hill, Hannafin, 2001). The items of development are *content* and *process*³.

Competence development in research⁴ is seen as human resource development (HRD) conception (Rothwell, 1996). That is why the conception of *development* is related to managerial standpoint, where the HRD is understood in activity context⁵.

Social learning (Wenger, 1998) in the research substantiates the learning as the social participation, which is expressed by characteristics of activity and dependence on teams or activity groups. That is why the social learning is applied by analyzing the learning in *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998; Lave, Wenger, 1991)⁶.

Organizational humanism (Denhardt, 2001) in the research represents the self-inclusion of employees and is based on participation in the organizational processes⁷.

strives for the result. The individual in social environment or the employee in work environment creates the various social relationships by doing the activity tasks and does not see the conscious learning experience in it. The SDL occurs on individual and organizational levels among the employees or in their groups. Thus, striving to illuminate the expression of SDL, the dimensions of employee, process and activity are chosen (Hill, Hannafin, 2001) that reveal the SDL characteristics and premises for its distinctness.

³ For analysis of competence development the conceptions of reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987) and competence are integrated in order to create the premises to treat the contextuality of the activity and organizational change as a learning environment, which stimulates the individual to see the personal development of competence as permanent learning as detached from learning forms. The dimensions of competence development in the context of SDL (Hill, Hannafin, 2001) include three dimensions: *personal, process, context*.

⁴ In the research, competence integrates three constructs – (1) competence, (2) its development through SDL in activity by treating (3) the activity as the context of work environment.

⁵ From this point of view the relationship between the competence development and SDL is substantiated in the presented research. The SDL in the research is seen as a learning form, and then this form acquires the meaning of distinctness by two dimensions of development, i.e. *content* and *process* (Dahlberg et al, 2001).

⁶ In the research the community of practice is represented by employees from public administration sector. The social context for learning is created by dimensions of meaning, activity, community and identity that adequately are expressed through characteristics of experience, action, dependence and becoming.

⁷ Thus competence development of an employee acquires

Research methodology

Sample

The priority is given to the first phase. The data from every phase were analyzed separately, and in interpretation the data were integrated.

The focus group consisted of six employees from public administration sector (see Table 1).

Table 1

Research participants of focus group

No.	Age	Gender	Experience	Status in organization
F1	25 years	F	3 years	Specialist of social care and wardship
F2	40 years	F	15 years	Specialist of social care and wardship
F3	35 years	F	10 years	Specialist of social care and wardship
F4	60 years	F	30 years	Social worker in educational branch
F5	55 years	M	29 years	Vice-Mayor
F6	45 years	F	19 years	Social worker in educational branch
Mean	43.33 years	-	17.67 years	-

Methods

By carrying out the empirical research of entire project, the mixed consequential explorative strategy was applied (Creswell, 2003). The *first* phase – qualitative, the *second* – quantitative, and the *third* – quantitative.

For *data collection*, the focus group interview (discussion) was applied. This method was chosen because of the purpose to illuminate several attitudes and opinions of research participants with the adequate social characteristics. According to McIlveen et al (2007), the homogeneity of the groups en-

the meaning of social evaluation. The relationship between managerial practice in organization and individual growth is complicated because formal organizational structures and traditional managerial practice not rarely are inadequate with the direction to individual growing (competence development) (Argyris, 1982). In this research the focus is on insights into the motivation factors for development of the employees' competence in public administration sector. The need for humanism is relevant to organizational change processes and creates premises for the changes in behavior of employees as self-directed learners. The organizational change means the dependence on changes that appear in learners' behavior with their learning experiences and this is the "outcome" of direct interaction between various organizational groups (Golembiewski, 2008). This is why the organizational change is treated as one of the resources for employees' competence development.

ures the integrity of the data. The *data were analyzed* by applying the qualitative content analysis (Wamboldt, 1992)⁸.

Ethics

The general ethical principles were the following (Polit, Hungler, 1995): beneficence, respect for human dignity, justice, informed consent. Each participant was asked to participate in the research individually and all the participants were from different organizations and various regions of Lithuania, and before the research they did not know each other. Participants were free to participate or not in the research as well as in group discussions, and to leave the discussion at any time they want. The researchers ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants by coding their names, not providing the detailed information about the organizations participants work at, and not asking for detailed information about their status, experience, organizational characteristics and other aspects, which could allow to identify the research participants. For the research it was enough to select the people from the same sector, i.e. public administration.

Research tool

The interview questions were divided into three groups:

I. Employee: "How do you see yourself in organization? What competences do you personally need to carry out the activity? How do you motivate yourself for professional development and improvement?"

II. Process: "How do you experience the autonomy at work? How do you compensate for the deficiency in knowledge and capabilities in organizational environment?"

III. Context: "What situations in professional activity do motivate you for development and improvement? What kind of working influences your

⁸ (1) selecting the analysis unit, which distinguish the thought about action, process, experience, understanding, perception, etc. (part of the sentence, sentence, or paragraph); (2) re-reading the text several times; (3) coding openly the selected units by marking the essentials; (4) comparing the open codes and finding adequacies and differences; (5) selecting different codes; (6) integrating into subcategories the codes that are connected by the same idea or thought; (7) integrating the subcategories into categories according to their common idea, e.g. action, process, experiences of participants; (8) presenting the categories, subcategories and providing the textual evidences of it in tables.

identification with the activity? What role does the communication play in your development? How do you treat criticism, help and advice in your activity?"

Results

As an outcome of the research was established a model, which distinguishes the possibilities for development of general and specific competences in learning context in work environment. The model consists of three dimensions – employee⁹, process¹⁰ and context¹¹. Every dimension includes criteria that are treated as premises for competence development in the context of self-directed learning.

In every dimension every criterion (premise) is related to specific indicators (conditions) and characteristics (context). Every criterion consists of different number of indicators, like every indicator of different number of characteristics; because they are extracted latently from the interview data. In the model the element of “outcome” is named as the result, i.e. the premises of self-directed learning in every criterion are explained by different number of elements. But those are not attached to every indicator (condition) and characteristic (context) individually, but are oriented to every criterion in every dimension (see Table 2).

⁹ Individuality and employee’s activity purpose in organization; employee’s motivation to strive for, satisfaction in and responsibility for organization’s aim; the need of an employee for competences and capabilities to do the “good work”; specificity and mutuality of applied capabilities, and influence of theory and practice on acquiring the capabilities for the employee; adequacy of applied capabilities to specific activity and influence of activity done by the employee on acquiring the new capabilities continuously; self-motivation for improvement and acceptable learning methods; planning of professional improvement and the need for new capabilities of an employee in professional area.

¹⁰ Participation in decision-making; independence of an employee in organization; compensation for knowledge and capabilities in organizational environment; knowledge and capabilities to strengthen employee’s position in the organization.

¹¹ Situations that motivate to improve; activity environment, which strongly influences the identification of the employee with the activity; role of communication in employee’s learning and improvement; value of collaboration for the employee; meaning of criticism, help and advice for the employee in activity; possibilities to reflect the being done activity; beneficence of individual and group reflections for the employee in activity.

Table 2
Example of element of the model in “employee’s” dimension

DI-MENSION	Crite- rion – PREM- ISES	Indica- tor – CON- DI- TIONS	Characte- ristic – CON- TEXT	Out- comes ¹² – RESULT
EM- PLOY- EE	Motiva- tion of the employee to seek the orga- nizational aims	Identi- fication with the organi- zation	Help for peo- ple according to their needs Reconcilia- tion of em- ployees’, employers’ and personal needs Personal obli- gation to seek the organiza- tional strate- gic aims	Reflec- tion on existen- tial life aspects

Purpose of activity in organization. Public administration sector is dominated by the individual initiatives of development and improvement, and permanent learning. The value of collaboration and work in groups is also recognized, because it stipulates the information-sharing, spontaneous accumulation of new knowledge and capabilities in the context of interactions by illuminating the individual creativity and performing the concrete roles. In organizations, the individual duty of an employee is valued. Fragments of self-directed learning are distinct, when employees collaborate, strive for the general understanding by discussing and acting together, take higher responsibilities spontaneously and it raises the self-realization. Results prove that conditions for self-directed learning are connected to employees’ reflection on experienced work situations. The self-directed learning for public-administration employees is individualized, personal, based on reflection and discussions with others.

Motivation to strive for organizational purposes. The employees in organization experience recognition from others and it is experienced in a form of positive feedback and respect from colleagues and clients, moral and financial stimulation of leaders. In this context is highlighted the self-directed application of cognitive competence, i.e. perception of meaningfulness by reflecting the performed and being performed activity.

Responsibility for organizational purposes. Employees see their formal activities as essential responsibility for organizational purposes, and their reflections are attached to analysis after planned activities and evaluation of results, and are spontaneous

¹² Premises of self-directed learning.

responsibility for organizational purposes. Premises for self-directed learning are in counseling the colleagues and clients, working in teams.

Competence. Employees actualize the responsibility and obligations that relate to the organizational hierarchy. In emotional intelligence important is tolerance and in reflecting the employees mention their listening to information given by others on cognitive level by “transferring” themselves to adequate situations. Results illuminated the *integral competences* that are applied in activity by integrating two or more competences, e.g. IT and reflecting, social competence and emotional intelligence.

Need to acquire new capabilities. The employees are influenced to acquire new capabilities by organizational changes and increase the number of the activities. The employees are influenced to develop and improve by respect of clients and colleagues, striving not to be detached from competence of leaders. The achieved result spontaneously empowers the employees for development and employees learn self-directly by interacting with the new and unknown activity aspects.

Acceptable learning methods. Employees relate their individual learning with the selection of expedient information and reading of theories. For employees’ learning at work environment are important activity authorities. It reflects the employees’ need to see the example, which could be “copied” and it would be indirect premises to transfer the part of responsibility onto the “chosen” authority. The employees value the learning by communicating and discovering, and note that received knowledge naturally influences their new perceptions. The premises for self-directed learning at work environment are influenced by employees’ reflections on activity and the need for new capabilities, independent selection of information from colleagues by asking them.

Independence in organization. Employees emphasize that independence increases their satisfaction and dignity, motivation to work and gives the premises to be responsible for activity results and mistakes. By being independent, the employees initiate projects, effectively communicate with people and listen to them, and that empowers them for competence development and improvement.

Strengthening the position in organization. For strengthening of the employees in an organization they need to know the activity and perform it effectively, have deep knowledge and understand the activity, collaborate with the colleagues and clients, initiate and mediate. Premises for self-directed learning by striving to compensate for the knowledge and capabilities in organization are related to trust of colleagues, experience of “being necessary” for them and professional value, learning from mistakes.

Self-empowerment for development. Development and improvement of public sector employees is connected to wide sphere of activity, help for people, arise of authority inside and outside of organization, respect of colleagues and clients and change of situations in activity, visible activity results. Self-directed learning is connected to personal reflection in activity by perceiving the personal unknown areas by relating them to activity contexts and situations.

Identification with the organization. To identify with the organisation helps the support of colleagues, orientation towards authorities and communication with colleagues. The premises for self-directed learning are formed by representing the organization and discussing the problems in organization.

Communication. Communication helps the employees to: learn from colleagues and acquire new knowledge; share experiences; receive new information; express critical attitudes; evaluate personal mistakes; understand thinking directions of other people and represent self by communicating inside and outside the organization. The premises for self-directed learning are in observing the activities of other employees.

Criticism. Criticism of others is meaningful if it is substantive and given by the authority. The premises for self-directed learning are when the criticism is meaningful and is given as subtle, and stipulates self-empowerment of the employee for permanent development and improvement. This stipulates the reflection of the employee on activity situations.

Help. Public administration employees recognize help when performing the similar or overlapping activities, because help in collaborating creates premises for adequate work atmosphere and colleagues learn self-directly to communicate effectively.

Advice. Advice of colleagues is valuable if it is substantive with argumentation and strict. However, the capability of an employee to analyze the received advice is important. The premises for self-directed learning are in positive reactions to remarks expressed by colleagues and leaders, because this creates possibilities to add, improve capabilities and correct mistakes.

Reflection. Employees reflect after activities, but there are situations, when they reflect during activity. By reflecting they summarize and systematize their work. They also value meeting and discussing with the “external experts”, because it stipulates the reflections on the correctness of the performed activities, think about possible decision-making in adequate situations, but in different contexts¹³. Premises

¹³ The individual reflection gives employees the premises to deepen their understanding about the activity and analyze self in various activity situations. The group reflection is also valuable because they receive help and raise the important questions for activity.

es for self-directed learning are employees' responsibility to perform the activities and this stipulates the deepening of their perceptions about the competence development and recognize the mistakes.

Conclusions

- The structure of general competence of public sector employees contains no separate capabilities, knowledge, values and attitudes. Every capability, which is applied in public sector, is related to several competences that are naturally, spontaneously integrated into concrete activity contexts and situations. It means that the same elements are involved in content of several competences. This is why integrated competences are formed naturally in activities and they *become* general competence. Thus in activity environment the structural model of competence is spontaneously transformed into holistic model. Because of the *context* dimension, the development of competences in self-directed learning at work environment depends on double contextuality: the context as dimension expresses the organizational level, and the context as characteristic represents the social behavior of the employee.
- In activity it is complicated to isolate the competences of communication, collaboration and teaching, because they are efficient only in a *complex*. Their integrity forms in activity spontaneously, when employees consult and explain, share experience and accumulated knowledge focusing on the activity analysis questions. In this context employees strive to take on formal and informal activities. Thus social and educational competences are integrated spontaneously through the concrete general competences in activity environment.
- Theoretical background of a specialist is the premise for his/her satisfaction and effective realization of activity. But theoretical knowledge is not enough to change the culture of services in organization and to participate in decision-making. For that a specialist needs professional dignity, identification with the organization for welfare of clients and effectiveness of services. It means that special capabilities are connected to specific activities, solve specific problems. However, management of work processes requires competence in management, which incorporates not only managerial-specific, but general professional competences as well. The theories that are well known for employees give premises for them to perceive the limits of theories in practice, analyze the practical situations by applying the elements from theories.
- It is not rare for public sector employees to experience controversies – they experience the need to

develop or improve their competences, but the organizations of that sector do not show interest to have employees with wide-ranging capabilities. For employees the deeper knowledge of their activity is not only the stimulus to continuously acquire the new capabilities, but is also the self-directed individual need. In public sector organizations the acquisition of new knowledge and capabilities is oriented exceptionally only towards limited, specific organizational needs.

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Profesinė veikla kaip socialinis žmogiškųjų išteklių vystymo procesas savaiminiame mokymesi (viešojo administravimo atvejis)

Santrauka

Pristatomi tyrimo rezultatai yra dalis trijų dalių (kokybinės ir dviejų kiekybinių) tyrimo projekto, finansuoto Lietuvos valstybinio mokslo ir studijų fondo. Straipsnyje koncentruojamasi tik į vieną sektorių – viešąjį administravimą. Todėl rezultatai ir siejami su viena fokusine grupe, atstovavusia minėtą sektorių (bendras fokusinių grupių skaičius – 4 po 6 asmenis kiekvienoje).

Mokslinės problemos pagrindimas. Nėra atlikta tyriminių studijų užsienio šalyse ir Lietuvoje, kuriose būtų sujungtos kompetencijos, vystymosi, savaiminio mokymosi ir mokymosi darbo vietoje koncepcijos, jas siejant su vidiniais kaitos šaltiniais organizacijoje, kaip prielaidomis, kompetencijų. **Aktuali problema – prieštaravimas tarp dviejų aspektų: sparčių viešojo administravimo sektoriaus veiklų pokyčių; viešojo administravimo sektoriuje dirbančių specialistų kompetencijos kaitos poreikio, nes savaiminis mokymasis darbo vietoje ir kompetencijos vystymasis tampa aktualiais moksliniame ir praktiniame lygmenyse.** Sprendžiama kompleksinė mokslinė problema, kurią sudaro tokie klausimai: *koks yra kompetencijų tobulinimo ir vystymosi mechanizmas vykstant savaiminiam mokymuisi darbo vietoje? Kokias prielaidas sukuria viešojo administravimo sektoriaus veiklų kontekstai ir situacijos vystytis kompetencijų struktūrai ir ją plėtoti?*

Tyrimo objektas – kompetencijos tobulinimas profesinėje veikloje savaiminiame mokymesi viešojo administravimo sektoriuje.

Tyrimo tikslas – nustatyti viešojo administravimo sektoriuje dirbančių specialistų kompetencijų vystymąsi ir tobulinimą veikiančius skirtingų lygmenų pokyčių šaltinius, apibūdinant veiklų kontekstus.

Tyrimo metodai: *duomenų rinkimas* – fokusinė grupė; *duomenų analizė* – kokybinė turinio analizė.

Tyrimo rezultatai:

- Teorinis specialisto parengimas ir jo turimos teorinės žinios yra specialisto profesinės savivertės ir efektyvaus veiklos realizavimo prielaida, tačiau vien teorinio pasirengimo nepakanka keisti paslaugų kultūrą organizacijoje ir dalyvauti priimančioms sprendimams. Tam reikalingas profesinis asmens orumas, identifikavimasis su organizacija vardan klientų gerovės ir paslaugų efektyvumo teikiant jas humaniškai.
- Viešajame sektoriuje dirbantys specialistai neretai išgyvena kontraversijas – jie patys mato poreikį plėtoti ar vystyti savo kompetencijas, tačiau viešojo sektoriaus organizacijos nerodo intereso turėti nuolatos plačios apimties gebėjimų tobulinančius darbuotojus. Informantai teigia, kad jiems gilesnis savo atliekamos veiklos pažinimas yra net tik stimulas nuolatos įgyti naujų gebėjimų, bet ir savaiminis poreikis. Viešąjį sektorių atstovaujančiose organizacijose naujų žinių ir / ar gebėjimų įgijimas orientuojamas išskirtinai tik į ribotus, specifinius organizacijos poreikius.