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EMPLOYABILITY PRACTICES IN THE HEALTHCARE SECTOR: AN EVIDENCE FROM POLAND

Abstract:

Topic and purpose

Human capital is considered as an essential driver of achieving competitive advantage in the healthcare sector. However, employment relationships in the Polish healthcare sector are changing and long-term relationships are replaced with more temporary relationships. Contrary to the situation in other sectors, this is favorable for employees of healthcare entities what stems from a growing demand for medical services. Healthcare entities attempt to attract and retain valuable employees. The possibility of employability enhancement becomes an important factor deciding about the attractiveness of the employer for many employees who look for opportunities for further career development. However, knowledge about competencies determining employability and practices of its enhancement in this sector is still poor. This paper tries to answer the questions: what are key employability competencies of employees in the healthcare sector and what are the conditions of their enhancement in healthcare organizations?

Method

The aims of the paper are realized by presenting the results of semi-structured interviews carried out with top management of 11 public healthcare entities*. Healthcare entities operating in Southern, Northern, Central, Eastern and Western Poland were targeted in order to get a more complete view of the situation. On the basis of the interviews carried out with managers of healthcare entities key employability competencies of employees and the practices of employability enhancement applied in healthcare entities are analyzed.

Findings and implications

Despite the fact that generally professional knowledge and skills were considered as the most important factor of employability in healthcare organizations the significance of some generic competences was also emphasized. It has been found that although the employees' employability enhancement is a vital concern of the management in the examined healthcare entities, activities undertaken in this area are rather limited and primarily focused on trainings.

To conclude, assuming that people and their competences are the most important capital of healthcare organizations, activities aimed at employability enhancement acquire crucial importance in healthcare entities and they should become an inherent element of HRM policy. They have to focus not only on the development of employees' professional knowledge and skills but also generic competences which today become a significant factor determining employability in the healthcare sector.

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Keywords:

employability, HRM, healthcare sector

JEL Classification: J24, O15, I19

Introduction

Changes in the Polish healthcare sector are a difficult challenge to its employees. High social requirements regarding the quality of healthcare services increase the significance of employees' development. Contemporary healthcare entities are concerned with making attempts to apply various approaches with the aim of generating a continual stream of competitive advantages, making use of their human capital. Human capital is considered as an important driver of achieving and maintaining competitive advantage in the healthcare entities. However, employment relationships in the Polish healthcare sector are changing and long-term relationships are replaced with more temporary relationships, but contrary to the situation in other sectors, this is often convenient and favorable for the key group of employees of healthcare entities i.e. its medical staff. This problem stems from a growing demand for medical services, hence healthcare entities attempt to attract and retain valuable employees in their workforce. The possibility of professional development and employability enhancement become essential factors deciding about the attractiveness of the employer for many employees in this sector who look for opportunities for further career development. They want to learn and develop their competences to stay employable on the demanding and unstable labour market. However, knowledge about competencies determining employability and practices of its enhancement in this sector are still poor.

This paper tries to answer the following questions: what are key employability competencies of employees in the healthcare sector and what are the conditions of their enhancement in Polish healthcare organizations. These aims are realized by presenting the results of semi-structured interviews carried out with managers of Polish healthcare entities¹.

1. Changes in the Polish healthcare sector

After the second world war the system of Polish healthcare was strongly centralized. The process of changes in the healthcare sector has begun in 1989 along with political changes and the transition of the Polish economic system from a centrally planned economy to market economy. The key reform, i.e. the Law on the Universal Health Insurance, which came into force in 1999, changed the structure of funding healthcare services. The previous system of state funding based on public budgetary rules was replaced with the mixed model of funding based on social health insurance (SHI) and public funding. A system of health insurance institutions has been introduced. The new healthcare system has been based on the rules of solidarity and universality of health insurance. The function of healthcare services payer has been separated from the organizer and provider of healthcare services (Wrona, 2011). Sixteen so-called regional Sickness Funds were established in every voivodeship (one for each voivodeship). Sickness Funds were independent and self-governing institutions. They

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took over the funding package of particular health services and benefits. They gathered funds from insurance premiums of people assigned to a given Sickness Fund. Sickness Funds managed these funds as well as concluded contracts with healthcare entities on healthcare services in terms of both medical treatment and prevention. This solution was designed to ensure that “money follows the patient” because everybody could choose his/her doctor, hospital or surgery.

In practice, many various problems such as e.g. lack of an integrated strategy, unclear contracting rules for sickness funds and payment mechanisms appeared, what led to the replacement of Sickness Funds with one central insurance institution, i.e. the National Health Fund (NFZ) in 2003. As a result of further reforms a new Law on Health Care Services Financed from Public Sources was enacted in 2004. This Law indicated healthcare services which were not covered from public funds. In an amendment to the Law, the Ministry was obligated to determine benefits which are financed from public funds.

Today all working Poles are burdened with a compulsory insurance contribution which represents 9% of their personal income but 7.75% is deducted from the income tax. However, it should be noticed that many healthcare services and actions are still funded from the state budget, e.g. emergency medical services or some highly specialist healthcare services, education of medical personnel, programs of healthcare policy, preventive programs, medical scientific research, blood donation centres, etc.

An important element of the transformation of the Polish healthcare system was decentralization. A lot of the authority over public healthcare was delegated from the Ministry of Health down to the local authorities (Sagan et al., 2011, p. 17). Local self-governments have become responsible for establishing public healthcare providers and for health promotion as well as health prevention at the regional level. Healthcare units have been transformed into independent public healthcare entities but local state authorities (i.e. voivodes) are still responsible for the coordination of government and self-government administration activities in this area (Sagan et al., 2011, p. 24). In practice, these actions often appear to be unsatisfactory due to ineffective management of healthcare entities on both regional and organizational levels. In 2011 the Law on Therapeutic Activity encouraging territorial self-governments to commercialize and privatize hospitals came into force to improve the poor economic efficiency of these public healthcare entities (Sagan and Sobczak, 2014). However, the complexity of the problems, the deteriorating quality and limited accessibility of healthcare services led to its subsequent amendments.

The current unstable situation in Polish healthcare entities is the result of numerous political, economic social and demographic changes. For the last 15 years these changes have also imposed the introduction of new methods of management on healthcare entities to enhance their position on the emerging healthcare services market. Healthcare policy, its instability and restructuring of many public healthcare organizations result in actions aimed at the improvement of managing public healthcare entities by the proper use of their human capital. The specificity of the sector in which the success of the organization is largely determined by its intellectual

capital, makes human resource management acquire special importance in healthcare organizations. Today, Polish healthcare entities are struggling to attract and maintain the best health specialists to enhance their position on the market of healthcare services. Simultaneously, careers of employees in the healthcare sector have started to be characterized by self-management and frequent changes of organizations. A lot of specialists have founded their private health care entities or simultaneously they work for other entities. These organizations often enter into a contract with the National Health Fund and provide free health care services to people who are insured in the National Health Fund. Many health specialists also work in a few health care organizations at the same time. Therefore, new career models have become more and more attractive for many employees in the healthcare sector, who are able to impose various requirements on their employers, due to their high employability. This problem particularly concerns medical staff. The value of their competences and increasing demand for healthcare services enhance their "bargaining position" on the labour market and allow them to choose such employers who meet their expectations, also these concerning organizational support for their employability enhancement. This situation poses serious challenges for Polish healthcare entities which they will be able to face only if they create such possibilities for their employees.

2. Towards the employability enhancement model in the healthcare sector: a theoretical background

There is a great diversity of definitions of employability but there are a few which are focused on understanding the essence of this phenomenon. This situation stems from the complexity of the concept of employability, which additionally has evolved over time. However, since the end of the 20th century the difficult situation on the labour market and the growing threat of a job loss among many employees, as well as the spread of the so-called flexible forms of employment have resulted in increased interest in the concept. The subject of employability has started to be considered from many different but interrelated perspectives, e.g. individual, organizational and macroeconomic perspectives (Frączkiewicz-Wronka and Marzec, 2012). This issue has become so popular and important that some researchers even maintain that today it practically concerns everybody on the labour market (Berntson, 2008, p. 6).

Many researchers emphasize factors related with the labour market situation, which are external and independent from an individual, while others stress individual aspects connected with features and competences of an employee. Today, the latter perspective acquires great popularity because the fundamental question of the employability issue is "why some people and not others discover and exploit the opportunities to get a job and to develop their career". In the individualistic approach employability may be understood as specific features of the individual which allow him/her to identify and to realize chances for employment and career development on the internal and/or external labour market (Forrier and Sels, 2003, p. 105). They influence competitiveness of an employee on the internal and the external labour market and are largely determined by competences of an individual. This approach is

presented by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2005), who proposed a competence-based model of employability, in which it is defined as “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). This model includes five specific dimensions which are a combination of occupational expertise and generic competences, i.e. personal flexibility, optimization and anticipation, corporate sense and balance (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006, p. 453). From this perspective employability can be understood as a specific, complex meta-competence of an individual which determines the ability to deal with the situation on the external and internal labour market and his/her career success (Marzec, 2015). It constitutes individual career potential (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004, pp. 15-21) present a similar perspective, claiming that employability represents these individual features which encourage people's adaptive behaviours, increasing their chances for employment and career success. They defined employability as “a constellation of individual differences that predispose individuals to (pro)active adaptability specific to work and careers” (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008, p. 503). According to them, the so-called dispositional employability of an individual is determined by openness to change at work, work and career resilience, proactivity at work and career, career motivation and work identity (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008, p. 507).

A variety of factors influence employability of employees. Literature study indicates that they encompass three groups, i.e. macroeconomic factors (e.g. labour market situation, social policy, macroeconomic stability, etc.), organizational conditions (e.g. the quality of the relationships between subordinates and supervisors, job content, leadership style, etc.) and individual factors (e.g. career history, career motivation, life situation, education, personality characteristics, etc.) (Marzec, 2015). The approach to employability based on competences also assumes that employability enhancement brings benefits for both the organizations and their employees. The enhancement of employability positively impacts their employees' sense of job security, because employees know that even if they lose their job, they will be able to quickly find a new satisfactory job (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008, p. 506). High employability raises the chances of an employee for a career success (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008; Marzec et al., 2009; Marzec and Van der Heijden, 2003, Marzec, 2015). On the other hand, it brings considerable advantages for organizations. It increases employees' work performance, initiative, adaptability and as a result functional flexibility of organizational human resources (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008, p. 506). Moreover, organizational support for employability enhancement encourages employees' commitment, loyalty and their citizenship behaviours (Camps and Majocchi, 2010, p. 142).

3. Research methods

Empirical research was conducted in the middle of 2015 as the first stage of a two-year program. Semi-structured interviews with top management of 11 public

healthcare entities were carried out. In each organization one interview was conducted with its top manager. Healthcare entities operating in Southern, Northern, Central, Eastern and Western Poland were targeted in order to get a more complete view of the situation in Polish healthcare entities. The research was focused on the analysis of factors determining employability and employability enhancement practices in the healthcare sector.

Interviews were conducted in line with the prepared scenario. Common interview protocol questions were applied in all interviews. The interviews encompassed 32 questions concerning e.g. HRM strategy, employability policy and practices in healthcare organizations, employability competences of employees and the results of employability enhancement. All interviews were carried out face-to-face. They lasted about 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Data were divided into variable categories. Similar interviewees' statements of the respondents' were grouped dimensions of categories, which emerged as a result of the process of their analysis (Baarda, de Goede and Teunissen, 1995). Comparable answering patterns were aggregated into the analysis to create an overall frequency table of responses (Scholarios et al., 2008, p. 1041).

4. Analysis of the results

All interviewees claimed that in their healthcare entities attention is paid to the problem of employability enhancement (11 persons). In this context one of the respondents indicated "we pay attention not only to development of professional knowledge but also to generic competences". In the examined organizations trainings were the most frequently mentioned activities undertaken in order to enhance employability of employees (7 persons). A few healthcare entities also offered employees possibilities of studying (2 persons), external trainings (2 persons), training leaves (1 person), internal trainings (1 person). Some managers only generally stated that their organizations create possibilities of qualifications development (3 persons) or motivate employees to professional development (2 persons). In two healthcare entities special meetings serving the exchange of knowledge are also organized. One of the respondents stated that in his organization only people with high competences are quickly promoted. The significance of self-development was also mentioned.

In the context of employability enhancement the importance of changes in the job content is stressed in the literature on the subject because it provides employees with opportunities to learn, and to improve their skills. However, the answer to the question concerning the frequency of changes in the job content and job tasks given by the vast majority of respondents was that the job content and tasks were constant in their organizations (10 persons). They explained that such changes were impossible because of the legal regulations and specialization of the job in health care entities, which requires a high level of occupational expertise (2 persons). One manager explained that despite the fact that the changes in the job content were impossible due to the existing regulations the extent of employees' job tasks was enlarged because of new challenges. Only one manager stated that the job content was sometimes

changed and two managers said that the change of job tasks sometimes happened in administration departments of healthcare entities. At the same time, many interviewees expressed the opinion that changes in the job content positively influence employability of employees (6 persons), because they create the possibility of development and learning (2 persons). One of the managers stated that “each change of job tasks enhances an employee’s position on the labour market”.

Another important factor of employability enhancement acknowledged by the majority of the respondents (10 persons) was the quality of the relationship between the supervisor and their subordinates, as the manager of a healthcare entity explained “good quality of the relationship with a supervisor results in willingness of employees to belong to the organization but poor quality of these relationships may even lead to leaving the organization by employees”. Respondents stressed that today supervisors should be mentors of their subordinates who support them in their professional development and employability enhancement. Moreover, they claimed that supervisors can influence direction of the professional development because they can choose and accept the proper trainings of employees.

Leadership style was also mentioned as a significant factor influencing employability. In this context participative leadership was indicated because it allows employees to enrich their experiences and to develop new competences due to participation of employees in the decision making processes and their greater autonomy. In the majority of the examined healthcare entities employees participate in decision making (9 persons) but this participation is quite limited and depends on the level of management and the kind of the decision (6 persons). However, most of the interviewees maintained that they delegate responsibilities to employees in such a way that their subordinates can learn, and enhance employability (10 persons).

Today, professional network and social capital are also considered as an important condition of employability enhancement and career success because it provides an individual with socio-emotional support and access to knowledge of participants of the network (Bozionelos, 2003, p. 41-66; Kram and Isabella, 1985; Marzec, 2015). However, according to managers of the examined healthcare entities their cooperation with other organizations and their employees is mostly limited (7 persons). Simultaneously respondents mostly expressed opinions that such contacts enhance employability (9 persons) because, as one of the managers stated “it forces employees to expand their professional contacts, what can improve their situation on the labour market”.

Next, features of employees which determine their employability in organizations of the healthcare sector were examined. According to respondents, key characteristics influencing internal employability in their organizations were professional knowledge and skills (8 persons). Some interviewees also pointed at commitment and motivation (3 persons) as well as willingness to learn (1 person), teamwork skills (1 person) and willingness to face new challenges (1 person). The individual features which in the opinions of the respondents generally decide on employee’s ability to deal with the situation on the labour market in this sector included professional knowledge and

education (7 persons), adaptability (3 persons) and self-reliance (3 persons). Subsequently, other features mentioned by respondents encompassed specialization (2 persons), reliability (1 person), availability (1 person), ability to deal with stress (1 person), conscientiousness (1 person).

Despite the fact that generally professional knowledge and skills were considered as the most important factor of employability in healthcare organizations the importance of some specific generic competences was also examined in the carried out interviews. They showed that social competences were also important factors which, according to interviewees, decide about acquiring and maintaining a job in healthcare entities (9 persons). Particularly the importance of communications skills was emphasized. Next, due to a special kind of activity of healthcare entities the significance of ethical competences of employees was often stressed (9 persons). Respondents also pointed at proactiveness as a competence which according them influences “first the ability to get job, and next a promotion” and brings benefits for an organization (11 persons). In the context of the specificity of work in healthcare entities, which requires high availability and high intrinsic commitment of medical staff and often leads to blurring boundaries between work and private life, the same respondents emphasized the importance of the ability to reach balance between work and home (10 persons), as one of the managers stated: “it is important that an employee does not bring private problems to work” because it positively influences work performance. Moreover, the dynamic pace of medical science knowledge increase results in the necessity of continuous learning to stay employable, thus in the opinion of all the interviewed managers the willingness to learn and develop is required from employees.

5. Discussion, research limitations and conclusions

The conducted interviews allowed to better understand the specificity of employability factors and competencies in the changing healthcare sector and to recognize key practices of its enhancement applied in the Polish healthcare entities. It has been found that the employees’ employability enhancement is an important concern of the management in the examined healthcare entities. On the other hand, activities undertaken in this area are rather limited and primarily focused on trainings. However, changes in employment relationships impose the necessity to search for such methods of employees’ development that would better fit the needs of both Polish healthcare organizations and their employees in an unstable environment and also enhance their external employability. In this context the positive impact of professional networks, leadership and the quality of relationships between leaders and subordinates on employees’ development and their employability enhancement should be indicated.

The carried out interviews revealed that in the opinion of the respondents professional knowledge and skills are factors which mainly decide about employability of employees in the healthcare sector. However, also the significance of some generic competences was strongly stressed, i.e. ethical competencies, social competencies,

adaptability, willingness to learn and develop as well as the ability to reach balance between work and home.

The limitations of the study must also be discussed. First, further analyses should be conducted to obtain a complete picture of the specific employees' employability competences in the healthcare sector and their significance should also be deeper examined in future quantitative research. Also other predictors of employability should be identified. Moreover, the impact of key macroeconomic factors such as the situation on the labour market and demand for medical staff should be deeper analyzed. Next, the results of employability enhancement for organizations and employees need to be examined.

Summarizing, by providing some insight into the factors determining employability of employees and the employability policy of Polish healthcare entities, this study has intended to contribute to theory building on employees' developmental practices in the healthcare sector. Assuming that people and their competences are the most important capital of healthcare organizations, taking care of employees' employability acquires crucial importance in Polish healthcare entities and should become an inherent element of HRM policy.

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