

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: CONTEMPORARY THEORIES AND PRACTICES

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Abstract: Starting from the premise of an effective communication, this paper aims to analyze the communication management of public authorities in Anina in an attempt to transform the town. It identifies both the degree of satisfaction of the citizens of Anina regarding the quality of public services provided by the Anina Town Hall and the level of citizens' trust in local public authorities. The study's conclusion shows that respondents are satisfied with the quality of public services offered by the Anina Town Hall and have trust in local authorities, indicating that there is interest on the part of the authorities to manage public service departments and to engage in the economic and social revitalization of the town.

Keywords: communication, management, governance, public authority, citizens

1. Introduction

Communication, as a process, is in a constant state of change due to the dynamics it is subjected to, and it is found in all activities undertaken by institutions, organizations, and individuals, enabling the creation of connections between them [8].

The efficient coordination of actions within public institutions depends on communication. Based on a communicational core, the public relations system facilitates effective communication with citizens and promotes responsible governance [3]. In this regard, the efficiency of public institutions is defined by the proper use of communication processes and adherence to the legal framework that ensures access to information for all citizens. Moreover, public relations support the decision-making process and the much more efficient functioning of our complex and pluralistic society, being an essence of communication management.

In a continuous changing society, the demands of communities and citizens have evolved, influenced by technological advancement and access to information. This evolution has led to a shift from a closed governance model to an open one, involving the import of practices, techniques, and tools from the private sector into the realm of public administration and, in a much more pronounced manner, the need for communication. The aim of this transformation is to improve public management and ensure the effective and transparent satisfaction of public needs and interests.

A relationship between the two concepts can be identified if we correlate and contextualize the aspects that characterize communication and public administration. Thus, public administration, by its very

nature, depends on communication. On the one hand public communication targets the relationship between authorities and citizens, ensuring transparency and access to relevant information for the public. On the other hand, institutional communication focuses on strengthening the image and relationships with various stakeholders. Communication contributes to the development of an open paradigm in public management by facilitating dialogue and the exchange of information between institutions and citizens [6].

The sociological survey conducted in this study, applied through a quantitative method, as well as an interview with a local public Authority, reflects how the authorities of the Anina Town Hall, through communication, transparency, and involvement, manage, or fail to manage, to revitalize the town economically and socially, all of which are reflected in the satisfaction level of the residents of Anina.

Since 1989, we can discuss about the economic decline of the town began, due to the restructuring in the mining industry. In 2006, the Anina mine was closed because of an explosion, in which seven people lost their lives and five others were injured. With the closure of the mine, other economic units that served it fell like dominoes, closing one after another.



Fig. 1. Jobs evolution in Anina between 1998-2010 [7].

The effects were harsh for the town, with citizens losing jobs and being forced to migrate to other regions of the country and abroad.

Tab. 1. Comparison of the census within Anina between 2021-2011 [5].

2021	2011	increase/ decrease 2021- 2011
5521	7485	-1964

Currently, there are in Anina small companies that operate in various fields: wood processing, constructions, food industry–baking, textile industry, but they are insufficient to meet the high number of job requests. Nowadays, the economic and social situation of the town is precarious; the lack of jobs has led to a decrease in the standard of living of the population through the emergence of poverty and a decline in local budget revenues. Based on these premises, the research design aims to obtain information reflecting the opinions of Anina citizens regarding the quality of public services offered by the town hall and to identify their trust in local public administration.

2. Research Design

Scientific research as a process involves searching, obtaining, and collecting information, formulating ideas, and innovation within a chosen field of study [4]. By using a questionnaire in a sociological survey, we can obtain concrete data that evoke both social facts and the factors that determine them [1]. In parallel with the quantitative study, a local public authority, the deputy mayor, was interviewed, as he is the most qualified to provide details on how the town acts in the process of economic and social recovery of the town.

The interview survey is a frequently used method in sociological research. The specific feature of the interview is verbal communication, containing questions and answers like a questionnaire, with the difference that in the case of the interview, information is obtained orally. Conversation is the fundamental element in the interview technique [2].

The proposed objectives and hypotheses for this research are:

Objective 1 – identifying the degree of satisfaction of the citizens of Anina regarding the quality of public services offered by the town hall.

Hypothesis 1 - if the public services (lighting, sanitation, road maintenance) offered by the town hall are of quality, then this leads to the satisfaction of citizens' needs, and they are pleased.

Objective 2 – evaluating the degree of professionalism of local public officials in the opinion of the town's residents. Hypothesis 2 – if local public officials fulfill their duties respecting the regulatory and ethical framework, demonstrating professionalism, then the citizen is

satisfied (e.g., if the clerk at the counter is polite and clear, taxpayers pay their taxes and duties on time).

Objective 3 – identifying the degree of citizens' trust in local public authorities.

Hypothesis 3 - if local public authorities seriously engage in the economic-social recovery of the town by implementing projects that generate jobs, then citizens will trust the authorities.

The questionnaire includes 17 questions: 2 demographic questions regarding the age and education of citizens, 2 open-ended questions allowing citizens to freely express their opinions, and 13 closed questions with multiple-choice answers, including two control questions.

The questions were designed to be easily understood by respondents and to meet the proposed objectives. The applied questionnaire aims to analyze the 17 questions which include:

- professionalism of public officials from the town hall;
- quality of public services;
- verbal and non-verbal communication of respondents with local public authorities;
- citizens' trust in the town hall;
- citizens' interest in projects carried out by local authorities.

The interview is semi-structured, and the investigation tool is the interview guide that contains 7 questions. These questions are designed based on the percentage of responses from respondents, allowing a comparison of opinions.

This research has an exploratory, non-experimental character, aimed at analyzing the percentage results obtained from the application of the questionnaire. The sample was random, with the questionnaire introduced into the Google Forms application, distributed online through social media and email.

Questionnaires with discrepancies between the response to the control question and another targeted question were excluded from the study. For the first control question: "Are you confident that the projects initiated by the town hall will revive the town economically?", for those who chose the option "not confident", the response to the question "Do you trust the town hall authorities?" was checked, and if the response was *yes*, existing a discrepancy, the questionnaire was eliminated from the study. The second control question: "Do you believe that local authorities are involved in the revival and development of the town from a mining area to a tourist area?", for those who chose the option "not at all", the response to the same question "Do you trust the town hall authorities?" was checked, and if the response was *yes*, again presenting a discrepancy, the questionnaire was eliminated from the study.

Personal data (phone numbers, email addresses of respondents) were monitored by checking in the data collection list, which was removed from the study after the questionnaire was closed to prevent any errors and to

ensure that the questionnaire was not distributed to a person twice.

61 respondents participated in the study, but 4 were eliminated according to the research limit, resulting a total of 57 respondents .

In terms of the age of the respondents it is noted that equally 38.6% are people between 35-55 years, and over 56 years. 15.8% are people aged 25-35 years, and 7% of them are between 18-25 years.

Regarding educational level, the sample distribution highlights that 45.6% of respondents have high school education, 31.6% have postgraduate studies, 8.8% have a master's degree, 5.3% have secondary and doctoral studies, and 3.4% have university studies.

3. Research Results

If we analyze the results of the questionnaire we can observe that a large percentage of 68.45% of respondents rarely use the public services offered by the town hall (likely once a year when they access the tax and duties department), 24.6% very rarely, 5.3% often, and 1.7% very often (probably those who access social services). Another reason that respondents rarely use local public services may be that they pay taxes and duties online.

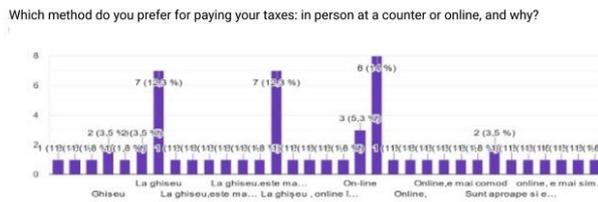


Fig. 2. Respondents’ options regarding the method of tax payment (Source: Authors).

Tab. 2. Number of respondents distributed by percentages.

Options	Number of respondents	Percentage value
On site	31	54,4%
online	26	45,6%
Total - 2	Total - 57	Total- 100%

An important aspect in providing quality public service also involves ensuring the environment within the institution (cleanliness, posters with working hours, indicators, seats in the waiting room, toilets).

When these aspects are implemented, citizens can easily find their way within the institution when they come to resolve an issue, the environmental setting providing them with a sense of comfort and security.

Regarding the interior aspect of the town hall, respondents’ assessments are varied; 61.4% consider it very well-maintained, while 33.3% consider it less well-maintained, and only 5.3% consider it poorly maintained.

Regarding the quality of street lighting, the answers are relatively positive, as we can see a large percentage (45.6%) of respondents who believe that street lighting is *good, very good* (26.3%), *satisfactory* (21.1%), and only a small percentage (7%) consider it *unsatisfactory*.

Moreover, 32 respondents (43.9%) consider that the roads are *good*, 25 (56.1%) *not good at all*, while the option "*very good*" was not chosen by respondents. This dissatisfaction is likely due to the fact that local public authorities have not managed to implement projects that fully cover the rehabilitation of all roads in the town.

Regarding the public sanitation service (water – sewage, waste collection), most respondents (43.9%) opted for the *satisfactory* option, 38.6% for the *good* option, and only 15.8% for *unsatisfactory*.

In the context of the first hypothesis, the total percentage regarding the satisfaction level of respondents will be calculated based on their satisfaction level (*good, very good, well-maintained*) and dissatisfaction level (*satisfactory, unsatisfactory, poorly maintained, less well-maintained, not good*).

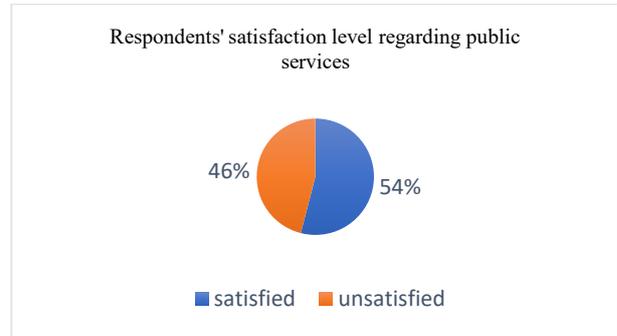


Fig. 3. Respondents' satisfaction level regarding public services.

From the figure above, we can say that the first hypothesis is confirmed, as we see that 54% of respondents are satisfied with the quality of public services offered by the town hall, indicating that local authorities are involved in managing public services that serve the interests and satisfaction of the town’s citizens.

However, a significant percentage (46%) of respondents are dissatisfied with the quality of public services. To find out the reasons for the respondents' dissatisfaction, an interview was conducted with a local public authority, the deputy mayor with responsibilities equivalent to that of the mayor of the locality.

Question: Are you aware of the citizens' dissatisfaction regarding the quality of public roads in the town? If so, how have you managed these issues, and what have you done in this regard?

Answer: Indeed, there have been complaints from citizens in certain neighborhoods regarding road conditions. Through the projects developed by us as an institution, we have managed to pave a large part of the town's streets. Problems began when the town underwent sewage works, a project implemented at the county level.

Due to issues within the construction company, work was halted for a period, leading to dissatisfaction among citizens. We, as an institution, have reported this to specialized institutions and assured citizens that we will proceed with the paving of the streets when the sewage work is completed.

Thus, we can note that the first hypothesis is confirmed; local authorities are involved in managing local public services, as evidenced by the satisfaction percentage (54%) of respondents. The fact that 46% of respondents are dissatisfied does not stem from a lack of interest from authorities but rather from unforeseen events that occurred along the way.

For the second hypothesis, the total percentage regarding the satisfaction level of respondents concerning the professionalism of local public officials will be calculated based on the satisfaction level (with kindness, professional, satisfied, very satisfied) and dissatisfaction level (with less kindness, without kindness, less satisfied, dissatisfied, less professional, unprofessional).

Regarding communication between respondents and officials, we observe that 78.9% state that they respond with kindness, 15.8% with less kindness, and only a small percentage (5.3%) without kindness.

Most respondents (66.7%) consider that local public officials are professional, 26.3% less professional, and 7% are unprofessional.

We note that the satisfaction level of respondents regarding the activity of local officials, which reflects their professionalism, shows that 47.4% are satisfied, 8.85% are very satisfied, 38.6% are less satisfied, and 5.3% are dissatisfied.

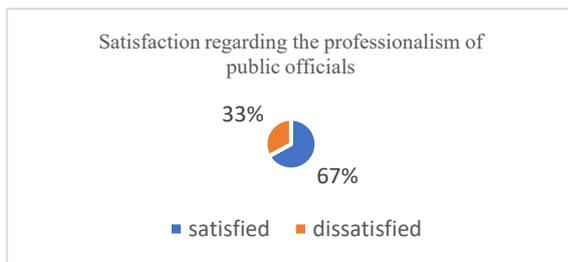


Fig. 4. Satisfaction level regarding the professionalism of officials.

The second hypothesis is confirmed, as we see from the above figure that 67% of respondents are satisfied with the professionalism shown by public officials in performing their duties, while 33% are dissatisfied. Among the factors that could turn a public official into an unprofessional person we can include a high volume of work because insufficient personnel, which can make the official unable to perform his/her duties, as well as a lack of training courses in the field.

If we talk about the authorities' involvement in the revitalization of the town, most respondents (61.4%) believe that local authorities are only slightly involved in the town's revitalization, with 28.1% saying they are largely involved, and 10.1% claiming there is no

involvement at all. This indicates that a large percentage of respondents are dissatisfied with the authorities' involvement in the town's revitalization.

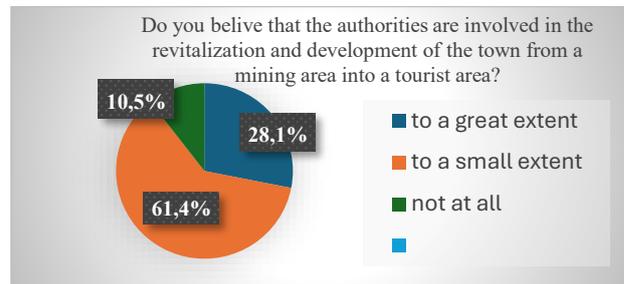


Fig. 5. Authorities' involvement in the revitalization of the town.

Nevertheless, according to respondents, the town has potential; 57.9% are confident, with 7% being very confident, and 35.1% being skeptical. Hypothesis 3 is also confirmed, as we can see that 57.9% of respondents trust local authorities, indicating that they are involved in the economic and social recovery of the town. However, 42.1% do not trust them. To understand what might be causing this distrust, several questions were prepared for the deputy mayor.

Question: What do you think is the most effective solution to revive the town economically and socially?

Answer: The most viable solution for town is to transform it from an industrial-mining town into a tourist area. There is potential in this regard; we focus on what we have locally, specifically the Anina Mine, which will be transformed into a museum (a project currently underway, developed by the Anina Town Hall). A mountain biking trail will also be created, and we have other projects waiting for approval and execution. Through projects we managed to develop things in our town. There are still much to be done in the town, but this requires money and time; all projects need time for approval and development.

Question: Do you think that some citizens do not trust local authorities because, for a long time (since the mine closed), no investors have been attracted to the town?

Answer: Possibly, but I want to mention that we are involved in this regard. In the Ponor area, there will be started a new business that will hire 30 people. A supermarket is nearing completion, which will create jobs too.

Question: Do you think the town will become a tourist area after finishing the Mining Museum?

Answer: I strongly believe that this will happen; economic agents will invest in tourism (motels, recreational parks, terraces), which will generate jobs and financial stability for citizens. As local authorities, we hope things will start moving relatively soon.

We can conclude in this hypothesis that the town's citizens are still optimistic and have trust in the authorities. Yet, distrust is still present because since the closing of mine in 2006, things were not as they expected.

Thus, we note that respondents' opinions regarding the quality of public services, the professionalism of local officials, and their trust in authorities are varied. Fifty-four percent of respondents are satisfied with the quality of public services, 67% are satisfied with the professionalism of officials, and 57.9% trust local authorities. Conversely, 46% of respondents are dissatisfied with the quality of public services, 33% with the professionalism of officials, and 42.1% do not trust the authorities.

These percentages reflect the extent to which authorities are involved in managing the town through all specialized departments. From the interview conducted with the deputy mayor, it appears that the authorities are engaged in everything related to the town's economic and social recovery, but there may be deficiencies that hinder the process. Therefore, the dissatisfaction percentages are very close in value to the satisfaction percentages, or the distrust percentages are close to the trust percentages.

Citizens' trust in authorities will increase when the process of transforming the town from a mining area to a tourist area gains momentum (creating jobs, increasing incomes that lead to better living conditions, and investing in the town).

4. Conclusions

All things considered, we observe that both from the specialized literature and from practice, communication is at the center of activities in different departments that are part of public administration.



Fig. 6. The role of communication in public administration.

Effective communication between these departments leads to their effectiveness, which is reflected in the degree of citizen satisfaction (satisfaction regarding the quality of public services and trust in authorities).

Ineffective communication in any department distorts the process, leading to difficulties in the functioning of other departments, and thus the objective of serving the citizen's interest is sometimes unachievable or delayed.

Based on the research methods used we may conclude that respondents are largely satisfied with the quality of public services provided by the Anina Town Hall and trust local authorities. This indicates that there is interest from authorities in managing public service departments and that they are involved in the economic and social recovery of the town.

As mentioned by the deputy mayor during the interview, the transformation of the town from a mining area to a tourist area is a process hindered by several factors (lack of funds, bureaucracy), which is reflected in the percentages of citizen dissatisfaction and distrust. However, through effective management of communication between authorities and the community, the process can be improved, thus strengthening citizen trust and facilitating the implementation of local development strategies. The most viable solution for the economic and social recovery of the town is to leverage the already existing heritage - Anina Mine.

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