

WORKPLACE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND USE OF ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE FROM A PILOT STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Workplace conflict is a common occurrence and if it is not managed, it can lead to dysfunctions in the public workplace. If it is managed effectively, it can increase the work productivity. This paper aims to explain anecdotally and through conflict analysis the dynamics of workplace conflict and conflict resolution in the experience of a sample of 38 public servants. The applied methodology is a pilot survey with open questions and interviews, followed by a multi-level conflict analysis. In most of the respondents' experiences, conflicts are either prevented through avoidance, or ended by a managerial verdict. The conflict analysis indicates the strong politization of the public workplaces and the use of informal conflict management. When the cause of conflict was continuous resource scarcity and perceived corruption, the conflict prologued over years. In the data collected, contract termination was not a consequence of workplace conflicts. Alternative Dispute Resolution practices such as mediation or conciliation were not employed formally. Practical implications and further research directions are suggested at the end of the article.

KEYWORDS: *alternative dispute resolution, public administration, workplace conflict, conflict management, decision-making*

INTRODUCTION

Workplace conflict is a universal occurrence. Individual workplace conflicts have been studied in recent years by researchers from the perspective of law (Secula, 2020; Florian, 2019; Top, 2020), mediation (Țiclea, 2021; Lozneanu, 2023; Aurica, 2022; Secula, 2020), communication (Lilia, 2019), organizational and work psychology (Gaëtane, et al, 2019; Kuriakose, et al., 2019; Qiao, et al., 2023), team management (Zahlquist Lena, 2019), leadership (Elisavet & Sophia, 2020; Nguyen, et al., 2022; Wilkin & Belak, 2020), social media use (Abdul Hameed Pitafi, 2020) as well as from the point of view of public administration (Pecino, et al., 2019; Țiclea, 2021).

Studies on the causes of conflict range from lack of resources, poor communication, competition, abuse of power, comparison, and dissatisfaction over wages, to causes such as ambiguous reporting lines, unclear expectations, extreme regulation of behavior and subtle cultural differences (Arops & Beye, 1997).

Conflict is one of the costliest phenomena that takes place in an organization, which often goes unaccounted. (Mediation Training Institute at Eckerd College, 2016) In developed countries such as the US, UK, Australia, Switzerland, a widely used way of managing conflict in the workplace, to avoid staff turnover and take advantage of the constructive potential of conflict, is alternative dispute resolution (ADR), avoiding recourse to the courts. It has been shown that having ADR practices that

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are perceived as fair by employees increases satisfaction and decreases employee turnover (Van Gramberg, et al., 2020) and is also a cost reduction driver. (Ury, et al., 1988)

ADR's main methods are conciliation, mediation, negotiation, and arbitration. All these methods focus on giving all parties a voice, listening, and resolving the dispute either by helping the parties reach a resolution themselves or by awarding a verdict - only in the case of arbitration.

Romanian legislation supports and suggests the use of these methods to resolve conflicts in the workplace. With the publication of Law no. 213/2020, the clause of resolving possible disputes through conciliation can be introduced in the Individual Employment Contract (Țop, 2020) Also, the Social Dialogue Law no. 367/2022 replaced Law no. 62/2011 and art. 210 which stipulated that the resolution of labour disputes is expressly done through the Court, (Țiclea, 2021) and the Mediation Law no. 192/2006 allows the use of mediation for labour disputes.

Workplace conflict in public institutions

Studies on public institution workplaces have found that conflict is closely connected to work stress. A quantitative study of 1127 civil servants in Italy identified that workplace conflict predicts stress at work and that it had the highest contribution to explaining the phenomenon of occupational stress. (Di Pietro & Di Virgilio, 2014)

Significance of the study

In Romania there are approximately 1,289,405 public employees. Of these, 822,948 employees are working in the central public administration, and 466,457 employees work in local public administration. (Finance Ministry, 2023)

The purpose of this study is to explore mainly qualitatively, the manifestations of workplace conflict and the use of ADR in public institutions, from a conflict studies perspective. Its goal is to fill a gap in the literature, by providing a phenomenological, grounded-theory-rooted approach to observe conflict manifestations. ADR is linked to increased job satisfaction and improved performance. However, previous studies on mediation (Dumea, 2014) have showed that mediation was not used.

This study may serve as a 'conflict audit' (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2005) to begin the process of balancing the most prominent workplace issues, thereby contributing to public administration staff's well-being, encouraging more sustainable workplaces, and increasing organizational productivity. Even though grounded theory is largely used for theory-generation, it is also considered a suitable method for generating actionable knowledge (Akhavan, Jafari & Fathian, 2006) due to its focus on situational circumstances in social settings, through which practitioner-relevant understandings are discovered.

In the first part, the framework of ADR in Romanian public administration is provided. In the second part, the methodology used – embedded mixed-method strategy (Creswell, 2017) – is explained. In this study the qualitative method of the interview is the primary method, and the qualitative method of the survey is the secondary method. The third and fourth parts focus on the results and the discussions.

Alternative Dispute Resolution in Romanian Public Administration

Conflict at the workplace is governed by labor relations legislation. A distinction is made here between conflicts 'of' workplace (conflictele de muncă), which, according to Romanian legislation, take place between employers and employees, and conflicts at the workplace (conflictele la locul de muncă), which refer to conflicts between members of the staff, about professional subjects or at the physical workplace.

Workplace conflicts

In Romanian public administration, the main regulations governing conflicts at work and ethics are: Law no. 188/1999 on the Statute of Civil Servants republished with subsequent amendments and additions, as well as Law no. 7/2004 on the Code of Conduct for Civil Servants, republished with subsequent amendments and additions, Order of the President of the ANFP no. 4500/2008 on the transmission of data on compliance with the rules of conduct and implementation of disciplinary measures by civil servants; Government Decision no. 1344/2007 on the organisation of disciplinary

committees with subsequent amendments and additions, Order 946/2005 on the Code of Internal/Managerial Control in public entities as well as the Labour Code.

The generation of conflicts is regulated in Law No 7 of 2004 republished, the Code of Conduct for Civil Servants: Art. 8 (2) "In their work, civil servants are obliged to respect the freedom of opinions and not to be influenced by personal considerations or popularity. In expressing their opinions, civil servants must be conciliatory and avoid generating conflicts due to the exchange of opinions." (Official Gazette, 2007)

Amiable dispute resolution

For the purpose of amiable dispute resolution, public institutions are required to have an "ethics advisor (consilier de etică)." This is defined by Art. 20¹ of Law 50/2007: "(1) For the purpose of effective implementation of the provisions of this Code of Conduct, the heads of public authorities and institutions shall designate a public official, usually from the human resources department, for ethics counselling and monitoring compliance with the rules of conduct."

According to the work "Ethics and Integrity in Public Administration" of the National Agency of Civil Servants - ANFP, in Romania, compared to other countries, the ethics counsellor is also responsible for settling amiably possible conflicts that may occur between civil servants, acting as a mediator. (National Agency of Civil Servants, 2011)

Analysis

As a conclusion, public servants are required to abstain from generating conflicts. Wherever there are conflicts, the ethics advisor also has the responsibility of intervening to settle conflicts between staff members, amiably. Although ADR is not referred to specifically in the legislation, its most common forms, negotiation, conciliation, and mediation, are implied when the legislator advises that conflicts are resolved amiably and with the help of a third-party, even though they are not an external party.

State-of-the-art literature

Searching through academic databases, it can be observed that studies about the use of ADR in workplace disputes focus primarily on mediation and the private sector, and describe predominantly situations from the English-speaking world: US, Australia, UK. In one of the few studies from Romania, Dumea (2014), mediation is placed at the opposite end from sanctions, showing a duality in the perception of public staff. The study reports that the most used conflict management practice in public institutions is to instruct managers to act as 'mediators' and that most of the staff prefers that conflicts would be resolved between the parties or through internal mediation.

However, by requiring the manager to act as 'mediator', the role of a mediator cannot be fulfilled, as they are not 'a neutral third-party that supports the parties to find a solution'.

Christopher Moore's conflict resolution continuum

The distinction between various types of conflict resolution techniques is most comprehensibly represented by Moore (2014, p. 23), who draws a 'conflict continuum', distinguishing between all the main conflict resolution mechanisms by who takes the decision.

Table 2. Conflict management and resolution continuum (Moore, 2014, p. 23)

Private decision making by parties				Private 3 rd party decision-making		Legal authoritative 3 rd party decision-making		Extralegal coerced decision	
Conflict avoidance	Informal discussion	Negotiation	Mediation	Administrative decision	Arbitration	Judicial decision	Legislative decision	Non-violent action	Violent action

Increased coercion and likelihood of win-lose outcome →

Analysis

The provisions of the presented legislation indicate that in public administration, workplace conflict management is supported and regulated, having a strong disciplinary and ethical character. This is coherent with the character of public administration, as a focus on ethics constitutes a basic prerequisite for quality public services. In these institutions, problematic behaviors are considered unethical and can have negative consequences in terms of financial, reputation, loss of partners, and litigation. To avoid much of the confusion that can occur around the specialized terms of 'mediation', 'conflict', and 'alternative dispute resolution', Moore's continuum helps direct the attention to the heart of the problem: who takes the decision when a conflict occurs.

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research approach

Based on the literature review, there was a clarity that there was not sufficient existent data on workplace conflicts in the Romanian public administration, to be able to confidently build hypotheses. As such, we chose the concurrent embedded mixed-method strategy (Creswell, 2017).

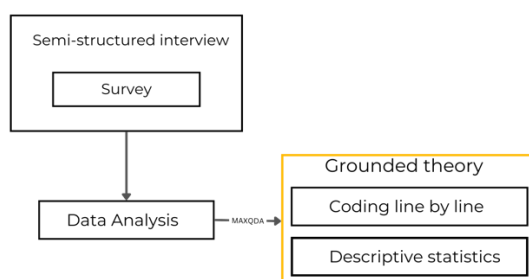


Figure 1. Research process diagram

In this mixed-method strategy, both qualitative and quantitative research methods are used, with the quantitative being 'nested' (nested) within the qualitative, meaning that greater weight is given to the qualitative method and results (Figure 1). Data were collected simultaneously. The research was conducted online, between December 2022 - May 2023.

1.2 The research questions

Based on the scientific literature, the following research questions have been investigated.

RQ1: How do public servants experience workplace conflict?

RQ2: Who takes the decision in conflict situations?

RQ3: What are the consequences of the conflict management practices?

To investigate these questions, the qualitative method guided the research, supported by the quantitative method. Each of them provided information at a different level about the same research questions. The quantitative data were interpreted using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data was analyzed using the coding software MAXQDA based on grounded theory. The integration of the results was executed in the discussion section.

1.3 Sampling

The sampling method was nonprobability or convenience sampling, in which "sample units are selected on the basis of personal judgment or convenience, the probability of a member of the population being selected being unknown." (Zikmund, 2007, p. 392) For this research we used the snowball method. In a first step, a few participants agreed to participate in the questionnaire interview. Afterwards, they provided recommendations - other people who could have responded.

1.4 The research instruments

For the quantitative data, the instrument was the closed and open-ended questions online survey. Although it has the advantage of convenience, the online survey has the disadvantage of a low response rate. The criteria for the selection of the results were: that the respondent was a public servant, and that the questionnaire was filled completely. Most of the questions also had open-ended fields, which were filled by most of the respondents. The questions used in the survey had been validated in the scientific literature by Ingwer & Cornelia, (2012), Van Gramberg, et al. (2020), Katz & Flynn, 2013.

For the qualitative data, the semi-structured interview method via videoconference was used. The researcher uses a guide to address the interview topics. The main questions allow the respondent to express him/herself freely and are open-ended. They serve as a guide to the interview. Investigative questions are intended to clarify and fill in missing details and ask for examples. Implication questions ask for the elaboration of an idea or concept. (Thietart, 1999) The interviews lasted 30-90 minutes. The content of the interviews was transcribed immediately.

1.5 Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) was introduced in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a method of qualitative data analysis. Its formal definition is - a general methodology of analysis and data collection that uses a set of systematically applied methods to generate an inductive theory. (Glaser, 1992, p. 16) It is considered particularly suitable for exploring relatively unexplored processes and generating new theories. The data was analyzed through constant comparison, memoing, coding and data analysis. Trends reflected from the data were carefully followed to discover theoretical insights from the data. Gupta, et al., (2000, p. 671) states that "grounded theory facilitates the generation of theories and processes, sequences and changes relating to organizations, positions and social interactions." Therefore, this study uses grounded theory to generate bottom-up research perspectives that can underpin organizational change. (Gupta, Iyer, & Aronson, 2000)

1.6 Data analysis

The qualitative results were coded manually using MAXQDA. The coding process is circular and generates a series of "basic categories" which, according to Glaser (2007, p. 14), appear automatically and easily. "Researchers tend to see their code category everywhere."

Selective coding is the next stage after open coding, as categories and their properties have been identified. Without pursuing new concepts, the researcher focuses on a basic category discovered. The researcher is constantly re-evaluating the data, focusing on themes (Scott and Howell, 2008) through memoirs, describing "at a theoretical level by conceptually rendering the material" (Glaser, 1978, p. 84) Completion of selective coding was achieved when the researcher considered that the core category included all features and subcategories that emerged in the data through open and selective coding. Theoretical coding is the secondary level of coding involves a new layer for "conceptualizing how substantive codes can relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory" (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). The relationship is identified based on comparisons of codes and data (Holton and Walsh, 2017).

2. RESULTS

a) Demographic and occupational characteristics

In the study distribution male-female has been approximately equal, with slightly more men than women. This is different from the study of Dumea (2014), which had 77% women in her study. However, the total number of respondents in that study was not indicated. The majority of the

respondents had graduated Masters and PhD studies. The most represented age group was 46-55 years old, followed by 26-35 years old.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Gender	Male	20
	Female	18
Level of education	Middle School	1
	High School	5
	Bachelors	5
	Masters	16
	PhD	10
	Post-doc	2
Age years old	18-35	10
	36-55	24
	56 and over	4

Source: Collected data

As shown in Figure 2, the majority of the respondents worked in the field of education, followed by public administration.

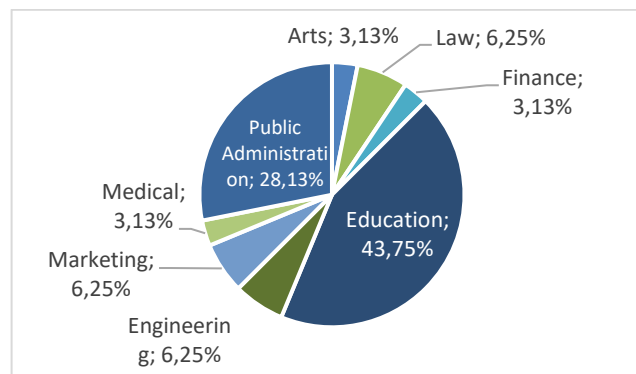


Figure 2. Answers to: In which field do you work?

b) Conflict occurrences

The majority of the respondents (66%) had experienced workplace conflict in the past 12 months, as shown in Figure 3.

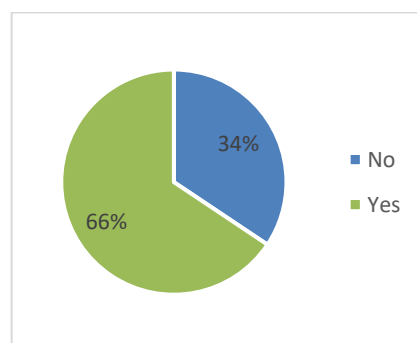


Figure 3. Answers to: Have you personally experienced workplace conflict in the past 12 months?

This is consistent with Dumea (2014)'s results, however, in her study the public servants also mentioned the frequency. For 75% of them, it was between 1-5 in the previous 12 months, as it can be seen in Figure 4.

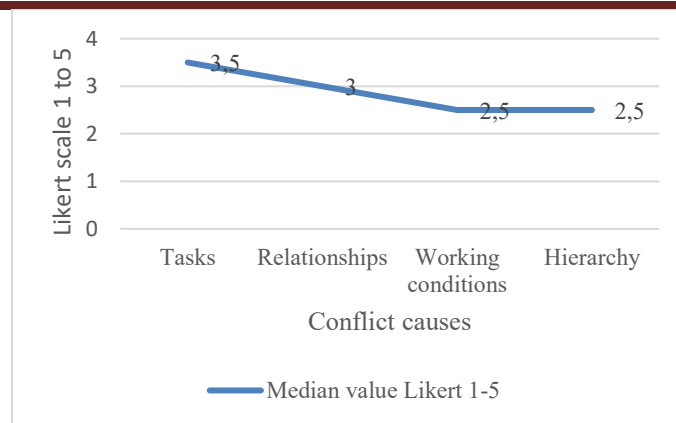


Figure 4. Answers to: *What is the majority of workplace conflicts in your institution about?*

The majority of the workplace conflicts are about work tasks, followed by relationships. In Dumea (2014)'s study, the main cause was the difficult communication (24%) and the differences of personality (19%). The difference may be also attributed to the fact that her study had 77% female respondents, who might be more aware about their need to communicate effectively.

c) Conflict behaviors and conflict management

As it can be seen in Figure 5, the main conflict behaviors on behalf of the employees are gossip and rumors and on behalf of the managers, the main behaviors are threats to get the employees to obey.

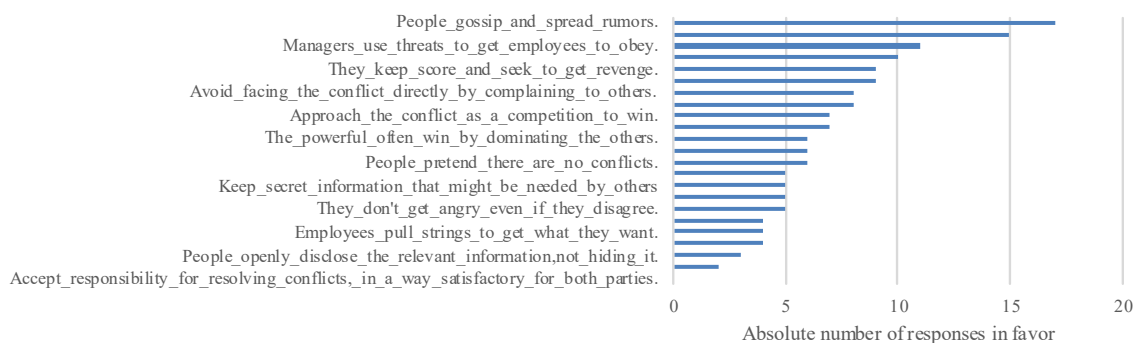


Figure 5. Answers to: *When there are conflicts at your workplace, how does the staff react most often? - Select all that apply.*

None of the respondents selected that people Accept responsibility for resolving conflicts in a way that is satisfactory for both parties. This is consistent with Dumea (2014)'s study, who found that 5% of the respondents saw mediation as detrimental to the managers' authority, namely to their ability to impose sanctions.

c) Conflict management and decision-making

When asked if the last conflict that they experienced was resolved, the majority of the respondents (31%) said that it was not resolved, with 22% of them stating that it was completely resolved, another 22% said that it was partially resolved, and 25% stated that they had not experienced any conflict (Figure 6). This is also consistent with Dumea (2014), who found that 75% of the respondents had experienced between 1-5 conflicts in the previous year.

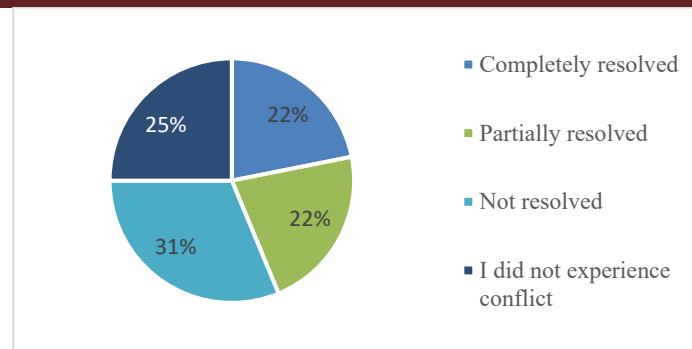


Figure 6. Answers to: *Was the last conflict you experienced resolved?*

When surveyed about how conflict situations are resolved (Figure 7), over 59% reported that the parties take the decision by themselves, 22% reported that the manager intervenes to end the conflict, and 19% reported that the conflicts end in another way. The number of people who reported that an external third-party intervenes was 0.

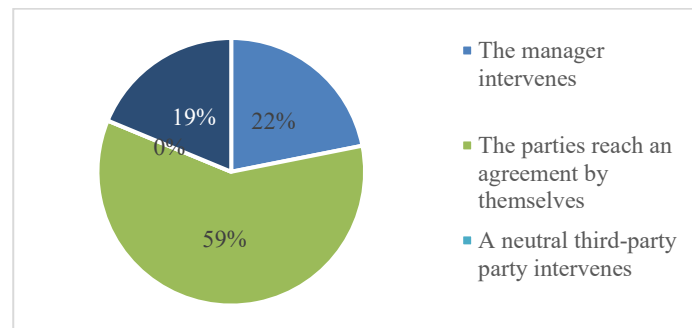


Figure 8. Answers to: *How are most workplace conflicts resolved in your institution?*

The respondents were also asked about their awareness of whether the institution where they worked had a designated person and process for conflict management. Almost half of them reported that the institution did not have (48%), with equal quarters selecting that it did have and that they did not know, respectively (Figure 8).

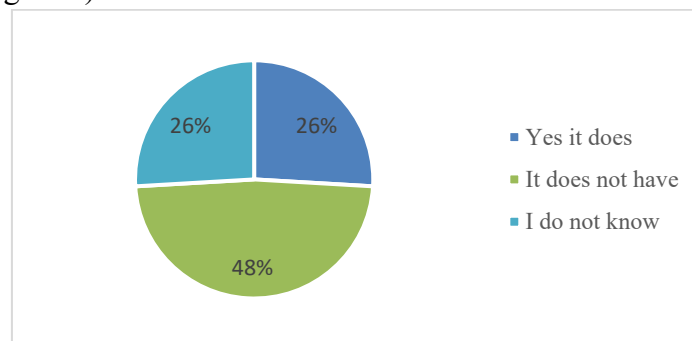


Figure 7. Answers to: *Does your institution have a designated person and/or a process for conflict management?*

When they were asked whether a person or process provided for conflict management by their institution should help the parties to decide themselves or to give a verdict/decision, the majority (87%) selected the first (Figure 10).

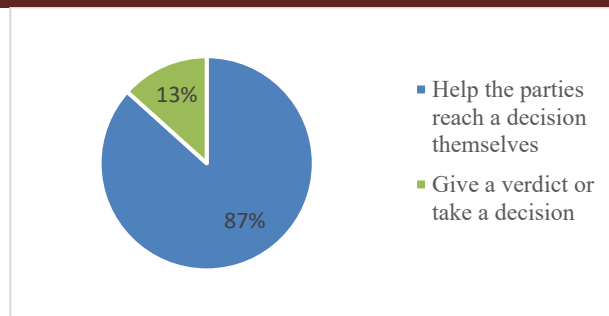


Figure 10. Answers to: *In your opinion, a person or process provided by your organization for conflict management should do which of the following?*

The qualitative data provided from the survey was analyzed in MAXQDA, together with the interview data. So far, from the quantitative results, the following conclusions could be drawn:

- The respondents, which were almost equally divided into men and women, were highly educated individuals, with over two thirds having graduated with Masters, PhD, and postdoctoral studies.
- A large majority of them worked in public education, followed by public services.
- The majority of them had experienced workplace conflicts in the past year, about tasks and about relationships. This is different Dumea (2014)'s study, where the majority of the respondents had been female (77%) and the main cause of conflict was reported to be 'difficult communication'.
- The most frequent manifestations of conflict were gossiping, rumors, threats from the managers, revenge, avoidance, and competitiveness. The least frequent conflict behavior was taking responsibility for finding a win-win solution (0), followed by openly disclosing information.
- Only 31% of the respondents said that their last conflict had been resolved. More than half of them (59%) stated that usually in their institution, the parties reach an agreement by themselves and that if their institution would provide a person or process for conflict management, its role should be to help the parties reach a decision themselves (87%).
- Almost half (48%) of the respondents reported that their institution did not have a person or process for conflict management.
- To conclude, it would seem that solutions that what the public servants are missing is empowerment for the parties to reach decisions by themselves, about tasks and relationships. Interestingly, in spite of the fact that the respondents reported that in their institutions people did not take responsibility for finding win-win solutions, they also selected that the parties find the solution themselves, in most cases.

Qualitative results

In addition to the qualitative answers from the open-ended questions of the survey, six interviews were taken with public servants: two top-minister managers, a middle-managers of a public enterprise, an HR manager of a public university, an employee from a public agency, an employee from a city hall, and an employee from a public domain management enterprise. They locations were Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca.

The qualitative results were analyzed using grounded theory principles and MAXQDA. All the data from the interview and from the open-ended questions were inserted.

Nine common themes were discovered in the qualitative datasets:

Theme groups	Quotes from the qualitative results
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(1) Performance pressure, (2) time pressure (3) slow pace of working, (4) overwork	• <i>"There is pressure in the sense that everything is urgent and needs to be done at the same time and you don't know how to prioritize it."</i> (Employee of public agency) • <i>"Suddenly I was informed on Monday morning by colleagues from the Ministry indirectly, through the Minister, that on Tuesday we will have a visit to the authority, a very important person from the Republic of Moldova. At the level of First Deputy Prime Minister on digitization, with the request to give him the opportunity to organize various workshops in our institution where they will present a little bit the problems or projects for which we are directly responsible. From this point, a conflict arose, because it forced me to shift my focus from the same day to the next day on the activities that I had."</i> (Top-level manager) • <i>"Others are desperate for work, running to the break and back from the break running and because of them, bosses stress us too."</i> (Survey) • <i>"There are conflicts between us and our managers over supply, let's say lack of infrastructure, not enough materials to work with. There are not enough office supplies in the field. The teams that go out on the field and don't always have what they need, something like that and the cars - the work cars are not adequate and usually those who use them come and complain that they are not adequate."</i> (Public enterprise employee)
(5) Participation in decision-making vs. (6) authoritarian decision-making	• <i>"They don't communicate with us, that they don't consult us, including the internal changes they make, they don't consult us and I think we would have something to add. I know that they know most of it too, but we are the ones who are most often confronted with these problems, and I think it would be good if they consulted us."</i> (Employee of public agency) • <i>"I would like more transparency, i.e. I would like to be informed first about what new changes are coming up and what projects the other directorates are doing that affect my work. [instead of finding out only when it becomes public information] (Employee of public agency)</i> • <i>"The last word, or rather the main word, is that "that's the way I want it". If I ask, "why did you do that or on what criteria did you send me to another sector or give them that salary?" - "That is how I wanted it."</i> (Employee of a public enterprise) • <i>"A colleague in our office wasn't liked by the bosses because she commented on everything and to be honest I kind of admire her because many of us don't have that strength and she complained "I can't"."</i> (Employee of public agency) • <i>"The ethics counsellor, as far as I understand if there are problems, [to] ask for advice. <<I've done this, I am liable for disciplinary investigation, how should I approach this situation so that - I don't know - either I get away with no sanction, or I am given a sanction as small as possible, like a written warning.>>" – public agency employee; Regarding a conflict in the workplace, the only available procedure would be to appeal to the Ethics Committee through a written complaint and automatically the Ethics Committee [...] determines what was done wrong and gives the final result."</i> (HR manager in a public university) • <i>"I was involved, there was more of a protest on my part against the decisions of our hierarchical superiors because first of all we were not consulted, and we did not agree with them and somehow I tried to draw attention to it in the sense that in the hope that maybe something would change. At that time I was called to say as a hierarchical level I think 3rd on the ladder from low to high so to speak above me, there is a head of department, a director and a general manager and I was called by the general manager into the office and somehow reprimanded so to speak but nicely in a diplomatic way with the threat that if you want more, it will</i>

	<i>go higher. Something like, you either want it this way, or you accept what you're told. In the end, somehow, I gave up, given that I don't think anything will change.</i>" (Employee of public agency) • <i>[I would like] not to bump into that no anymore, because at the moment I have the impression that no matter what I have to say, if I go to the manager for example, the answer is generally the same. I won't even get them to try or even hint that they would like to help me with a proposal. I think this employee-oriented management is missing in my opinion.</i> (Employee of public agency) • <i>"The bosses are vindictive, I think, and they're always attacking each other. When they catch, they attack. – public agency employee"</i> (Employee of public agency)
(7) In/existence of processes or (not) respecting processes	• <i>"[The superiors] didn't take any responsibility and I personally didn't like that. I was verbally ordered that in this situation, instead of having at least 3 people check the communication as required by procedure, somehow, I should answer directly without anyone checking and I should sign so that only my name would appear. It didn't seem right."</i> (Employee of public agency) • <i>"(First of all, I discuss the case, where it also needs a discharge - like I have tolerated, I have tried all the options, I don't see any other option, or I don't know what to do. And then we talk face to face, usually privately. One reason I often approach this is so that the parties don't influence each other, because when they're together, maybe they're more subjective or they don't say everything.</i> (HR manager from a public university) • <i>"- And if someone has a different idea from yours, how do you manage to reach a consensus? - By reading the text of the law again and understanding it better, maybe... Reading, rereading, interpreting the commas and everything. Basically, you have a procedure where you keep rereading and clarifying until everyone starts seeing pretty much the same thing [together with the direct superior, at eye level]."</i> (City hall employee) • <i>The role of the manager [...] is similar to the role of a sponge [...] you get a lot of information from above, which if you let it go in the same form, this information might become harmful. And then you have to filter it and create your own information. Here the role is to influence without damaging the message, so that the information conveyed becomes motivating and, moreover, acts as a catalyst.</i> (Middle manager in a large public enterprise)
(8) Unfair distribution of work and (9) comparison among employees with respect to work and pay.	• <i>"Colleagues who are in the same political party as the director are always paid preferential salaries. They always have the easiest, easiest job, they have time to go, they do political work during working hours, and they have the best salaries. [...] Yes, the conflicts at my workplace are very numerous, almost daily, mainly due to inadequate pay, which no longer follows a grid. It's a pay scale that is more in line with the general manager's wishes and this is why there are conflicts between colleagues. The manager pretty much does as he pleases. Who is the manager? A person appointed by the local council."</i> (Employee of a public enterprise) • <i>[Going to] HR no, because they are still the director's people, that's why they stayed in office. And they defend the interests of the director, not our interests</i> (Employee of a public enterprise)

Maps of code co-occurrence were obtained from the MAQDA analysis. In Figure 8, two code maps can be viewed. The thicker the black line, the strongest is the connection between the topic in the middle and the one at the periphery. The most peripheral instances are examples of content, but

they have been coded for confidentiality. “Qualitative summary” represents the qualitative results from the open-ended questions of the survey.

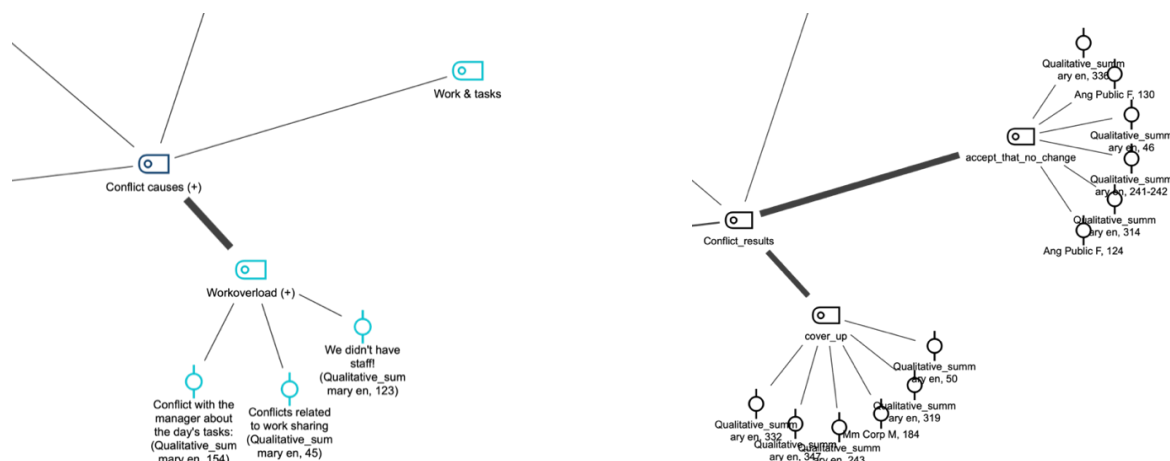


Figure 8. MAXQDA output code map, based on all the qualitative data (a) Work overload as main conflict cause, (b) Most conflict results: accepting that there is no change and cover-ups

As shown in the maps above, there is a strong connection between conflict causes and work overload, and the most common conflict results are ‘cover-up’, which means that people pretend that nothing happened, and the acceptance that nothing will change. Similar maps were created for multiple other codes, in order to explore the connections between them. The results are presented in the form of statements, in the discussions section.

3. DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Analysis of the results

Studying the dynamics of workplace relations from the experience of public servants is an important endeavor. Firstly, due to the fact that there are over one million public servants in Romania. Secondly, because they are under scrutiny by the citizens, who expect high performance from the public apparatus. And thirdly because there is a scarcity of studies in Romania about this topic. The present study’s objective was to collect grassroots information that may be the key to unlock organizational change. However, this study is only the beginning of a larger research endeavor, and therefore should be taken as pilot research, meant to shape future approaches.

The study started with three research questions. As seen in Table 3, each one of the questions has some themes that have proven meaningful in relation to it. The first question inquired about conflict processes and experiences. The second question referred to the decision that resolves the conflict. And the third question refers to the consequences and implicitly to the efficacy of the chosen method.

Table 3. Research questions and the main themes found in the qualitative data

1	RQ1: How do public servants experience workplace conflict?	Belonging and exclusion, social loafing, productivity pressure and lack of resources, politization, information and secrecy, institutional memory, favoritism, corruption, lack of trust, lack of processes, lack of transparency
2	RQ2: Who takes the decision in conflict situations?	Superiors, autocratic decisions, threats, disciplinary action
3	RQ3: What are the consequences of the conflict management practices?	Submission, silent quitting, favoritism, corruption, daily reminders, dissatisfaction, antagonism between superiors, retaliation, tolerating misbehavior

In grounded theory analysis, more theoretical context can be added at the interpretation stage. Thus, for analyzing the results, the following definitions and comparative theoretical points are provided:

- Social loafing comes from social psychology and indicates the tendency of people to put less effort when they work in groups. Social laziness does not occur so much when people believe they make a unique contribution, when they have a lot of knowledge on the subject and when they see their own contribution as identifiable. (Simms & Nichols, 2014)
- Politization in organizations refers to: "activities that are not required as part of a formal role in an organization, but influence or attempt to influence the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within the organization." (Robbins, 2005, p.157) These actions are not part of the job description. The political perspective can explain many irrational behaviors in the organization.

By analyzing the experience of the respondents and their commonalities, through various tools and maps of co-occurrence the following statements resulted:

1. Statements about the conflict process:
 - a) Belonging to a group is important in the public workplace, since politically appointed superiors treat staff according to alliances.
 - b) Social loafing is a cause and effect of conflict since some employees rely on others to do their work, due to silent quitting and favoritisms.
 - c) Productivity pressure is one of the main causes of conflict, due to the insufficient resources and to the focus of some individuals on the politization of the workplace. This is consistent with van den Broeck et al. (2008) who showed that there is a connection between job resources and engagement. (Breaugh, 2020)
 - d) Information and secrecy are currencies in the public workplace, with some employees purposefully withholding information, in order to make themselves irreplaceable.
 - e) Lack of information is a cause of conflict when the people directly affected by it, find out the last.
 - f) The strongest employees are the ones that have been in the same department the longest, because they have the benefit of 'institutional memory', which transcends present situations.
 - g) Favoritism and corruption are a cause of conflict since some superiors delegate the easier tasks to their sympathizers.
 - h) There is a lack of trust in the HR department and in the institutional processes for resolving conflicts, due to the impression that they are all corrupt. However, in the scientific literature, HR is still considered as the main department responsible to diminish destructive and deviant behavior in the public workplace. (Malik & Lenka, 2020)
 - i) From the perspective of HR, conflicts can be resolved by talking them through internally.
2. Statements about decision-making:
 - j) Superiors take the decision in the majority of conflicts, without consulting the staff.
 - k) When there is disagreement, the superior has the last word.
 - l) When the decision is not followed or there are 'comments', the superior might threaten the employee. This may in fact encourage corruption, according to Potipiroon & Wongpreedee (2020), who show that there is a direct link between perceived psychological safety and ethical climate, since the authors consider it critical for public employees to feel safe enough, in order to expose organizational wrongdoings when they occur. In other words, fearful public servants do not expose corruption.
 - m) The ethics counselor and ethics commission are considered disciplinary tools of the institution.
 - n) A more inclusive decision-making process may occur when the superior and the subordinates have a common 'enemy' or challenger, e.g., a new law change needs to be agreed upon.
 - o) The middle-manager acts as a buffer and diplomat between top-management and the employees.

3. Statements about consequences of conflict:

- p) The staff perceives that it is mandatory to submit to orders, otherwise they might lose their job. This diminishes the ‘public service motivation’, which is the servant’s desire to do good for others and society and which would make them feel more involved and productive. However, this motivation is strongly linked to psychological safety, therefore diminishing in conditions of threat. (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2020)
- q) Performing the job at the minimum is a common form of accommodating conflict. This is consistent with the findings of Breugh (2020) who found that the satisfaction of basic needs, i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness is directly related to engagement, which is related to productivity. (Breugh, 2020)
- r) Favoritism and corruption are persistent realities in the public workers’ experience.
- s) When the cause of conflict persists, the employees remind their colleagues daily about their dissatisfaction.
- t) Employees fear retaliation from superiors and falling in the middle of antagonistic attitudes which take place between superiors.

The importance of studying conflict comes from its connection to engagement. This study shows that authoritarian conflict management practices diminish engagement and raise frustration, which, according to Zahari & Kaliannan (2022), decrease proactiveness and commitment towards organizational goals. These factors are crucial for the government apparatus’ ability to respond to crises and to organize the state and its territory. Moreover, public servants are one of the interfaces of the State in front of the citizens, alongside their political representatives. A more involved and motivated public workforce would improve the perception of the State and would save resources, while elevating the quality of life. In the next section, a graphical representation of the conflict causes and dynamics is presented, to facilitate a deeper understanding of the discoveries and to provide a starting point for more extensive studies and interventions.

3.2 Multi level conflict model

In order to connect the statements and to reach a higher level of abstractisation using grounded theory, based on the analyzed qualitative content and the generated sentences, the following conflict process model was created (Figure 9). On the left side, the flow of information and decisions is represented. The blue circle represents the external environment (political, economic, technology, etc.), in which the institution exists. The green and orange shapes represent the institution.

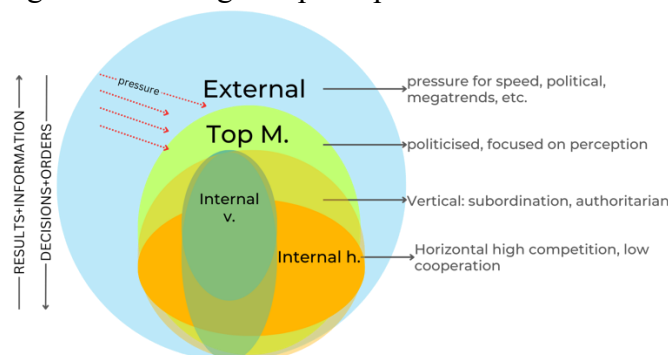


Figure 9. Multi-level conflict model

Source: Analyzed data

The graphic can be described by the following statements, which synthesize the information it contains:

1. Whenever decisions and orders come only from the top-down, and results and information are shared only from the bottom-up, conflicts will emerge.

2. Once conflicts emerge, if external forces pressure the institution, and the top management is focused mainly on self-perception, inside the organization the tendency is to solve conflicts by authoritarian decision-making (vertical) and by competition (horizontal).

The first sentence refers to the cause of conflict and the second sentence refers to the process of conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore what were the manifestations of public workplace conflict from the grassroots level, in Romanian public institutions, in order to fill a gap in the literature and to give an impetus to practitioners by generating actionable knowledge about.

The three research questions were answered as follows. To the first question, RQ1: How do public servants experience workplace conflict?, the answer was that the most frequent means of expressing conflict are gossip and threats. The multiple conflict causes and behaviors have been explained at length. The majority of them revolve around workload and resources, with corruption and politization being another main cause.

To the second question, RQ2: Who takes the decision in conflict situations? the most common answer is that the manager gets involved and usually decides. On Moore's conflict resolution continuum, presented at the beginning, this conflict resolution method is on the right half, that of win-lose outcomes. ADR methods are not employed. The Ethics counselor or committee function largely as punitive mechanisms. As a consequence (RQ3: What are the consequences of the conflict management practices?), there are inefficiencies resulting from conflicts that were not resolved. Some of these are social loafing, silent quitting, rebuttals, and repetitive discussions, transforming the workplace into an unproductive environment. From the quantitative study, the most important findings were that the majority of employees were not aware of the existence of any formal conflict management person or process. From the qualitative study, there were many results that might be used to inform further studies, particularly since they were consistent with the literature.

By interpreting the results using grounded theory, a conflict process model was created. This model is consistent with the state-of-the-art conflict models that consider external forces (Sørensen, et al., 2011; Medler, Fitzgerald, & Magerko, 2008), but it is customized, since it arose from the data gathered, put in the context of the research literature.

The conflict model acts as a 'conflict audit' tool and informs possible in-depth research or action design research interventions. The key to the model is the flow of information versus the flow of decision. In a 'healthy' organization, information and decisions would flow in both ways. However, in the experiences of the respondents, they were either on one side or the other of the graphic. From the subordinates, information and results is expected, while as from the superiors, decisions and orders or demands are sent. Middle managers may act as buffers between these two seemingly disconnected zones. As the external forces pressure this system, dysfunctionalities become more acute and unproductive behaviors become chronic. The superiors are increasingly worried about how they are perceived, and the subordinates are increasingly concerned that they may become dispensable. The only exception to this type of experience was an employee who had periodic discussions at eye-level with their direct superior, to decide together how to solve a disagreement. As such: autonomy, eye-level discussions, and participation seem to be keys in mitigating conflicts.

Future research

Future research directions may be: a quantitative study in order to verify the sentences as hypotheses, a qualitative study in specific departments and institutions, action design research or participative action design, whereas an intervention would be implemented and the results would be assessed, qualitative study to assess the public managers' perception of the conflict model and a qualitative study of decision-making in conflict situations, in city halls in a smaller area, for representativeness.

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