

EXPERIENCES FROM AN IMPLEMENTATION OF A NEW CIVIL SERVANTS TRAINING SYSTEM IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC - COUNTRY STUDY

Ivan Malý¹

Abstract

There has been adopted a new legislation establishing the first real public servants training system in the Czech Republic. The author is a member of Accreditation Commission of the Czech Ministry of Interior - it is quality-assuring body in the system - and he shares his experience from the first steps of its implementation. It is a difficult process suffering from many obstacles, lack of experience, antagonistic interests of different power groups, and resource scarcity, indeed. However, it seems to be a promising attempt to increase an overall capacity, working skills, and the quality of the public administration in the country.

The first part of the paper presents a description of the new training system. There are several levels of training – introductory, continuous, etc. A training scheme for executives is perhaps the most interesting part of the system. The second part of the paper confronts differences in a design of current programmes available for the Czech executive public servants.

The final part presents a critical assessment of the current stage of implementation. There are three main areas of shortcomings: capacity of trainers, quality of programmes, and lack of financial resources.

Introduction

Civil servants' education and training have been declared one of recent public administration reform's pillars in the Czech Republic. The basic idea is quite simple – to use the training in order to achieve an increase of the overall capacity, working skills, and the quality of the public administration in the country. There is clearly a kind of a pay off situation here: public officials are obliged to take part in a regular and ongoing training activities, their reward is going to be (hopefully) a higher social status, better image, and potentially higher salaries in a long run.

Conceiving the key legislation the Czech government decided to split whole agenda onto two separate parts (see Government decree no. 349/2001) under the supervision of two institutions: Government Office and the Ministry of Interior. Former is in charge of education and training for officials from the supreme state administration offices (ministries), the later is responsible for the **training system for officials of territorial self-government bodies**.

This article is addressed on a **training system for officials of territorial self-government bodies**. A special legislation was adopted in 2002 in order to build up a comprehensive system of education and training for this large group. Since there are tens of thousand eligible officials, one can imagine how it is complex and difficult to implement this legislation. Building up proper capacities for training, and assuring the quality of training programmes, these have been two major issues...

1. Training for Territorial (regional and local) Self-Government Bodies' Officials

The new system was adopted by the act no. 312/2002 Sb. It is based on these principles:

¹ Ivan Malý, associated professor, School of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic. ivan@econ.muni.cz

- To conduct some training is a compulsory part of a job of the public official. Each one has to have a special individual qualification plan; this plan covers 3-year period - 18 working days can be devoted to the training as the maximum during this period;
- The training is a never-ending activity. There is a certain number of working hours devoted to the training;
- In order to fulfil the legal requirement, regional and local authorities are supposed either to provide an accredited programme to their officials or to purchase it at the competing market of accredited programmes;
- Accreditation process is the most important quality control tool. Institutions offering any programme to public administration authorities as well as programmes themselves are subjects of approval (accreditation) of a Ministry of Interior and its special Accreditation Commission. Each provider has to pass successfully a process of accreditation; each programme has to be accredited.
- The minister appoints members of Accreditation Commission. They have usually an academic background or they represent territorial self-government bodies.

There are four special types of training programmes:

1. **Entrance Training** for new employees (§ 19, Act no.312/2002 Sb.); the content as well as the volume of such programmes are more or less standardized now as a result of the Ministry's policy. The aim is to provide a basic orientation in the role of the specific public administration authority.... It consists from:
 - a. Basic knowledge of public administration, general principles of organization and operation of public administration;
 - b. Essential principles of Czech administrative law and European administrative law;
 - c. Essential principles of the public finance;
 - d. Specification of rights and obligations of an officer (Ethics Codex included);
 - e. Elementary skills and habits necessary for an exercise of a specific administrative activities;
 - f. Handling with necessary communication technologies;
 - g. Communication, organization and other skills necessary for the officer's position;
 - h. Organizational instructions of a particular office (statute, rules of organization, safety regulations).
2. **Continuous Training** (§ 20, Act no.312/2002 Sb.) – a wide variety of different specialized and updating courses. The decision about the participation in such continuous training is on the head officer authority according to the needs of an office and in compliance with a plan of education. There is implemented also so called updating training according to the government priorities for subsequent period – for example the training concerning the EU (structural funds and regional policy, projects of

EU etc.), problems of corruption in public administration, etc. There are no examinations. Each training institution issues a certificate approving the participation of an official.

3. **Special Professional Abilities (ZOZ)** (§ 21, Act no. 312/2002 Sb.) courses finished by special examination are required for all officials dealing independently with some administration agendas;
4. **Training for executive officials** (§ 27 Act no. 312/2002 Sb) – it has to be completed in following four years by each official leading any other subordinates... The target group of this level is represented by head of departments, divisions and their deputies. Into this group there are newly placed also the heads of offices. This training contains two groups of modules:
 - Modules of theory and practices of management of public administration (General part);
 - Modules from the area of administrative activities of subordinate officers (Special part).

This legal definition of the training content is very wide indeed. The key issues are the quality assurance, relevance of the content, and the balance of different topics here. Available training courses have to offer at least comparable product of the same kind, since the required skills of executive officials are the same everywhere. Some typical issues and troubles are discussed in the following section.

2. Design of Training Programmes – Dilemmas and Dangers

There was a widespread belief the general level of managerial skills of executive officers was rather low in the country. Quite a lot of executive officers in the territorial self-government bodies had no training or education in management at all. It seemed to be a clear obstacle in the process of turning the public administration towards a professional public service. The need for *some* training was unquestionable. **The point was how this training should look like, what is supposed to be a proper content and how to define it.** We believe this discussion in the Czech Republic may be relevant and familiar in some other countries too, since these questions are universal in our global world... We do not claim we are presenting right answers. The whole training system is just on its beginning and there has not been time enough for a proper evaluation of outcomes. (First executive officials have started to attend courses last year.) Regardless the limitations we feel we can still formulate some lessons from the Czech experience. There are major questions occurred during the implementation of the system:

1. Do executive officials really need managerial skills? Are these skills the same like in the business? Are they completely different?
2. Where is the proper balance between universal and special knowledge?
3. Should the training bring more skills that are practical for officials or should they learn there more about the theory?
4. Is there any reason for a definition of any standard? Suppose it is, which subjects and topics are essential? Training programmes are inevitably restricted in terms of time. How much time should providers have for a programme anyway?

2.1 Universal managerial skills?

This issue was not just a matter of academic discussions. As a background, there was a deep concern of many well-experienced senior officers and some academic experts. They were afraid of a massive attack of quite flexible, unscrupulous, and profit maximizing private consulting and training companies with zero experience with the public administration on a brand new market. They pointed at many specifics of the public administration including non-profit character, highly formalized structures and rules, specific relation between elected decision makers and bureaucrats, etc. Moreover, they emphasized the need for well-experienced lecturers and tutors familiar with practical and relevant applications. (Our first experiences from the training seem to confirm this preliminary concern. Participants often express some scepticism concerning their chances for applying modern managerial principles in their everyday job. This is clearly neither a surprise nor evidence ...)

The Ministry finally accepted sort of a “carefully balanced block” approach, requiring the provision of all modules in one programme. Cream skimming is not possible. The first (general) part of the training consists from the following modules (some marginal differences are possible):

1. Introduction to management in the public administration
2. Setting objectives, planning, organization, control
3. Regional and municipal policy
4. Projects in the public sector (a design, implementation, and evaluation...)
5. Public relations, lobbying, marketing
6. Leadership, teambuilding, communication, motivation
7. Information management
8. EU regional policy

2.2 Universal vs. special?

Setting up a balance between universal and special knowledge has not completed yet. It is a very relevant issue mainly with respect to the second (special) part of executive officials training. Modules here cover the areas of specific administrative activities of subordinate officers. Each of subordinate officers is qualified for his/her position by passing the Special Professional Abilities examination. An executive officer does not need to have the same extend of knowledge from all potential areas incorporated to his/her department. Besides, it is hardly possible...

A universal orientation is preferred one here. There is an idea here, that each officer can easily follow up his training with another programme from the group of “continuous training” within his/her personal training plan later on.

2.3 Practical vs. theoretical?

Asking participant of the most training programmes for executive officials, we may learn they clearly prefer practical orientation. Being obliged to follow up many lectures, while new files and letters at their offices are filling their desks, they would like to learn quickly at least something **to do**. Obviously something, that can help

them to do their job. The nature of their jobs is also very much practical and concrete. They do not like theoretical backgrounds, introductions, and they mostly do not want to think about any rationalization. What does the law says, is the classical question here.

One can understand this position. However, since the training objective is not just to fulfil client's preferences, but also to increase their working skills and consequently a general level of management, the training has to involve theoretical concepts too. Being a good manager, we believe it also means to **understand** fundamental principles and causal relations.

2.4 Standards

There is an official policy at the Ministry of Interior to provide a maximal support for the new training system created by the Act. no. 312/2002 Sb. A provision of standardized content of two kinds of training: entrance training and training for executive officials is a piece of this policy. There is a clear objective: the Ministry wants to reduce the variations in the content, to keep the "product" as much homogenous as possible, and consequently to make the "market" very transparent. Moreover, it wants to encourage regional and municipal authorities to build up their own accredited training capacities.

Regarding the training for executive officers, the Ministry offered a deal to a prestigious university in order to obtain a well-elaborated professional sample programme. It set the main parameters like general objectives, some essential parts, a length of the programme (each part takes 48 hours of teaching, means 96 hours totally), and it organized a review of the final proposal. Therefore, the Ministry purchased a sample programme for the general part. Ministry's officials, other PA professionals, and academics discussed the programme proposal at several seminars and conferences. Ministry has published the programme on its public web page then and it is available for all potential providers now. The Ministry also co-published sample textbooks for all modules.

3. Implementation Shortcomings

There are three main areas of shortcomings: training capacities, quality of programmes, and lack of financial resources.

3.1 Training capacities

Ministry of Interior accredited 91 training institutions with 602 training programmes in following structure during the first year (2003):

- 51 Entrance training programmes
- 274 Continuous training programmes
- 15 Continuous programmes for executive officials
- 141 Special Professional Abilities programmes
- 30 Training programmes for executive officials

Official ministry's materials declare that the "core requirement for a training according the Act no. 312/2002 Sb was met" (POSTRÁNECKÝ, 2003). Almost all regions have created their own educational capacities in order to

provide at least entrance training for themselves and for municipalities within their jurisdiction. Many private companies compete for a stable and interesting business; non-for-profit organizations including universities do not seem to stay aside. However, the number of available institutions varies regionally (see the table no.1). Karlovarský region (Western Bohemia) does not surprise too much, but an absence of more than one institution at Královéhradecký region is rather strange. Hradec Kralove is a large city with a university... There is just a single accredited institution – Regional Office itself.

Table 1: Accredited training institutions in regions. March 2004

Source: Ministry of Interior, 2004

Region	Number of institutions
Prague	30
Jihočeský	6
Jihomoravský	14
Karlovarský	1
Královéhradecký	1
Liberecký	4
Moravskoslezs.	9
Olomoucký	9
Pardubický	6
Plzeňský	5
Středočeský	7
Ústecký	5
Vysočina	7
Zlínský	5
Czech Republic	109

We can find mainly public and private universities and/or their autonomous training units within accredited institutions. Some regional offices obtained an accreditation as well as some traditional training institutions like Institute for Local Administration, Prague (for the structure of accredited training institutions see Appendix 1). There is an electronic catalogue of the accredited institutions and programmes available on internet addresses².

3.2 Quality Assurance - Accreditation Process

An accreditation should assure a professional character and the quality of training. Accreditation Commission started to work in October 2002. It is an advisory body of the Ministry. (Ministry's of Education Accreditation Commission for universities served as a pattern for it.) Minister appoints 12 experts to the commission, some of them comes from universities, some other from the Ministry, and some work there as regional and municipal authorities' representatives.

In order to achieve an accreditation, institutions have to file for it and for the programme too. They have to approve their material capacities, human resources, and some other formal requirements. Whole process is very formal. Two independent reviews are required for each programme.

² <http://www.mvcr.cz/reforma/vzdelani/instit.html> and <http://www.mvcr.cz/reforma/vzdelani/programy.html>

The accreditation process is pursued in a way that can easily serve as an illustration of typical government failures: mainly limited control over bureaucracy, and limitations imposed by political processes. The government is hardly able to run its policy in a consistent way; it fails especially in transforming generally relevant and desirable principles onto a proper legislation:

The new civil servants education system is supposed to be built up on a quite progressive principle of **managed** competition. A new market of various education and training programmes provided by public and private entities has been foreseen. Regional and local authorities ought to choose the most appropriate programs for their servants with respect to the price and orientation of the program.

A quality assurance is clearly a key issue in this system. Many education and training programs were purely evaluated by their participants or by public authorities in the past, being accused as incompetent, poor quality, obsolete, and worthless. Lecturers appeared to know not really too much about Public Administration or their pedagogical skills were low. Local and regional public administration representatives asked for a clarification of the market, setting rules in order to avoid these situations.

A very first key moment happened during the process of passing the bill at the House of Representatives. The text prepared by experienced officials from the Ministry of Interior was heavily changed. Due to an influence of trade unions, almost all provisions asking officials to pass any examinations just “disappeared” from the proposed bill...

First, gradual “specifications” and “clarifications” of formal requirements for an accreditation proposal as well as conditions for its approval has marginalized the space for a real assessment, evaluation and decision of the Accreditation Commission. Its role has become to be more and more formal. Even some members of the Commission admit that they deal more frequently with purely formal requirements of application instead of assessing their real values in terms of quality of the content, lecturers, etc. Accreditations are sometimes approved even though none of the members truly believes an applicant is able to deliver a good quality program. However, there is impossible to find out any formal omission against legal requirements. Whole process seems to have a typical Czech, “Kafkaesque” feature. Everyone obeys the new law; the old reality stays untouched.

3.3 Lack of Financial Resources

We are not in favour to mention this universal obstacle, which is so much typical for many CEE countries. After a thorough analysis, one can figure out in many cases that it is more an issue of wrong planning, inappropriate priority setting, or just incompetence. However, tight budget constrains seem to create some specific threats here. There is a very strong temptation for regional and municipal officials responsible for individual training plans to choose the programme just according the price. Since there is also a strong incentive for trained officials “just to survive” courses and lectures – note there is no effective motivation system that is able to give a reward for an official that “improved” his/her work - there is a large space for low-quality low-costs providers... It is too early to conduct any detailed analyses, but it is certainly a possible scenario³.

³ Additionally, as far as we know, no one has published or prepared any effective method for a future evaluation of the new training system and its impact...

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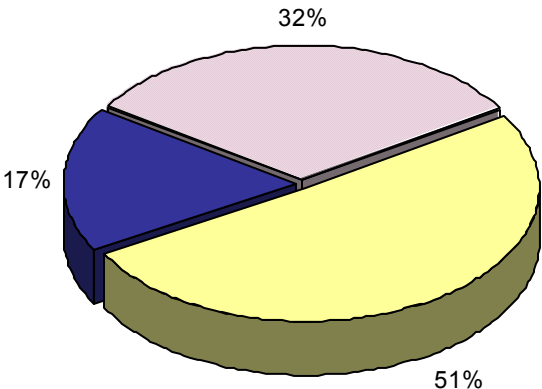
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Relevant Legislation

- Zákon č. 218/2002 Sb., o službě státních zaměstnanců ve správních úřadech a o odměňování těchto zaměstnanců a ostatních zaměstnanců ve správních úřadech (služební zákon)
- Zákon č. 312/2002 Sb., o úřednících územních samosprávných celků a o změně některých zákonů

Appendix 1: A structure of accredited institutions

Accredited institutions (%), March 2004



Territorial self-government body	19	
School (University)	35	
Other	55	
Total	109*	

** actual number of institutions is refered in a legend*