# ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION FOLLOWING THE REFORM OF SOCIAL SERVICES: LESSONS FROM SLOVENIA

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## *Abstract*

*The main goal of the paper is to present how employees of social services in Slovenia view the reorganization carried out in 2018 with the purpose to draw attention to the importance of both the organizational climate and employee satisfaction before and after the reorganization given the established connection between these constructs. In the research, mixed methods were used, specifically an explanatory sequential design. In the quantitative phase, an online survey adapted to these organizations was conducted among employees, while in the following qualitative phase in-depth semi-structured interviews were performed with managers and professional workers. The results show the failure of the reorganization of social services because the set objectives were not accomplished. Employees rated both organizational climate and employee satisfaction worse after the reorganization than before it. Here, the most critical aspects are the lack of knowledge concerning the new organization's mission, vision, and goals, coupled with the employees' lack of identification with them. While, as expected, a connection exists between climate and satisfaction as well as satisfaction and attitudes to the reorganization, the research also reveals the important connection between digitalization and the principles of good governance pursued by these services. The findings of the research may be valuable for policymakers and practitioners while designing and implementing future reforms in social services organizations in terms of ensuring a favorable work climate and employee satisfaction.*

***Keywords:*** *Organizational Climate, Employee Satisfaction, Social Services, Reform, Reorganization, Slovenia*

## 1    INTRODUCTION

The organizational climate adds considerably to the effectiveness and efficiency of employees at work and, in turn, to the realization of the vision, mission, and goals of organizations. Studies show that organizational climate refers to the perception and feelings that employees have about their work environment and is based on their beliefs and experiences, and related to employee satisfaction, performance, and motivation on the individual, team, and organizational levels (Gil *et al.*, 2023; Schneider *et al.*, 2013). Unlike organizational culture, which is relatively permanent and built from common systems of values, attitudes, and principles, organizational climate represents the way organizational members perceive the organization's existing practices, and what members feel about the organization and their role within it (Prastiawan *et al.*, 2020). More recent research (Ahmad *et al.*, 2018; D'Amato, 2023; Zahid and Nauman, 2023) identifies several of its dimensions, such as communication, leadership, cohesion, autonomy, innovation, rewarding, consistency between strategy and operational management, dynamics and freedom of expression, and particularly in the public sector it is strongly influenced by institutional leadership as a reflection of the integrity and responsibility of managers (Viđak *et al.*, 2023).

Given the complexity of the phenomenon, organizational climate is defined by many theoretical frameworks. Gil *et al.* (2023) relate it to social exchange theory, according to which employees perceive opportunities to develop their own skills, become visible in the organization and participate in decision-making, while contributing to a positive work environment and engagement. In this context, D'Amato (2023) highlights the theory of constructivist epistemology, according to which organizational climate emerges in a process in which employees construct its meaning by collecting and modifying their assessments of organizational events as a result of their interactions with (significant) others in the workplace. Furthermore, Schneider *et al.* (2013) distinguish between service, safety and diversity organizational climates. With the development of these dimensions, the theory approaches practical implications as these concepts focus more on organizational processes and their outcomes.

Studies also establish that the leadership style in public organizations has a significant impact on the climate since, as noted by Novac and Bratanov (2014), flexibility within the public system, motivation, and trust are essential factors in the success and strengthening of the reputation of organizations. The role of managers in these hierarchical organizations must accordingly be to ensure legitimacy and nurture agreements between different levels of management, whereas top management must consistently translate strategic messages to lower levels and provide formal and informal guidance, support, and empowerment for the operationalization of strategic directions by lower-level managers (Stanton *et al.*, 2010). The basic foundation of the leadership style is trust, both of managers towards employees and employees towards managers, which is shown in public services of higher quality (Martínez-Tur *et al.*, 2020). As stated by Tomaževič *et al.* (2014), in the repressive part of the public sector (e.g. police service), the feeling employees have that the employer will protect them if they are exposed as part of performing their otherwise legal and professional work is important, while trust in one's immediate superior also has a strong influence.

Most studies of organizational climate in the public sector refer to its connection with specific aspects of the work of such employees. Moussa *et al.* (2018) and Mutonyi *et al.* (2020) found a strong positive connection between organizational climate and the creativity of employees at work. A supportive organizational climate was shown to be significantly positively related to the results of the employee training process and to the emphasized role of relationships (Gil *et al.*, 2023). Ancarani *et al.* (2019) established a positive connection between organizational climate and employee engagement, as reflected in the autonomy of workers, their empowerment and well-being, and simultaneously as concerns reforms in the public sector the authors claim that an organizational climate which is based on efficiency and is target-oriented does not have a positive effect on civil servants' commitment, and reforms do not therefore increase employee commitment.

To ensure an adequate organizational climate, the public sector often needs an organizational transformation with new innovative methods of organiza-

tion and operation that lead to a more agile, flexible, and innovative environment (Boufounou and Argyrou, 2022). As noted by Ng *et al*. (2016), it is crucial that the motivation for employment in the public sector is often related to external rewards (e.g., job security) or an easier work–life balance compared to the private sector (as also stressed by Kalliath *et al*., 2020). This is even more apparent in the case of younger generations of civil servants who no longer feel so much that motivation for being employed in these fields is built on a sense of commitment to serving the country and the common good. Public sector organizations are also characterized by a certain legal determination with the aim of protecting the public interest in administrative activities and users' rights (Babšek *et al.*, 2020), which is also accompanied by relative organizational rigidity and fewer opportunities for individual and collective innovation.

Employee satisfaction is influenced by many factors and exerts a positive effect on the effectiveness, efficiency, and stability of organizations. Employees are satisfied at work when they fulfill their desires and needs, taking various facets into account, including job security, work tasks, benefits, reward options, career development etc. (Sageer, *et al.*, 2012; Tomaževič *et al.*, 2014). As the theory of relative utility shows, higher job satisfaction can arise in various ways: through improvements in the objective aspects of the job, through lower expectations of the job and through a change in the weighting of the various aspects of the job so that the negative aspects receive less attention compared to the pleasant ones (Pacheco and Webber, 2016). It is important to note, as Herzberg's theory of job satisfaction, also known as Herzberg's two-factor theory or theory of motivation and hygiene, shows that the factors that lead to job satisfaction are different from those that lead to job dissatisfaction, meaning that these two feelings are not on a single continuum, but are independent phenomena (Maidani, 1991). Measuring employee satisfaction and monitoring its trends is thus a vital measurement that quantitatively helps to determine the overall health of an organization (Thomas *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, employee satisfaction is a complex and multifaceted construct that holds different meanings for different people, and mainly includes interpersonal relationships as a key intangible facet of work, material security, a positive work envi-

ronment, and opportunities for personal and professional development (Laguador and Gonzales, 2023). Employee satisfaction hence reduces turnover and has a positive effect on work results and long-term performance (Myskova, 2011).

When it comes to examining employee satisfaction in the public sector compared to the private sector, even over a long period of time there are no uniform findings. Maidani (1991) states that overall employee satisfaction at work is largely based on internal facets, especially motivation, which applies equally to the public and private sectors, while employees in the public sector find external facets and rewards more important. In this regard, a study by Dirzyte and Patapas (2022) showed that employee satisfaction is most influenced by positive organizational practices and general life satisfaction, whereas employees in the private sector have more strongly expressed qualities of dignity, support, care, and optimism. In their study, Andersen *et al.* (2013) concluded that for civil servants' user orientation is more strongly positively related to their employee satisfaction than motivation for public service in general (Ng *et al.,* 2016), albeit in both the public and private sectors the social component of the motivation of employees has a positive impact on their satisfaction.

Other studies (Gastearena-Balda *et al.*, 2021; Mihajlov *et al.*, 2013; Zeffan and Bani Melhem, 2017), which found higher employee satisfaction in the public sector compared to the private sector, attributed the reasons for this to the greater security and predictability of the employment of public employees, who are in turn less interested in changing their current job and, on the other hand, the public sector offers fewer opportunities to change jobs. Other studies underscore interpersonal relationships and trust in the work of managers as being a vital factor of employee satisfaction in the public sector which, notably in the service sector of public institutions, increases engagement and reduces the possibility of burnout at work (Martínez-Tur *et al.*, 2020). Additional reasons for this include the position of employees within the organization and following the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) (Škarica and Vrtodušić Hrgović, 2021). Regardless of the various facets of employee satisfaction, in their comparative study Juana-Espinosa and Rakowska (2018) established that motivational fac-

tors have a positive effect on employee satisfaction in the public sector, with no significant differences between the countries being studied.

Both organizational climate and employee satisfaction are crucial for the introduction of change in organizations. According to Kuipers *et al.* (2014), change management theory and institutional theory are the most commonly used theoretical perspectives when studying change in public sector organizations. Institutionalists argue that organizational change is imposed by the environment and that organizations seek legitimacy by adapting to environmental pressures. Change management theory, on the other hand, emphasizes how organizational change is brought about by the deliberate actions of the actors involved in the change, with the focus of the theory being on the intra-organizational level.

All of the above allows the conclusion that understanding the organizational climate and employee satisfaction in the public sector is crucial for analyzing the effectiveness and efficiency of public institutions that pursue their vision, goals, and mission to contribute to social welfare, progress, and democracy. This means it is important for researchers as well as policymakers and practitioners to understand these processes and the factors influencing them. In our research, we employed multiple research methods with the main goal of analyzing employee satisfaction and organizational climate before and after the reorganization of Slovenian social services in 2018. After presenting the basic constructs being studied (employee satisfaction and organizational climate), the paper describes the social services system in Slovenia – its institutional framework together with its reorganization that commenced in 2018 – followed by an explanation of the study's significance, the methodology, presentation, and interpretation of the results and, finally, a discussion and conclusion.

## 2 SOCIAL SERVICES IN SLOVENIA

### 2.1 Institutional framework

To fully appreciate this research and the implications it holds for the human resources management theory, it is necessary to understand the institutional environment of Slovenian social services and the reforms implemented in this context,

particularly the reorganization of social work centers (SWCs) in 2018. The SWCs are the central, primary, and coordinating institution in the sense of having acted as a single entry point to the system of social services in Slovenia ever since they were established in the 1960s. From a legal and organizational point of view, SWCs are legal entities under public law with their own legal subjectivity - public institutes as holders of public powers that carry out the professional tasks delegated to them by the state. The goal of such an arrangement should be to bring social services closer to people and ensure apolitical decision-making (Babšek *et al.,* 2020). With this kind of institutional arrangement of social services, the professionalism and independence of action of SWCs in an extremely sensitive area are guaranteed. In September 2018, 62 SWCs were operating in Slovenia, with their local jurisdiction being determined by the areas of administrative units as a territorial division of the state administration. In October 2018, in the process of reorganizing them, they were merged into 16 organizationally independent public institutes which are managed in a fairly centralized way via uniform regulations and instructions of the competent ministry. Reorganization is the transformation of structures, procedures and mechanisms specifically designed to deliver services to citizens, leaving aside broader changes affecting public administration in general (Bolgherini *et al.,* 2019). Although this process was labeled as a reorganization, it went beyond mere changes to the organizational structure. According to the established goals, it was a reform intended to address the structural aspects and strategic functioning of these organizations.

Here, it must be noted that with its administrative and social system Slovenia belongs to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe regarding which, on top of striving for the efficiency, resilience, and agility of public organizations, the ongoing transition from former post-socialist arrangements to modern democratic principles is still typical. Further, in the case of administrative reforms, Slovenia follows the legal culture and norms specific to the German-Austrian tradition, with its relatively strict legalism and formalism (Kovač and Bileišis, 2017). During times of reforms, these sociological-cultural phenomena usually constitute an obstacle that must be properly ad-

dressed, i.e., incorporated into the existing system. The administrative tradition is a core factor for efficient reforms, which means the successful public management approaches developed in the Anglo-Saxon world are not necessarily a suitable mechanism for achieving reform goals in Central Europe. Alternatively, according to the way changes are introduced, their adaptation is necessary, e.g., also placing otherwise managerial-organizational measures in the legal framework which, on one hand is thus quite rigid in relation to private or Anglo-Saxon practices and, on the other, leads to predictability and legal security for stakeholders and is in line with the otherwise formalized nature of public administration.

## 2.2 The Reorganization of Social Work Centers

Before the changes in 2018, the SWCs had not been significantly reformed since their inception. Their reorganization was foreseen on the level of strategic documents by the Resolution on the national social welfare program for the period 2013–2020 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 39/13) that pursued the objectives of ensuring the availability, accessibility, and reachability of services while simultaneously improving the quality and efficiency of their implementation. This was to be achieved by reorganizing the SWCs since this would strengthen their coordinating and connecting role with the services of other departments and non-governmental organizations. In the entire social services system, this was expected to encourage the expansion of the offer and the introduction of modern innovative approaches based on the professional autonomy of the providers. Irrespective of the above, the provision of social services was expected to be primarily taken care of by public service providers in this area.

On the political level, the reorganization of the SWCs arose from two coalition agreements of the governments at the time, and legislatively was implemented with the Act on Amendments to the Social Security Act (ZSV-H, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 54/17) as the central legal basis for the organization and operation of SWCs in Slovenia. In addition to merging public institutions and establishing new organizational structures (e.g., regional joint services at the headquarters

and branches in a local area), it introduced social activation services for long-term unemployed persons, an informative calculation of social rights (e.g., child allowance, kindergarten payment subsidy), and other legal and managerial novelties (ACSW, 2018). In summary, the reform did not achieve the set objectives in terms of reducing administrative burdens for users, greater opportunities for fieldwork, and the development of new methods of professional work, chiefly due to insufficient strategic planning of the reform and the insufficient participation of relevant stakeholders (Babšek *et al.*, 2020). Concretely, the reform paradoxically led to increased bureaucratization and formalization of substantive work, unsuccessful rationalization, a failure to achieve the economic objectives of the reform, insufficient autonomy of the profession and social responsibility, and additional staff malnutrition and employee burnout (Rape Žiberna *et al.*, 2020). The systemic reasons for this may be found in the lack of a central coordination approach and insufficient rational discussion, along with cross-sector uncoordinated solutions, which led to inadequate reform results concerning operationalization of the principle of the welfare state relative to the publicly declared objectives of this reform (Kovač and Bileišis, 2017).

Given the above, from the point of view of organizational theory the SWC reorganization process was not carried out optimally as it did not cover all essential aspects of the operations of these organizations (whose key stakeholders are employees), nor did it focus on their participation and individual factors of employee satisfaction (Pacheco and Webber, 2016). Even today, several years after the reform, employees do not identify with the newly established organizations and do not know their vision, goals, and strategies (Rape Žiberna *et al.*, 2020). The reasons for the failed reform in the viewpoint of employees are to be found in the fact that in the Slovenian public sector, even though the formal aspects of civil servants are otherwise well taken care of, there is a lack of a strategic view and attitude concerning human resources management, which would have a long-term effect on assuring a stimulating environment and thus on the professional and personal development of employees at work (Stare, 2021).

## 3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In the literature, not many studies comprehensively deal with the organizational climate and employee satisfaction in social services in connection with their organizational or substantive reforms, but instead generally refer to just one aspect of the work of social services. Analyses accordingly often refer to strictly organizational-institutional aspects of reforms in terms of agencification, decentralization, and governance-related optimization of the welfare state in individual legal regulations/arrangements (Van Berkel, 2010) or analyze the objectives of administrative relief, cost reduction, and efficiency increase (Johnston and Romzek, 1999). Reforms have also been frequently studied in terms of the creation of policies and governance models of the welfare state, especially the operationalization of reform policies (Borghi and Van Berkel, 2007), the institutionalization and empowerment of citizens as prevention against political influences (Kekez, 2018), or political responsibility for the results of reforms arising from the administrative responsibility of social services (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014).

Most studies in the field of social service reforms refer to their professional autonomy as the basis for their managerial independence and apolitical functioning, for example in the context of less radical reforms of social services due to professional values and the rootedness of institutions in public systems (Ackroyd et al., 2007), the risk of standardization as a result of reforms for the professional basis of social work (Røysum, 2013), the key role of managers in successful reform implementation (Niiranen et al., 2019), the impact of reforms on the transformation of the practice of social services in the direction of citizens' needs (Gilbert, 1998), and the importance of involving social services in reforms with a complex cross-sectoral impact to assure a supportive environment for employees (Levin et al., 2020).

Although many analyses refer to the satisfaction of employees in social services with their work, yet only in general and not specifically in connection with reforms, some individual studies of the organizational climate in these services in relation to the implemented reforms can still be found, for instance on the connection between quality reform policies and the organizational climate in social organizations

(Olin et al., 2014), on the tangible effects of a positive organizational climate on solving the situations of individuals and families (Glisson and Green, 2011), and on the influence of organizational climate on the work of managers during the process of introducing the changes (Carnochan and Austin, 2002).

Almost no studies in the literature focus on establishing a link between organizational changes and organizational climate and employee satisfaction. Studies that partially referred to the mentioned topics were carried out in other countries and, due to the different cultural environment, are not directly comparable and applicable in Slovenia.

The presented research therefore provides important insights into the operation of social services from the point of view of both reforms as part of their external environment as well as the organizational climate and employee satisfaction. The aim of the research was to determine how employees of Slovenian SWCs generally view the reorganization of these services with the purpose of highlighting the importance of organizational climate and their work satisfaction. This was done by assessing their satisfaction and selected facets of the organizational climate before and after the reform and to establish whether a positive relationship exists between the studied variables. Accordingly, three research questions were formulated. The first question (RQ1) was concerned with how employees evaluate the achieved results of the SWCs' reorganization in relation to the set objectives. While finding an answer to this, the presence of statistically significant differences in the attitudes of managers and professional workers was also checked. The second research question (RQ2) asked how employees evaluate the organizational climate and their satisfaction before and after the reorganization. The third question (RQ3) was whether a correlation exists between employees' attitudes to the reorganization and the employee satisfaction and organizational climate.

## 4 METHOD

### 4.1 Participants

An online survey on reorganization, organizational climate, and employee satisfaction in Slovenian SWCs was administered at the beginning of 2022. An email was sent to the official e-mail addresses of all

16 SWCs in the country with an introduction to the survey, instructions for completing it, information stating that the results were confidential, and a link to the online survey. In order to achieve greater responsiveness, employees were also sent two reminders to participate in the survey. The population of the survey consisted of all 1,387 employees employed at the SWCs at the beginning of the survey. The survey was started by 351 participants – who answered at least one substantive question, and 243 surveys were completed. The share of participants in the survey was thus 25.3%, among which 95.9% were women, which is representative of the gender structure of the entire population. Most were aged 40 to 49 years old (41.0%), followed by those 50 to 59 years (29.0%) and 30 to 39 years (24.0%). The majority (68.0%) had a university education or education of the 2nd Bologna cycle, followed by those with a higher education or education of the 1st Bologna cycle (16.0%) and those with a higher secondary professional education (9.0%). According to the position in the organization they occupy, 8.0% of them were management representatives, 74.0% were civil servants – professional workers, while the remainder did not want to define themselves in this way.

In the second research phase that followed the online survey, in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of management and professional workers in SWCs were conducted. The goal was to achieve a representative sample in terms of the characteristics of individual SWCs. The interviews were held in 2022 after the survey results had been processed. Nine representatives of SWCs participated, including four managers and five professional workers.

## 4.2  Procedure

In view of the mentioned problematic situation, the study used mixed methods of research in a explanatory sequential design manner (Creswell and Plano, 2010) according to which a quantitative survey method was first used, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews to clarify any unexpected results and provide a comprehensive understanding in a wider context of social services' reforms. The research was conducted at a time when just over 3 years had passed since the reorganization of the SWCs had been implemented since

it was estimated that by this stage the reform was already well implemented and the operation of the institutions thereafter had stabilized to an extent making it possible to examine its effects more independently, even with as little influence as possible from the COVID-19 epidemic, which by then was already partly under control, and at the same time the findings were still sufficiently up-to-date given the timing of the completed reorganization.

The questionnaire prepared for an online survey was adapted from questionnaires already used in other studies to measure employee satisfaction at SWCs (Sladojević, 2021) and the organizational climate in local self-government administrations (Tašner, 2013). The questions concerning the reorganization of SWCs were developed by the authors themselves. To measure the organizational climate, the SiOK questionnaire, which is standardized in the Slovenian environment (Jordan *et al.*, 2017), was adapted to the studied population. The survey contained closed-ended questions that required the level of agreement with each statement to be expressed using a Likert scale, where a score of 1 meant "Do not agree at all" and a score of 5 "Strongly agree". Due to the greater variability of the results, questions about the extent to which the reorganization's objectives had been achieved contained a Likert scale with values from 1 to 10, where a score of 1 meant "Least" and 10 "Most". When measuring organizational climate and employee satisfaction, scores on a 1–5 scale referred to the situation before and after the reorganization. Based on the survey results, the authors developed semi-structured interview questions that measured the same variables to provide for the triangulation and validation of the research results.

Quantitative data were processed in the statistical program IBM SPSS 28.0. Initially, exploratory-descriptive statistics were used. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney test (MW U test) was used to determine statistically significant differences in the attitudes of the two groups of employees (managers and professional workers), and correlation analysis with Pearson's correlation test (r) was used to determine the interdependence of the variables. The Atlas.ti 22 tool was used to process the qualitative data. The analysis was performed in line with the principle of open and axial coding with the creation of thematic networks of constructs.

## 4.3 Variables

In the research, the following facets of the SWCs' work were studied as variables of individual phases in the research:

- generally about the reorganization (its necessity and usefulness, involvement of employees, reduction of administrative burdens, development of new work methods);

- achieving the declared objectives of the reorganization (simplified procedures, unified operations, the same standard of services, social activation, multidisciplinarity, location and time availability, field work, development of professional work methods);

- employee satisfaction (satisfaction generally, satisfaction with management and colleagues, satisfaction with tasks at work, satisfaction with permanent employment and salary, satisfaction with training and education opportunities, satisfaction with promotion opportunities);

- organizational climate (employee commitment, organization, the fact that the mission, vision, and goals are well known, vision and goals, internal communication and informing);

- digitalization (the need for and usefulness of training, simplicity and transparency, time rationalization, supervision by superiors); and

- good governance principles (accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equality and inclusion, effectiveness and efficiency, rule of law, participation, and consensus orientation).

Employee satisfaction and organizational climate variables were measured by assessing the views held by employees before and after the reorganization in 2018. Based on an examination of related research in the Slovenian environment (Jordan *et al.*, 2017; Sladojević, 2021; Tašner, 2013), relevant demographic data concerning gender, age, level of education, and the position held by the participants in the organization were collected for the research.

It is important to emphasize that the variables mentioned were studied in the context of reorganization as reform and not just as organizational change. Regardless of its (mis)designation and final outcomes, the reorganization of the SWC in the strategic documents and the reform policy was broader than just a change with a specific focus, which also included managerial, financial, legal, institutional and social aspects. The analysis must always be based on the actual purpose and objectives of the reforms as defined at the institutional level of governance, and not only on what is publicly stated, as there are often discrepancies here (Bolgherini *et al.*, 2019).

## 5 RESULTS

Employees generally assessed that although the reorganization of the SWCs was needed, it did not lower the administrative burdens and lead to the development of new work methods or more time becoming available to work with users (Table 1). Statistically significant differences between all the assessments made by managers and professional workers also emerged, except for the contribution to the development of new professional work methods where all aspects of the reorganization were rated better by the managers. As may be seen in Table 2, employees assessed that the introduction of the informative calculation of social transfers and the unification of SWCs' operations across the country were the objectives of this reform that were achieved to the greatest extent.

Managers statistically significantly rated the following objectives had been accomplished to a bigger extent better than professional workers: (1) the same standard of customer service throughout the country; (2) the unification of practice via the introduction of a new organizational structure; (3) more field work; and (4) services becoming more accessible.

Employees were the most satisfied with the working hours, permanent employment, and colleagues, and the least satisfied with the salary, opportunities for promotion and training, and the top management (Table 3), thus confirming theoretical findings on employee satisfaction in the public sector (e.g., Gastearena-Balda *et al.*, 2021; Mihajlov *et al.*, 2013; Zeffan and Bani Melhem, 2017).

As for the climate in their organizations, the respondents rated the internal communication and information, as well as organization the best, while knowing the mission, vision, and goals of newly established organizations and commitment were assessed

*Table 1: General assessment of the reorganization – arithmetic means, standard deviation, MW U test*

| | Management | | | Professional workers | | | | MW U | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable | n* | M** | SD | n* | M** | SD | Δ | U | p |
| SWCs' reorganization was necessary | 19 | 3.32 | 1.20 | 180 | 2.48 | 1.21 | 0.84 | 1.064.500 | 0.005 |
| SWCs' reorganization was beneficial | 19 | 2.84 | 1.12 | 180 | 1.82 | 0.91 | 1.02 | 836. 000 | <0.001 |
| SWCs' employees were sufficiently involved in the reorganization process | 19 | 2.58 | 1.02 | 180 | 1.81 | 0.90 | 0.77 | 986. 000 | <0.001 |
| The reorganization made it possible to have more time to work with citizens | 19 | 1.84 | 0.96 | 180 | 1.27 | 0.62 | 0.57 | 1.049.500 | <0.001 |
| The reorganization contributed to the development of new methods of professional work | 19 | 1.84 | 0.90 | 180 | 1.53 | 0.87 | 0.31 | 1.321.500 | 0.058 |
| The reorganization reduced the administrative burdens | 19 | 1.68 | 0.58 | 180 | 1.28 | 0.65 | 0.40 | 1.010.000 | <0.001 |

*Note: *Number of answers ** 1 – completely disagree, 5 – completely agree. A non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used for assessing the differences between the two groups of respondents with the limit of statistical significance set at p ≤ 0.05.*

*Source: Questionnaire survey, 2022 (see "Method"); calculations by the authors.*


*Table 2: Assessment of the declared objectives of the reorganization – arithmetic means, standard deviation, MW U test*

| | Management | | | Professional workers | | | | MW U | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variable | n* | M** | SD | n* | M** | SD | Δ | U | p |
| Simplification of procedures for exercising rights from public funds by introducing informational calculation | 19 | 5.21 | 2.57 | 180 | 4.24 | 2.44 | 0.97 | 1333. 500 | 0.112 |
| Standardization of SWCs' operation with the introduction of a new organizational structure | 19 | 5.05 | 2.27 | 180 | 3.13 | 1.98 | 1.92 | 891. 500 | <0.001 |
| The same standard of services for users across the country | 19 | 4.42 | 2.41 | 180 | 2.48 | 1.94 | 2.48 | 900. 000 | <0.001 |
| Improving the situation of long-term beneficiaries of financial social assistance through involvement in the social activation project | 19 | 3.89 | 2.64 | 180 | 3.09 | 1.90 | 0.80 | 1457. 500 | 0.282 |
| Ensuring multidisciplinary case management by teams of experts with specialized qualifications | 19 | 3.84 | 2.69 | 180 | 2.86 | 2.11 | 0.98 | 1371.500 | 0.143 |
| Better local and time accessibility for users | 19 | 3.42 | 2.06 | 180 | 2.27 | 1.71 | 1.15 | 1097. 500 | 0.006 |
| More fieldwork | 19 | 2.84 | 2.36 | 180 | 1.71 | 1.34 | 1.13 | 1264. 000 | 0.029 |
| Development of new methods of professional work with users | 19 | 2.74 | 2.18 | 179 | 2.19 | 1.72 | 0.55 | 1454.000 | 0.262 |

*Note: *Number of answers. ** 1 – completely disagree, 10 – completely agree. A non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used for assessing the differences between the two groups of respondents with the limit of statistical significance set at p ≤ 0.05.*

*Source: Questionnaire survey, 2022 (see "Method"); calculations by the authors.*

to be the worst. All measured facets were rated worse after the reorganization than before. General employee satisfaction was also measured, with 26.1% being very dissatisfied, 35.4% dissatisfied, 30.9% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and only 7.3% satisfied and 0.3% very satisfied. At the same time, 66.0% rated their overall employee satisfaction lower than prior to when the reorganization started in 2018.

The following are the results of Pearson's correlation analysis (see Table 4) of the correlation between individual variables: general assessment of the reorganization (REORG), the objectives of the reorganization (OBJECT), employee satisfaction (SATISF), organizational climate (CLIMAT), digitalization (DIGIT), and good governance principles (GOODG). Among the measured variables, a positive two-way relationship was established between employee satisfaction and general attitudes to SWCs' reorganization, as well as the organizational climate and employee satisfaction at the level of 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$). Employees who were more satisfied

had a better assessment of the reorganization carried out and vice versa, while employees who had a better assessment of the organizational climate also assessed their own satisfaction better.

It was somewhat surprising that, unlike employee satisfaction, no statistically significant correlation was found between organizational climate and attitudes to the reorganization, nor were organizational climate or employee satisfaction related to the assessment of the extent to which specific objectives of the reorganization had been achieved. In particular, the connection between digitalization and the good governance principles is worth highlighting, with both being significant at the 0.01 level ($p \leq 0.01$), which points to the significance and importance of digital services for SWC employees in pursuing the principles of good governance such as, according to the OECD/Sigma, responsibility, transparency, responsiveness, equality, inclusion, effectiveness, efficiency, the rule of law, participation, and a consensus orientation (Kovač and Bileišis, 2017).

*Table 3: Facets of employee satisfaction and organizational climate – arithmetic means, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis – before and after the reorganization*

| Before reorganization | | | | | | After reorganization | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| n* | M** | SD | γ | K | Satisfaction with | n* | M** | SD | γ | K |
| 278 | 4.33 | 0.76 | -1.34 | 2.91 | Working time | 279 | 4.12 | 1.02 | -1.40 | 1.77 |
| 276 | 4.32 | 0.82 | -1.25 | 1.65 | Employment stability | 278 | 4.07 | 1.07 | -1.28 | 1.19 |
| 277 | 4.20 | 0.82 | -1.07 | 1.37 | Colleagues | 278 | 3.76 | 1.09 | -0.66 | -0.31 |
| 279 | 3.96 | 0.69 | -0.55 | 1.14 | Tasks | 279 | 2.97 | 1.06 | -0.11 | -0.70 |
| 275 | 3.80 | 1.01 | -0.63 | -0.21 | Immediate manager | 277 | 3.32 | 1.35 | -0.31 | -1.13 |
| 272 | 3.64 | 1.10 | -0.62 | -0.15 | Top management | 277 | 2.82 | 1.30 | 0.15 | -0.09 |
| 277 | 3.57 | 1.08 | -0.57 | -0.25 | Training possibilities | 279 | 2.66 | 1.14 | 0.20 | -0.80 |
| 279 | 3.21 | 1.21 | -0.75 | 1.59 | Advancement possibilities | 279 | 2.68 | 1.18 | 0.11 | -0.85 |
| 277 | 2.87 | 0.99 | -0.14 | -0.32 | Salary | 279 | 2.77 | 1.13 | -0.43 | 1.53 |
| n* | M** | SD | γ | K | Facets of org. climate | n* | M** | SD | γ | K |
| 267 | 3.79 | 0.97 | -0.67 | 0.19 | Internal communication and information sharing | 269 | 3.00 | 1.25 | -0.09 | -1.02 |
| 271 | 3.72 | 0.94 | -0.66 | 0.35 | Organization | 271 | 2.94 | 1.16 | -0.40 | -0.83 |
| 272 | 3.58 | 0.91 | -0.50 | 0.24 | Familiarity with mission, vision, and goals | 274 | 2.63 | 1.11 | 0.20 | -0.75 |
| 270 | 3.39 | 1.10 | -0.45 | -0.33 | Employee commitment | 271 | 2.64 | 1.18 | 0.27 | -0.75 |

*Note: *Number of answers. ** 1 – extremely dissatisfied, 5 – extremely satisfied.*
*Source: Questionnaire survey, 2022 (see "Method"); calculations by the authors.*

Table 4: The Pearson`s correlation matrix of variables

| | REORG | OBJECT | SATISF | CLIMAT | DIGIT | GOODG |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **REORG** | 1 | | | | | |
| **OBJECT** | 0.132 | 1 | | | | |
| **SATISF** | 0.778* | -0.071 | 1 | | | |
| **CLIMAT** | 0.368 | -0.342 | 0.781* | 1 | | |
| **DIGIT** | -0.252 | 0.524 | -0.452 | -0.244 | 1 | |
| **GOODG** | 0.120 | 0.407 | -0.156 | -0.049 | 0.874** | 1 |

Note: *mutual interdependence is characteristic at the level 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$); **mutual interdependence is characteristic at the level 0.01 ($p \leq 0.01$). Pearson's Correlation test (r) was employed to measure the correlation between the following variables: general assessment of the reorganization (REORG), the objectives of the reorganization (OBJECT), employee satisfaction (SATISF), organizational climate (CLIMAT), digitalization (DIGIT), and good governance principles (GOODG).

Source: Questionnaire survey, 2022 (see "Method"); calculations by the authors.

The main findings of the analysis of the interviews conducted with four managers and five professionals, taking the findings of the previous quantitative phase into account, were:

- generally speaking, while managers were not more in favor of the reorganization compared to professional workers, they still evaluated the extent to which the objectives of the reorganization had been accomplished better than professional workers, especially with respect to unifying the practice and rationalizing the business processes in the newly created joint organizational units;

- managers' expectations of the reorganization were that they would be able to provide employees with working conditions that would allow them greater time to work with users, which would unify the practices of individual organizational units and the possibilities of developing professional work methods, while professional workers expected more from the reorganization in terms of the possibilities of field work with users and a reduction of administrative burdens;

- both managers and professionals assessed digitalization as mostly positive and necessary and in relation to its effects they largely highlighted the simplified procedures for users, albeit not for the employees who are conducting them;

- employees noted the good interpersonal relationships, working hours, and job stability as key facets of employee satisfaction, and training op-

portunities as well as satisfaction with the organizations' top management as the most critical;

- employee satisfaction was rated the highest by employees in the newly created joint organizational units, while the least satisfied were employees from previously independent larger institutes, which have now merged, primarily due to the loss of professional autonomy and managerial independence;

- both managers and other employees underscored the lack of a common vision and goals of the newly formed organizations as the most critical facets of the organizational climate following the reorganization, along with the fact that the employees do not (yet) identify with them; and

- both managers and professional workers pointed to the lack of personnel, the administrative burdens, the low reputation held by the organizations in the public, and the limited financial resources as the biggest factors affecting the poor organizational climate and employee satisfaction.

## 6    DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although the reorganization of the SWCs in 2018 saw management being centralized and a changed organizational structure, it had no impact on substantive work. Despite being necessary, the reorganization did not achieve the objectives of getting rid of red tape, greater field work, the development of new work

methods and to a certain extent only achieved the unification of practices. Accordingly, SWC employees mostly evaluated it as unsuccessful (RQ1). Compared to professional workers, managers rated individual facets and the extent to which the reform objectives were realized significantly better. This indicates the need for well-considered holistic change management before (planning and organizing), during (leading), and after (controlling) any reform. The role of superior institutions and managers is crucial for analyzing the situation, setting the objectives and purpose of the reform along with the activities and key performances indicators to enable detailed control of the whole reform process, all in collaboration with the employees and users as the main stakeholders, as also stressed by other authors (Carnochan and Austin, 2002; Levin and Baruch Ben-Abou, 2020). This even more implicitly applies in today's turbulent times (Greve *et al.*, 2020), especially if management wishes to preserve or even increase levels of employees' satisfaction and organizational climate, with both benefitting users' satisfaction and the long-term effectiveness and efficiency of the social services system, as noted by Boufounou and Argyrou (2022), Gil *et al.* (2023), Myskova (2011), and Schneider *et al.* (2013).

Both organizational climate and employee satisfaction were rated worse after the reorganization than before (RQ2) for each of their facets. It is quite concerning that all four organizational climate facets, indicating the situation after the reform, were given a score of 3 or lower, which means the employees do not feel sufficiently acquainted with information within the organization or that they are sufficiently involved in planning processes, and in turn do not feel committed to the new organizational system. Similarly, all facets of employees satisfaction were assessed lower after than before the reform, especially as concerns the training and advancement possibilities, again showing the need for a different approach by top management while implementing changes (also see Ackroyd *et al.*, 2007; Dirzyte and Patapas, 2022; Jordan *et al.*, 2017). The drop in satisfaction was also significant with respect to the tasks and top management. This reveals that there is huge room for improvement for both policymakers and managers on all levels (even in the superior ministries) to plan and perform future reforms as effectively and efficiently as possible.

As expected, Pearson's correlation test showed a correlation between organizational climate and employee satisfaction, as well as employee satisfaction and general attitudes to the reorganization. In contrast, there is no correlation between organizational climate and general attitudes to the reorganization, which may be explained by the mentioned critical facets of the organizational climate, such as being acquainted with the strategic orientations of new organizations and identifying with them. The significant ($p ≤ 0.01$) positive correlation between the digitalization of social services and the principles of good governance (RQ3) also stands out. Still, this outcome is not surprising because modern administrative reforms in various fields and countries include e-government and digitalization of public services as one of the central pillars of systemic improvements (Kovač and Bileišis, 2017). The digitalization of social services also increases transparency, participation, responsiveness and, of course, the efficiency of the implementation of activities, which applies in relation to both users and the internal organization of work, and the possibilities of employee participation. This was shown by previous studies conducted specifically for social work centers that examined the importance of the rule of law and other good governance principles, and the relationships between them (Babšek *et al.,* 2020).

Successful change management in organizations requires a strategic approach based on the involvement of employees in all phases of these processes and supported by transparent communication based on the trust of employees towards managers and vice versa (Moussa *et al.*, 2018; Pacheco and Webber, 2016). To increase employee satisfaction, they need to be trained and supported emotionally and professionally to adapt to new roles and processes (Sageer, *et al.*, 2012). According to Schneider *et al.* (2013) this also contributes to the established and well-known system of incentives and rewards, as well as the established mechanisms to provide employees with initiatives and feedback according to the system of a continuous feedback loop. To improve the organizational climate, it is crucial to ensure adequate psychological safety for employees in a changing organizational environment, and the reforms must be aligned with the values and organizational culture of the organization (Moussa *et al.*,

2018). Only in this way can the reforms not only maintain but also significantly improve existing levels of employee satisfaction and organizational climate.

This research had some limitations. It was carried out in Slovenian social services and hence while interpreting and generalizing the results to other arrangements one must take account of the social, cultural, and political environment of the transitional countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the fact that the welfare state and administrative system in these environments are shaped predominantly by the provisions of legislation. The research also focused on employees' attitudes regarding the reorganization, the organizational climate, and their satisfaction. It is known that these phenomena, emphasized in the public sector, are also considerably influenced by other factors, especially stakeholders from the external environment. As a predominantly exploratory study, the research primarily focused on the still unexplored aspects of evaluating a given organizational change and its connection with the organizational climate and employee satisfaction, but not on the influence held by facets of selected phenomena as independent variables on others as dependent ones. Given the cross-sectional nature of the current study, it might be beneficial for further research to take a longitudinal approach in order to examine the development of views on reorganization, organizational climate and employee satisfaction over time. This approach could provide a more nuanced insight into the lasting effects of such organizational changes.

Nevertheless, the results of the study can be generalized to other countries or sectors. In view of the common administrative tradition of the Rule of law and the associated organization of social services, the results are also useful for planning corresponding reforms in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Since reforms, employee satisfaction and organizational climate are very current and at the same time important facets of the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations, the results can also be generalized to other countries in Europe and worldwide. Moreover, the results of this study should be considered not only in social services but also in other public administration structures, as the latter, due to its institutional setting, has different variables influencing employee satisfaction and organizational climate than the private sector, especially given the lack of studies in public administration in this area.

**EXTENDED SUMMARY/IZVLEČEK**

Temeljni cilj prispevka je predstaviti, kako zaposleni na centrih za socialno delo v Sloveniji ocenjujejo leta 2018 izvedeno reorganizacijo ter opozoriti na pomembnost organizacijske klime in zadovoljstva zaposlenih pred in po reorganizaciji, glede na ugotovljeno povezavo med tema konstruktoma. V raziskavi so bile uporabljene mešane metode, natančneje način zaporednega pojasnjevanja. V kvantitativni fazi je bilo s tem organizacijam prilagojenim vprašalnikom med zaposlenimi izvedeno spletno anketiranje. V naslednji, kvalitativni fazi, so bili opravljeni poglobljeni polstrukturirani intervjuji z vodji in strokovnimi delavci. Rezultati kažejo, da reorganizacija centrov za socialno delo ni bila uspešna, saj zastavljeni cilji niso bili doseženi. Zaposleni so tako organizacijsko klimo kot tudi lastno zadovoljstvo z delom po reorganizaciji ocenili slabše kot pred njo. Najbolj kritična sta bila vidik 'pomanjkanje poznavanja poslanstva, vizije in ciljev organizacij' ter 'pomanjkanje identifikacije zaposlenih z njimi'. Čeprav obstaja pričakovana povezava med organizacijsko klimo in zadovoljstvom pri delu, pa tudi med zadovoljstvom in stališči do reorganizacije, raziskava ugotavlja tudi pomembno povezavo med digitalizacijo in načeli dobrega upravljanja, ki jih zasledujejo te službe. Ugotovitve raziskave lahko bodočim snovalcem politik in izvajalcem koristijo pri načrtovanju prihodnjih reform v socialnovarstvenih organizacijah z namenom zagotavljanja ugodne organizacijske klime in zadovoljstva zaposlenih.

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