

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS VIEWED BY EMPLOYEES OF POLISH WELFARE INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the issue of Public Relations (PR) and its use in Polish social welfare institutions. At present, we can observe that Polish social welfare industry faces serious problems related to its public image. This is due to: insufficient experience in Public Relations, lack of systemic actions towards improving the prestige of social work as well as creating the image of social welfare. The text offers a comparison of beliefs and opinions expressed by the employees of the Polish public welfare institutions; these opinions and views are related to PR and communication practices applied by their organisations. The opinions were collected through a nationwide survey. The results include very interesting findings: for instance, they confirm the thesis about the lack of regular and constructive communication and image-related activities carried out on the institutional level and low evaluation of their effectiveness. The conclusions, however, also point out that the respondents revealed that they are highly aware of the importance of PR operations as well as of the correlations between these operations and how their institutions are seen by the general public and by the media. This may be interpreted as prospects and chances for further application of communication tools in social policy institutions.

KEY WORDS:

communication in social policy, Media Relations, Public Relations of social assistance institutions, social recognition of social work, welfare institutions

Introduction

Nowadays, the functioning of social welfare institutions tends to gravitate towards the professionalization of social welfare and integration activities. The main stress in organisational efforts is put on the promotion of beneficial social changes as well as providing professional services. In this context, social work – with its growing significance in the social policy system – plays a special role.¹ During the recent years, the roles and tasks of

¹ RYMSZA, M.: W stronę pracy środowiskowej i nowych ról zawodowych pracowników socjalnych. In RYMSZA, M. (ed.): *Pracownicy socjalni i praca socjalna w Polsce. Między służbą społeczną a urzędem*. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2012, p. 203.



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social welfare institutions and their employees have changed dynamically: granting material benefits has been giving way to social work and active integration.² The agents of social policy at all levels are involved in promoting these changes.³ Various initiatives are taken to fulfil this objective, among them research, testing, modelling, standardisation of activities⁴ and complementary trainings for social welfare institutions staff.

The professionalization of activities is accompanied – unfortunately, in a limited range – by the reinforcement of the communication and image-related aspects of functioning of the social welfare institutions. We need to notice the problem of conditions governing media and social perception of social assistance institutions. The author's own research that has been carried out since 2013 indicates that public welfare institutions have been experiencing massive communication and image-related problems lately. We can point out to the main issues, namely: unfavourable image of the functioning of the public institutions presented in media, social and historical conditionings of the social welfare-related topics,⁵ institutional help being mostly associated with distribution of financial and material benefits.⁶ What is important, this unfavourable image and social perception of social workers is viewed as one of the crucial barriers to effective welfare activities.

Conditions of Public Relations in Social Policy

The professional aspect of Public Relations plays a special role in this context.⁷ We assume that public welfare institutions experience serious deficits in this area, which translates into how their functioning is perceived by the society and media. Traditionally, the public units of social welfare assistance have never conducted such activity and until the present times PR has been a *terra incognita* for their Human Resources departments (with few exceptions). Nowadays, due to the frequency of social welfare-related news and topics appearing in the media – especially in unjust and unreliable media reports⁸ – more and more recognition is given to the issues of the image of social welfare services. However, the lack of PR experience and good practices remains an important hindrance.

One should also point out to the formal issues of educational background of welfare institutions' employees. Until 2013 the vast majority of standards set for the studies that grant qualification to work as a social worker and to manage social welfare institutions had not included courses (lectures, practical classes) in PR. Public Relations issues were included in the management curricula and practice shows that the areas of social communication are treated by future employees of social welfare institutions as less important in the process of vocational training. Learning outcomes emphasise, first of all, the competences in the areas of methods of the social work, sociology, psychology and pedagogy. This tendency has been shifting for the last few years: Public Relations and social marketing courses, as well as courses in inter-institutional communication are more frequently included in the curricula of specialist courses in social welfare administration that prepare future management staff in these institutions.

Social welfare assistance is both complex and difficult field of work. This refers in particular to the area of its institutionalised, multi-sector character, and to the unique nature of professional and multi-faceted operations for the benefit of various individuals and social groups⁹ facing diverse problems. Contemporary social

2 HRYNKIEWICZ, J.: Zakres i kierunki zmian w pomocy społecznej. In RYMSZA, M. (ed.): *Reformy społeczne – bilans dekady*. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2004, p. 96-98.

3 GREWIŃSKI, M.: System pomocy i integracji społecznej w Polsce – pluralizm, współzależność i urynkowanie usług społecznych. In BAŃKIEWICZ, M.; GREWIŃSKI, M. (eds.): *System lokalnej polityki pomocy społecznej – instytucje i instrumenty*. Warszawa: WSP TWP, 2010, p. 9-12.

4 See: SZARFENBERG, R.: *Standardy pracy socjalnej. Wprowadzenie*. Warszawa: WRZOS, 2012. [online]. [2016-10-15]. Available at: <http://www.wrzos.org.pl/projekt1.18/download/SPS%20wprowadzenie_2601.pdf>; KADELA, K., KOWALCZYK, J. (eds.): *Standardy usług pomocy społecznej. Rekomendacje metodyczne i organizacyjne*. Warszawa: WRZOS, 2014.

5 SZYSZKA, M.: Conditions of Media and Social Image of the Public Assistance Institutions in Poland. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2015, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 251-253.

6 SZYSZKA, M.: *Kształtowanie wizerunku instytucji pomocy społecznej w mediach*. Warszawa: Instytut Rozwoju Służb Społecznych, 2013, p. 10-13.

7 SOLÍK, M.; VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.; LALUHOVÁ, J.: Media as a Tool for Fostering Values in the Contemporary Society. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2013, Vol. 9, No. 6, p. 71-73.

8 See: WALOTEK-ŚCIAŃSKA, K. et al.: *New Media in the Social Spaces. Strategies of Influence*. Praha: Verbum, 2014, p. 40-43.

9 TRAWKOWSKA, D.: Bariery rozwoju pracy socjalnej w pomocy społecznej w perspektywie systemowej. In MICHALSKA-KOT-LARSKA, A. (ed.): *Zalety i wady życia w rodzinie i poza rodziną*. Poznań: UAM, 2010, p. 185.

work is tied to the conditions resulting from its institutional character: task distribution, 'red tape' character of the work of public institutions, variety of centres and limited or insufficient competences, limited resources or improper distribution of tasks and assets, plus typical barriers in collaboration between institutions. It is worth to take notice that welfare institutions experience a serious deficit in up-to-date knowledge about the wide aspects of communication activities – both internal and those that take place within the social and institutional environment. This need has been diagnosed not only on the basis of parallel studies,¹⁰ but also in the functioning of certain welfare units. Their staff often point out to the communication gaps, deficits in collaboration and the low prestige of social work as a profession. This in turn leads to poor reception of welfare activities in the social and media circles.

Principles of Own Research

The main objective of the presented research¹¹ was to study the knowledge, beliefs about Public Relations, communication, collaboration, and experience of employees and managers in public social welfare and social integration institutions in Poland. The research is based upon quantitative methodology, it was conducted by the means of diagnostic survey method and the technique of classic survey was applied; the basic tool was a questionnaire form consisting of 42 questions (only 8 of them are described and discussed in this article). Print copies of the questionnaire were handed over directly to respondents. The sample group was randomly selected and consists of 200 respondents – employees of various social welfare and integration institutions (e.g. city and regional welfare centres, social welfare homes, specialist counselling centres, crisis intervention centres, and night shelters). The vast majority of the respondents are employed as social workers. This is important due to the fact that social workers, as a professional group, have a significant impact on the substantive and organisational functioning of their institutions, and thus on their Public Relations. The key questions were focused around the issue of the widely understood communication inside institutions as well as between institutions and their environment; the latter was recognised as social, institutional and media space. Among others, the following issues were diagnosed: attitude towards Public Relations, effectiveness of internal communication (horizontal and vertical), application of communication tools, and experience in interacting with the mass media.

The study was nation-wide. The questionnaires were filled in by the representatives of various types of social assistance (welfare) units from different, yet not all, voivodships (12 out of 16). The educational background of the respondents (as has already been mentioned, mainly social workers participated in the research) is also of some significance. The biggest group in the sample were employees holding second cycle qualifications (66 %) and first cycle qualifications (19 %). The biggest percentage of the sample consisted of employees of basic, small and medium size social welfare units: municipal (38 %) and city-municipal (11 %). A considerable group (25 %) of respondents were also employees of city social welfare centres.

Public Relations as Viewed by the Interviewed Employees of Welfare Institutions

While answering the question introducing the topic of Public Relations [*What do you associate the term "Public Relations" with?*], the respondents were to select 3-6 notions from a long list, which they thought of as most adequate. The choice of answers included explicitly positive (e.g. cooperation), neutral and emotionally negative (e.g. manipulation) terms. There were total of 955 selected notions. Interestingly, the opinions are highly polarised here; there was a high coefficient of answers referring to the terms directly related to PR prac-

10 OLECH, A.; SOBCZAK, K.: *Jakość i organizacja pracy w ośrodkach pomocy społecznej. Raport z badań*. Warszawa: Instytut Rozwoju Służb Społecznych, 2011. [online]. [2016-10-15]. Available at: <<http://irss.pl/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/jakosc-i-organizacja-pracy-w-ops.pdf>>.

11 The survey was conducted from 1st November 2015 to 30th January 2016.

tices (communication, image shaping, cooperation with media, management function – the biggest number of answers was obtained in this area) as well as practices confused with Public Relations activities (manipulation, social engineering, political campaigns). We can state that the term ‘Public Relations’ is more often associated with activities that can be described as *ad hoc* (advertising, interactions with media, promotion) rather than as systemic operations carried out in order to build a stable system of effective internal and external communication. The fact that the term ‘communication’ was chosen by the biggest number of respondents is important. This indicates that they are able to identify the right activity and anticipates that adequate and constructive PR practices will be implemented.

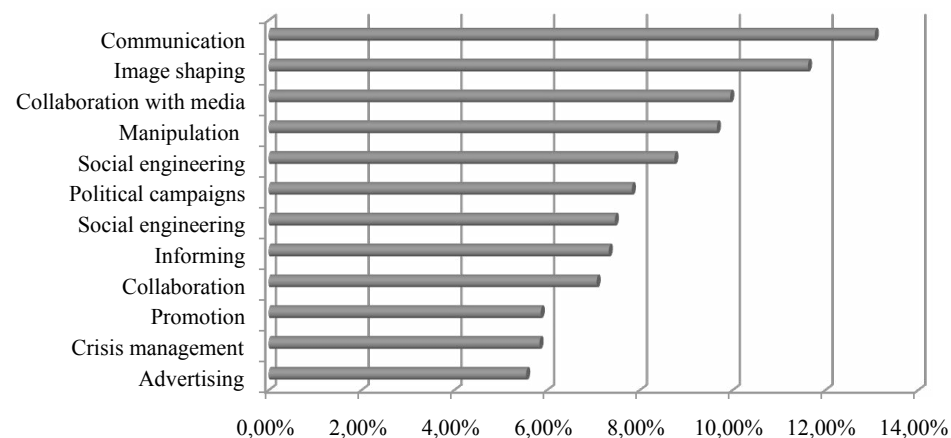


Chart 1: Answers to the question: What do you associate the term ‘Public Relations’ with?

Total number of selected terms = 955

Source: own processing

We can conclude that the respondents’ opinions about PR reflect the most popular practices of welfare institutions in this area. Observations and interviews conducted during the meetings with welfare institutions staff suggest that Public Relations is more often inaccurately associated with the perspectives of Media Relations and image shaping rather than with planning and building effective communication, developing collaboration within institutions as well as between institutions and their institutional and social environment. It is also worth noticing that Public Relations is often considered as a label identifying the whole set of all kinds of activities towards communication, collaboration, winning the public opinion, promotion, social perception of institutions and their operations. At the same time, the popular approaches delivered during didactic classes and functioning among the welfare institutions employees suggest a great confusion as to what exactly PR is, what are its objectives and tools.¹² Moreover, we often encounter a verbalised aversion towards Public Relations being mistakenly identified as activities limited to advertising, promotion or non-ethical ‘reality whispering’ applied in order to ‘create positive image’, to ‘whitewash’ some individuals and institutions, e.g. in various crisis situations. However, it seems important to mention that the collected answers clearly indicate that despite such polarised associations, the vast majority of employees recognise the perspective of including PR activities in the functioning of their institutions. They view it as one of the ways of improving effectiveness, the quality of internal and external collaboration as well as the method of supporting the social work itself.

The answers to the question as whether there is a person responsible for building information policy and contacts with media (e.g. a spokesman) in the represented institutions are not surprising. The majority of the respondents declare that their institutions lack such a person or department. Among the 2000 respondents

¹² See also: SZYSZKA, M., TOMCZYK, L.: Vybrané funkcie Public Relations inštitúcií sociálnej pomoci. In *Zdravotníctvo a Sociálna Práca*, 2014, Vol. 1, p. 20-23; WOJCIECHOWSKI, L. P., MIKULÁŠ, P., ŠTRBOVÁ, E.: *Mediálna komunikácia – Vybrané aspekty*. Nitra : UKF, 2013; FICHNOVÁ, K.: *Psychology of Creativity for Marketing Communication. Selected Aspects*. Noailles : AAFS, 2013.

only 9, which is less than 10 %, stated there is such a practice present in their institutions. The parallel interviews conducted with the employees imply that it is a serious deficit. There is a frequently articulated need to include spokesmen in the institutional structures; moreover, the lack of properly trained experts who would operate in the area of media contacts is seen as one of the significant causes of poor relations in the public space and inability to react to media attacks or to publications presenting untrue or negative image of institutions.¹³

Next questions concentrate around identification of activities undertaken in the area of developing inter-institutional collaboration, promotion, interactions with media and communication of institutions with their environment. The vast majority of respondents once again pointed out to the lack of planned and organised PR activities in their institutions that act only incidentally (i.e. reacting to the current needs) or occasionally (when some opportunity appears).

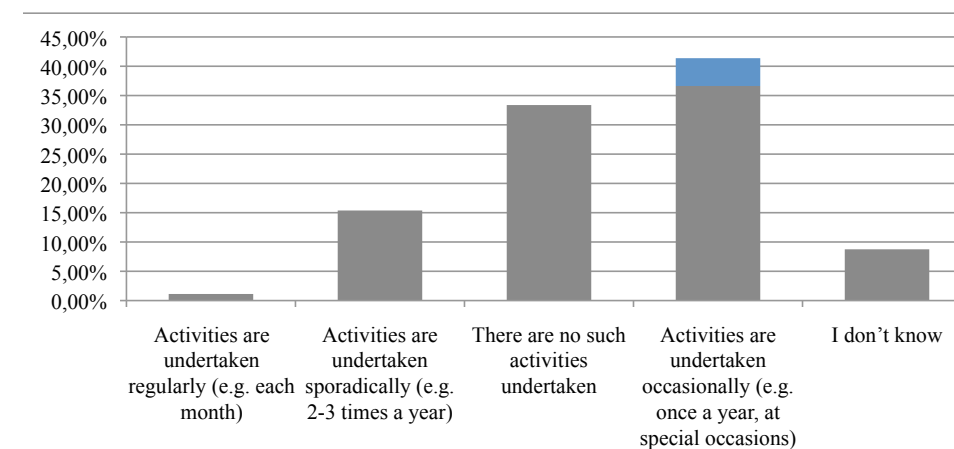


Chart 2: Answers to the question: Does your institution carry out any activities leading to the development of Public Relations (building image, promotion of activities, contacts with media and the public sphere at large)?

n=200

Source: own processing

While looking at the research results, we need to consider the specifics of activities carried out by welfare institutions and the nature of PR operations. We can point out that – besides the basic, typical steps towards the development of Public Relations (PR tools) – there are also numerous possibilities and prospects for implementing complementary and accompanying forms. Social workers and employees of welfare institutions conduct diverse environmental activities such as contests or charity fundraising, and do not call them ‘PR’. This regularity, which carries various communication activities without identifying and categorising them as PR, was confirmed in the answers to the next question (Table 1) and during the interviews with social welfare units managers. There is an observable tendency to implement actions and projects that involve multi-level, even innovative solutions – without any publicity and promotion thereof. This is partly due to the lack of proper competences in the area of media communication as well as due to fear of establishing contacts with the media.

The question identifying the tools applied to develop relations and to build image of the represented institutions yielded very interesting results. The English term ‘Public Relations’ was deliberately replaced by its Polish translation. The respondents selected the total of 699 areas of activities from the choice of answers (from the list included in the questionnaire). The analysis of the answers given (the list is presented in Table 1) confirms the thesis about a relatively wide range of communication tools that are applied to support social welfare activities but are not qualified into the ‘PR’ category. We can conclude that many institutions carry out interesting forms of activities; however, they are not always based on a coherent plan (strategy) and not all such

¹³ See: GAJDKA, K.: *Rzecznik prasowy w otoczeniu mediów. Teoria i praktyka*. Kraków : Universitas, 2012, p. 196-199.

actions are coordinated. For example, information or promotion materials are released only when such opportunity appears during implementation of EU-funded projects. Such incidental actions miss the perspective of a coherent information policy or regular campaign.

Table 1: Answers to the question: Which Public Relations tools are used most often in your institution?

Developing contacts with social and institutional environment	118
Seasonal correspondence (e.g. Christmas wishes)	104
Organisation and joint organisation of events (e.g. social workers' day, meetings, conferences, volunteers' centres, community picnics, open days, etc.)	101
Publishing tools (publishing information materials, leaflets, posters, information)	97
Online tools (up-to-date website, publishing news about current activities and projects)	60
Visual communication and aesthetics of the institution's facilities and surrounding	57
Incentives for employees, ensuring comfort of work	55
Ensuring good communication within the institution, e.g. between staff members, departments, etc.	42
Video and television tools (producing videos and video reports presenting the institution's activities, invitations / cooperation with TV journalists)	15
Use of social media	14
Press tools (contacts with media, sending invitations, press releases, etc.)	11
Radio tools (radio ads, presentations of the institution's activities, inviting journalists)	4
Other	12
I don't know	9

Source: own processing

Regularity can be observed as the respondents most frequently chose activities typical for the functioning of the social welfare and integration units, especially those that fit into community activities such as local activity centres.¹⁴ They also frequently pointed out to the use of typical communication tools and active initiation and development of collaboration between the institutions and their environment.

At the same time, we need to take notice of the significant dissonance between these choices and the answers to the preceding question. 33 % of the respondents indicated that their institutions do not conduct any activities in terms of developing Public Relations (Chart 2), which is not coherent with the options selected afterwards and presented in Table 1. This discrepancy probably stems from the lack of precise knowledge about PR (employees' opinions about the nature of such activities) or low evaluation of the effectiveness thereof resulting from irregular, incidental actions and failure to plan.

More interesting dependency is revealed in the answers to the question about the importance of Public Relations in the context of institutions functioning. 33 % of employees declared that intentional PR activities are not carried out, whereas the majority of the respondents (46 %) stated they are of little importance comparing to the total range of institution's operations. Very small percentage of the respondents declared that PR was of big or priority importance.

The answers confirm the described tendencies to fail to integrate PR activities with the routine forms of social welfare institutions functioning. This is due to the fact that managerial staff does not understand the significance of PR as well as due to the shortage of resources: time and people (already overworked employees, 'red tape' and administrative character of work). This trend may be also interpreted in correlation with the previously discussed phenomenon of separating promotional activities and their occasional character.

14 See also: BEDNARCZYK, I. et al.: *Raport końcowy z badania "Programy Aktywności Lokalnej – skala ich wdrażania na terenie woj. podlaskiego"*. Białystok: ROPS, 2014.

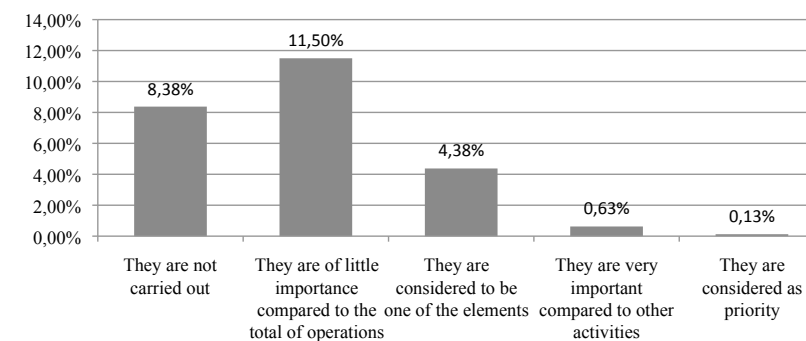


Chart 3: The results regarding the question about the degree of importance of Public Relations activities in the functioning of the represented institution

n=200

Source: own processing

A very interesting comparison is the one of the evaluation of activities in building Public Relations as viewed by the employees, and the evaluation of possible impact and effectiveness of these actions in creating social welfare institutions image as well as in developing collaboration with other institutions and the environment. First, the vast majority of the respondents declared low evaluation of the effectiveness of PR activities undertaken by their institutions or pointed out to the absence of such. In total, the negative answers constitute 72 %, while the positive evaluation was given by only 28 % of the respondents.

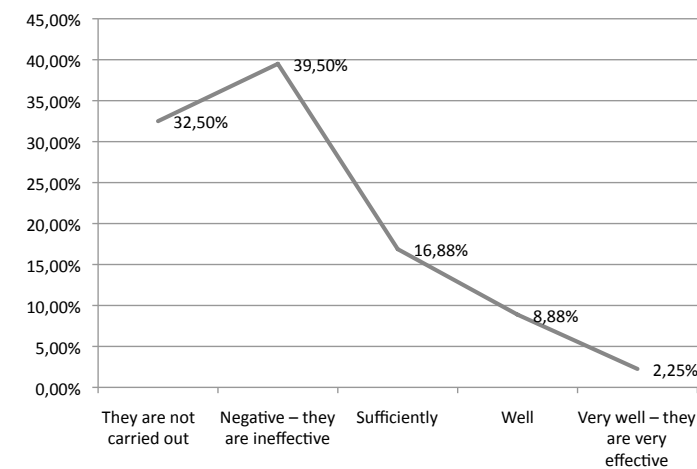


Chart 4: Answers to the question: How do you evaluate the effectiveness of PR activities (building image, promotion of activities and contacts with media and public at large) carried out in the institution you represent?

n=200

Source: own processing

The comparison of the given results with the question about the perspective of the effectiveness of PR operations turns out to be particularly interesting. It allows us to identify great opportunities and wide perspectives resulting from undertaking communication steps in the future. While evaluating the communication activities conducted in their institutions as poor and very poor, the respondents notice the great advantages of Public Relations. And, first of all, they see the direct correlations between PR initiatives, the development of collaboration and the evaluation of institution's effectiveness in social perception. In other words, respondents' opinions clearly recognise the possibilities to influence the image and social perception of their

institutions through well-thought PR. As much as 44 % of the respondents stated that such activities were very important, 46.25 % declared they are important, 8 % pointed out to their moderate importance.

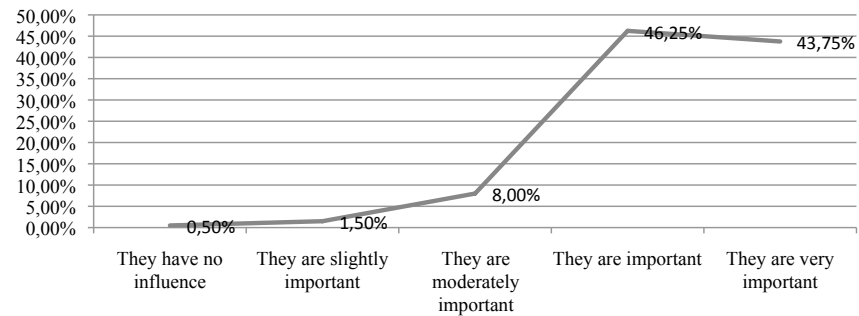


Chart 5: Answers to the question: Do you think Public Relations activities may influence the way society (citizens) evaluate the effectiveness of your institution?

n=200

Source: own processing

Summary

To summarise, the compared answers almost univocally imply that Public Relations activities – in the context of declarations and information given by employees of welfare institutions – require professionalization and wider implementation in functioning of the institutions at various levels of social policy. The fact that Public Relations, as the area of practical activities, is associated mainly with the perspectives of building and enhancing collaboration with the social and institutional environment, is highly significant. It literally fits into today's demands regarding the functioning of welfare institutions which should actively seek social support for their activities (active integration) and form broad coalitions for the support and collaboration with the local environments (communities, NGOs, business entities).

What is important, is that despite significant educational deficits in PR and media communication among welfare professionals and their insufficient preparation in this area, PR activities are undertaken in various dimensions (although they are named or rather understood differently). And, first of all, we can see the respondents' awareness of the significance of this area of communication. The analysis of the survey results allows us to draw the conclusion that the main part of the operations that can be identified as PR is not focused on promoting and creating the so-called positive image of organisations but refers to deeper and more significant matters: organisational activities, collaboration with social and institutional environment. This fits into the basic assumptions of PR understood as the development of relations in the public space, acting towards increasing understanding and acceptance in one's environment and – in the long-term perspective – harmonious collaboration and coexistence. We also need to conclude that in the opinions of the employees, the growing importance of activities in the area of professional Public Relations, along with improving competences of institutions' staff, can seriously translate into the higher prestige and better social perception of social welfare and integration activities. This, in turn, would affect indirectly their effectiveness as the low prestige of social workers is seen as one of the main barriers to the effectiveness of modern, institutionalised social work.¹⁵

¹⁵ Raport z badań: Czynniki warunkujące efektywność działań ośrodków pomocy społecznej województwa zachodniopomorskiego w opinii ich pracowników. Szczecin : ROPS, 2012. [online]. [2016-10-15]. Available at: <http://www.ois.wzp.pl/attachments/article/151/RAPORT_dot_efektywnosci.pdf>.

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