

IMPROVING PUBLIC MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE PARTICIPATION OF CIVIL SERVANTS IN PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

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Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of the evolution of the improvement of the civil servants in the mayoralities of Romania in the period before the COVID 19 pandemic compared to the pandemic and post COVID 19 period, focusing on the need to digitize public institutions, a strong need for the challenges posed by the pandemic to both public institutions and private organisations, and last but not least to citizens as consumers of public services. The study presented in the paper aims to analyze how the professional training process was conducted in the 3 mentioned periods, to identify the advantages, respectively, the disadvantages of carrying out professional training programs among civil servants and identify the most efficient and preferred way for civil servants to carry out professional training.

Keywords: Civil servant, public institutions, public administration, professional training programs, digitalization of public services.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24818/beman/2024.14.2-01>

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the doctrine, a civil servant is a natural person who has been given legal authority by an independent act of the citizens or a public authority to carry out a public function for a set amount of time or indefinitely in order to realize the institutional competence whose structure it is a part of (Iorgovan A., 2005). "The person appointed, under the terms of the law, to a public position" is how the Administrative Code defines a public official. Naturally, when we discuss training, we bring up the advancement of a civil servant's career. This process describes how civil servants change within public

institutions based on the demands of the organization as well as the abilities, potential, and goals of individual civil servants.

Career development is crucial for public institutions as well as for individuals. It is always determined by the demands of the organization, but it must be acknowledged that these needs can only be satisfied when personal needs are taken care of. Therefore, the following factors must be taken into account: individuals within the institution must be acknowledged as unique individuals with distinct needs, desires, and abilities; individuals are more motivated by public institutions that address their needs and aspirations; employees are capable of growing, changing, and pursuing new paths when provided with the proper opportunities and guidance. Professional progress is strongly reliant on training. In order to function more effectively, people are increasingly integrating with public organizations in this manner. Workplace training is a representative form of training because it introduces new activities and abilities and establishes a direct link between what is taught or has been learned and what is used later. It is important to avoid performing this task in a shallow manner as officials may come to believe that their own worth inside the public institution is greater than the value of the work they accomplish.

According to Auby, J.M., and Ducos-Ader, R. (1986), the career concept is used in modern public law to describe how an official's legal situation evolves over time, from hiring to the conclusion of professional activity, or, in other words, from the issuance of the act that gives rise to the public service report until the issuance of the one that ends this report. The legal circumstances and outcomes that arise from the beginning of the service relationship until its termination are all included in the public office career (GO 1209/2003). In public office, career growth occurs through salary grade advancement and promotion to a higher public office. The promotion (GO 57/2019 revised) is the path for civil workers' professional development. As known methods of promotion: Upon obtaining a diploma of higher level studies, in the field of specialization in which they carry out their activity or in a field deemed beneficial for carrying out the activity by the head of the public authority or institution; in a public management position; as a high civil servant; in a professional degree that is immediately higher than the one currently held; in the class.

2. TRAINING OF PUBLIC SERVANT - LEGISLATIVE PROVISIONS, THE MAIN PROVIDERS OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING SERVICES

Public servants are required by law (GO 57/2019 on the amended Administrative Code, part VI, chapter V, section 4, art. 458 and art. 459) to continuously enhance their professional training and skill sets. In this sense, every public servant must be guaranteed enrollment in a minimum of one professional development program every two years by the authorities and public institutions. According to the statute, INA, ANFP, or any other professional training provider may host these courses. Public

authorities and institutions are required, for the purpose of improved organization, to create an annual professional development plan for civil workers. This plan must estimate and indicate the funds (as specified in the budgets) required for the payment of participation fees for these training programs.

The law specifies many methods for fulfilling the goals of government servant training and improvement:

- a) professional training providers arrange and carry out training programs that are concluded with a graduation diploma or certificate of participation;
- b) employers within public authorities and institutions arrange and carry out or, if applicable, approve training programs;
- c) training initiatives planned and executed as part of projects receiving outside funding;
- d) additional legally mandated professional development.

The following organizations offer professional training for civil personnel in accordance with this decision (GO 57/2019 concerning the Administrative Code, chapter III, section 1, art. 22):

- a) public authorities and institutions whose purpose is clearly defined in the normative act of establishment, organization, and operation, including the planning and execution of training programs;
- b) educational establishments within the national education system that match the higher education level or, if applicable, the permanent education category, within the bounds of the law;
- c) private law organizations founded in conjunction with or alongside public authorities and institutions, whose purpose is clearly defined in the act of establishment, organization, and operation, including the planning and execution of training programs;
- d) autonomous private organizations, of the kind of commercial companies founded under Law No. 31/1990 regarding commercial companies, republished, with subsequent amendments and additions; or, in the event that the situation calls for it, non-governmental organizations founded under Government Ordinance No. 26/2000 regarding associations and foundations, approved with amendments and additions by Law No. 246/2005, whose activities are clearly defined in the act of establishment, organization, and operation, including the planning and conduct of training programs.

We shall list the major providers of professional training services along with a few of the most representative programs in the lines below, taking into account the comments from the legislators.

➤ NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADMINISTRATION (NIA)

Its webpage states that it provides training programs on a variety of subjects that are developed through an analysis of training needs and tailored to the requirements of strategic documents and priority areas, as authorized by OPANFP no. 234/2022. These programs are offered through the Department of Training Programs and the Territorial Centers for Continuous Training for Public Administration. It should be mentioned that they provide programs tailored to the unique demands and goals of the beneficiaries (public agencies and institutions). And a link to a standard form is supplied so they can

request particular programs. A digital certificate of graduation and a legal-required descriptive supplement detailing the abilities obtained are used by NIA to attest to the completion of advanced training programs.

➤ NATIONAL AGENCY OF PUBLIC SERVANTS (NAPS)

Establishing competency frameworks, policies, and strategies, as well as drafting normative acts in the field, the National Agency of Public Servants (NAPS) is the public institution of the central public administration that oversees the management of civil servants and the public function. Through the provision of specialist help to human resources departments in the application of specific law, as well as the monitoring and control of its application, NFPO maintains a continuous engagement with public institutions and authorities in Romania. **The goal of NAPS** is to create a body of politically impartial, professionally trained civil servants who can absorb and acquire performance standards from the European Union level, thereby increasing the efficiency of public administration and fostering better ties between administrations and their primary constituents, the people. In addition to public officials and institutions, trade unions, academic and professional associations, the media, and national and international organizations or entities in the sector are all targets of the National Agency of Public Servants' activities. **NAPS views people as a strategic resource** in its pursuit of enhancing public administration performance, with an emphasis on ongoing growth and development. **The objectives proposed by NAPS for 2023 are:**

- professionalization and prestige for the public office;
- digital transformation for the management of personnel paid from public funds;
- creation of the premises for the transformation of the National Agency of Public Servants into a "new generation" institution;
- strengthening institutional communication and cooperation for a high-performing management of the public function and civil servants.

➤ OTHER VOCATIONAL TRAINING SERVICE PROVIDERS

Many websites, including the APSAP Training Center, Columna Training & Consulting, Columna University Association, and the ASE site through postgraduate programs of training and continuing professional development, in the Administration and Public Management section as well as other universities in Romania, are among those that offer training courses for civil servants, according to our Internet searches.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRAINING OF ROMANIAN PUBLIC SERVANTS IN TOWN HALLS BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID19 PERIOD

3.1. The Romanian public servant and his retraining – the challenges brought by the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a number of significant changes in many spheres of endeavor. State-level efforts to stop the pandemic's spread resulted in immediate changes to the social, economic, and educational spheres, among other things. Practically speaking, the worldwide society quickly became a monolithic one, with digital or online platforms serving as the only means of accessing the boundaries of an interconnected world.

Organizations, both public and private, are now required to adjust to the changing environment in order to be flexible enough to alter direction at any time. The management of organizations implemented various measures to reorganize processes in response to the numerous large-scale changes that were emerging. These measures included increasing the use of telework, shifting or individualizing the work schedule, digitalizing or intensifying the digitalization of certain processes, and coordinating teams remotely.

Romania, like all other states in the world, had to quickly adjust to all the obstacles brought about by the pandemic. During this time, a number of primary or secondary normative acts governed how public authorities and institutions as well as commercial companies conducted their business

Numerous activities have moved online as a result of these changes, with education being one of the sectors most impacted. Hepburn (2020) claims that this is "the biggest disruption that teaching/learning has ever seen because learning will never be the same after this time."

In this work, we attempted to undertake an analysis of the planning and execution of professional training for Romanian public administration staff prior to, during, and following the COVID-19 epidemic.

Romania's public administration is always undergoing transformation, and competent human resources are essential to the efficient execution of the changes. It is evident that the European Union and Romania are consistently focusing on professionalizing and enhancing the professional performance of their human resources. This is achieved through skill development and acquisition, and is closely linked to developments in professional training and new technology.

According to Allen's, I.E. and Seaman, J. (2010) views „The theoretical and practical professional training of administration personnel becomes all the more important as the specialized and complex character of administrative activity must be understood, considering the major transformations that public administration is going through, as a direct effect to the environmental changes in which it takes place".

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Romanian public administration staff received professional training primarily from public or private training providers in the traditional (classical) or hybrid/mixed (blended learning) systems. However, due to government-imposed measures, it became imperative to quickly adapt the way that professional training programs were provided and to introduce training programs on a large scale in the online system (e-learning).

The mixed or hybrid model combines the traditional style of training sessions with the opportunities offered by e-learning. In the classic system of professional training, training programs are carried out without the contribution of technology and the training materials are delivered through traditional methods.

In order to respect physical distance and stop the pandemic's spread, a number of restrictive regulations in 2020 and beyond mandated that professional training be conducted online. Professional training providers in this situation had to change to fit the needs of the situation, switching from blended learning or the traditional method to online training. Training platforms were created or free training platforms were modified for the new environment, depending on the training provider and its organizational or financial capability (used for the asynchronous mode). Additionally, synchronous online chat platforms like Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and others were bought to ensure that the administration staff's training process runs smoothly and under ideal circumstances. Each training provider had a customized approach to the planning of the training process, allocating the number of hours in synchronous (interaction with the trainer and delivery of online content) and asynchronous (activities on the training platform) formats, training the trainers to use the online tools, and other aspects of the training process. The National Institute of Administration released a training process planning document that included specific activities related to the establishment of professional training programs for the personnel of public authorities and institutions, as well as a number of program and participant statistics.

The online approach for vocational training has several benefits and drawbacks. The following are some benefits of online training that should be noted: learning system that is focused on the needs of the student; training materials that are accessible on any kind of device (computer, laptop, tablet, phone); lower budget costs (transport, lodging, and salary expenses); guaranteeing that the participants' activities continue in the institutions from which they originate; high level of accessibility; and availability of training resources for the asynchronous format (accessible at any time). There are a number of drawbacks to online training, including the following: lack of face-to-face interaction; differences in the accessibility and quality of Internet connections between rural and urban settings; a focus on technology rather than content and learning opportunities in online training programs; certain topics are not well

suited to online delivery in order to facilitate the acquisition of established skills; and the use of online tools necessitates a variety of IT skills from both trainers and learners.

The professional training of public administration staff prior to, during and following the COVID-19 epidemic is the subject of this study. The goal is to examine the public administration's professional training program in order to determine the benefits and drawbacks of training during the three phases, the effectiveness of each kind of training, and the elements that would contribute to the successful completion of this program. The objectives of the study are:

1. Analysis of the way in which the professional training process was carried out in the chosen periods;
2. Identifying the main advantages and disadvantages of conducting professional training programs;
3. Investigating the main factors that could have a positive impact on running an online training process in an effective way.

The study started from the following research questions:

1. How were vocational training programs conducted before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Which way of conducting vocational training programs is more effective and appropriate?
3. What factors significantly contribute to the optimal and efficient performance of professional training activities?
4. How is it preferable for vocational training to continue to take place?

There are twelve questions in the questionnaire, three of which are designed to identify the participants by asking about their age, type of post held, and level of seniority in public administration. The remaining questions, which were closed-ended and had one or more possible solutions, were designed with the intention of analyzing the professional training process. Five territorial administrative units in the county of Hunedoara received the questionnaire. Sadly, we only had responses from two administrative territorial units, but this did not stop us from doing the study we desired. Twenty-three replies in all (management and executive public personnel) were noted. Participants in the questionnaire gave their consent and were guaranteed the privacy of their answers.

3.2. The Romanian public servant and his progress - results of the study

The findings from the examination of the respondents' responses are provided in this section of the work. The primary features of the research subjects are listed in the first section. The analysis and interpretation of the data that was gathered are presented in the second section.

Regarding the distribution of respondents according to **seniority in the public administration**, shown in Figures 1 and 2, we can observe this for each of the city halls:

- at City Hall no. 1: people with 0-5 years, 6-10 years and 16-20 years seniority are predominant (26.67%), followed by those with over 25 years seniority (13.35%) and for those between 11-15 years (6.67%) have the lowest percentage;

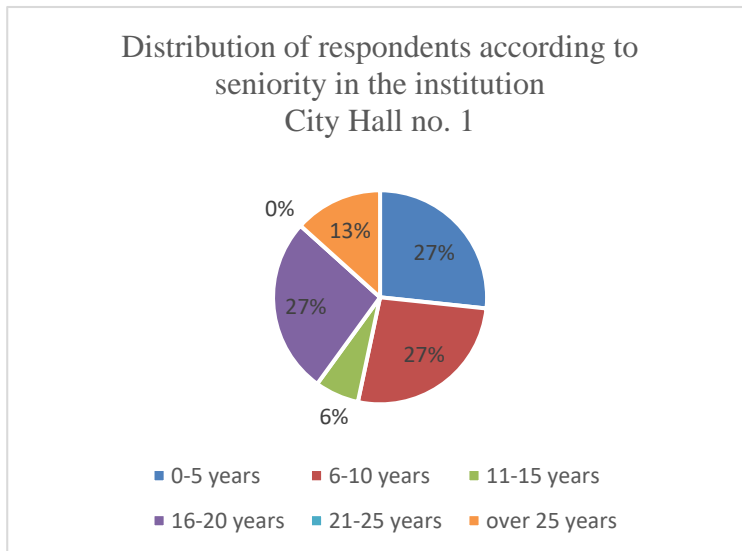


FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO SENIORITY IN CITY HALL NO. 1
Source: Author's research

- at City Hall no. 2, those with seniority of 0-5 years, 6-10 years and 16-20 years are predominant (25%), followed by those between 11-15 years (12.50%) and for those between 21-25 years (12,50%) there is the lowest percentage.

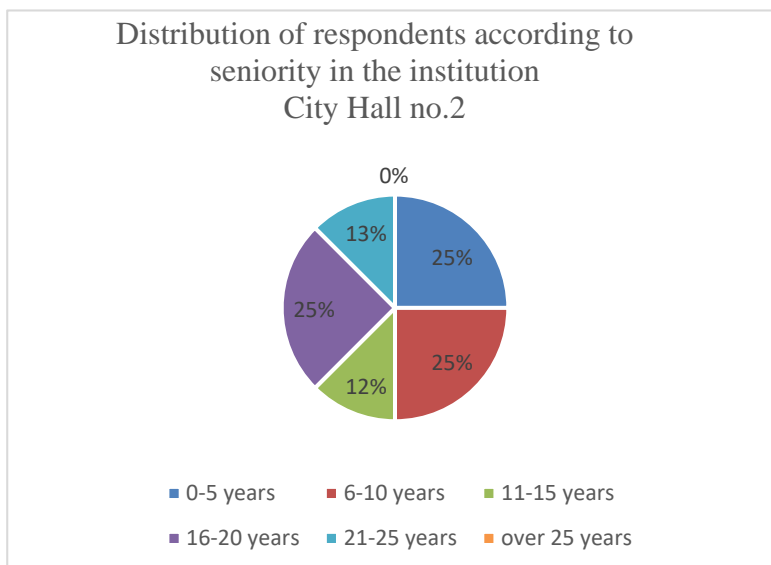


FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO SENIORITY IN CITY HALL NO. 2
Source: Author's research

Regarding to the **respondents age** who participated in the survey, presented in Figures 3 and 4 we can see this distribution:

- at City Hall no. 1: the majority are those aged between 36-45 years (33.33%), followed equally by those aged between 25-35 and those between 46-55 years (26.67 %), a small percentage is represented by those aged 56-65 (13.34%);

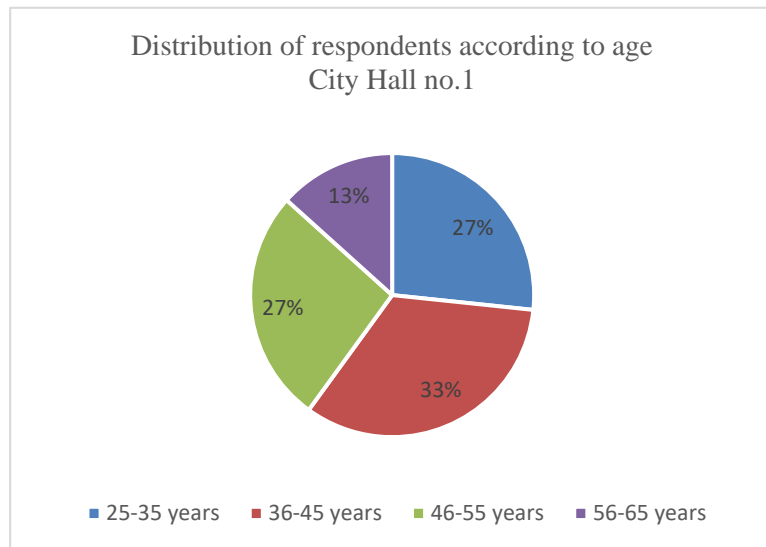


FIGURE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO AGE IN CITY HALL NO. 1
Source: Author's research

- at City Hall no. 2: the majority are those aged between 36-45 and those between 45-55 (37.50%), followed equally by those aged between 25-35 and those between 56-65 years (12.50%).

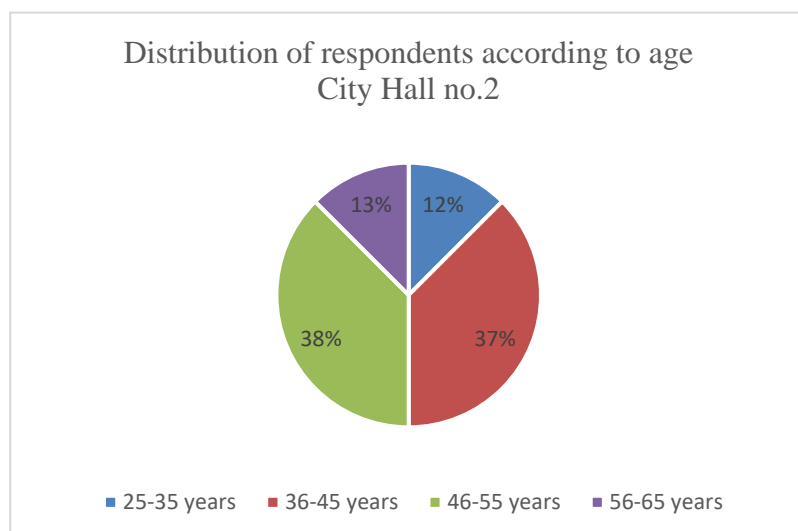


FIGURE 4. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO AGE IN CITY HALL NO. 2
Source: Author's research

Regarding **the education of the respondents** who participated in the survey, we can see that in both city halls predominate civil servants with long-term higher education: 93% and 87% respectively (Figures 5 and 6).

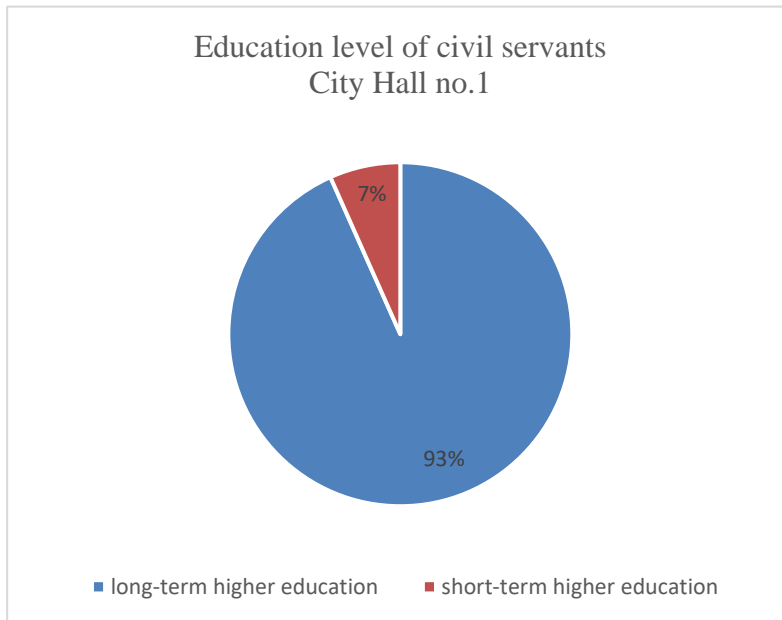


FIGURE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO EDUCATION IN CITY HALL NO. 1
Source: Author's research

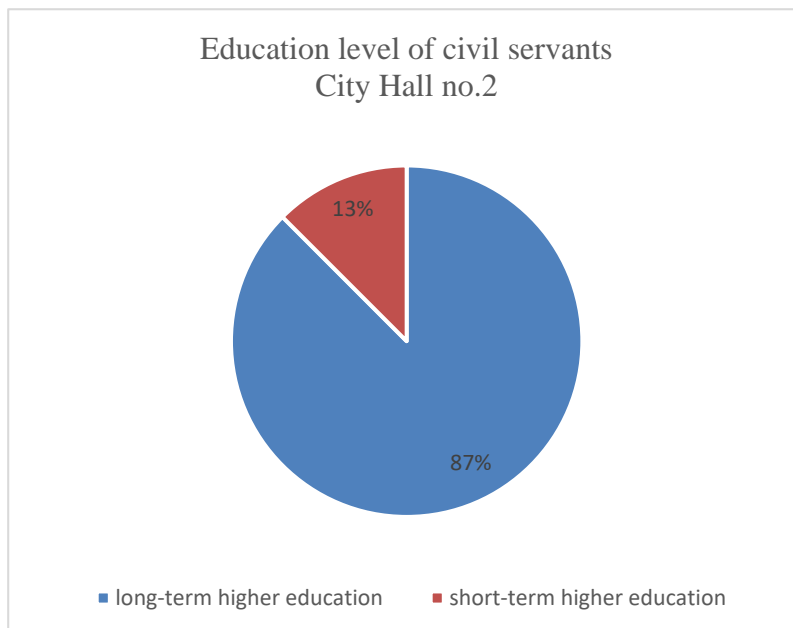


FIGURE 6. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO EDUCATION IN CITY HALL NO. 2
Source: Author's research

Respondents were asked if they had participated in **vocational training programs** and according to Figures 7 and 8 we can see the following:

- at City Hall no. 1: have been participated 53.33% and those who did not participate are 46.67%. There is a rather thin line between participants and non-participants!

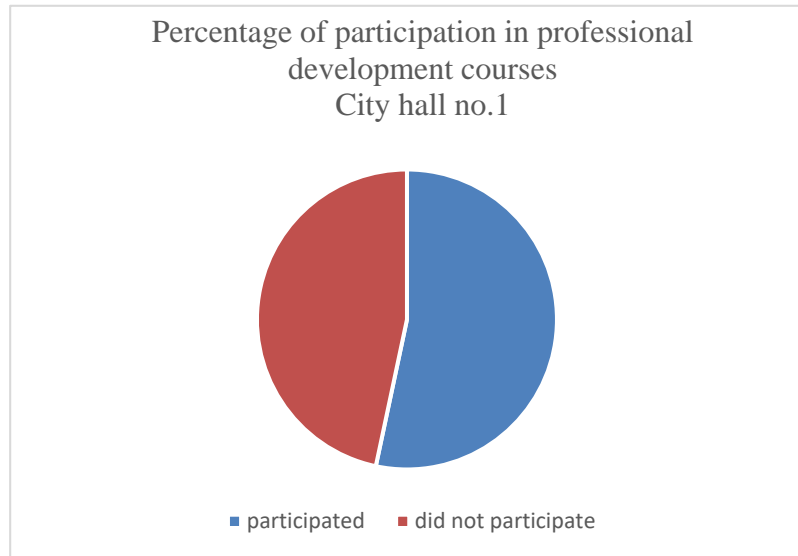


FIGURE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO PARTICIPATION IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 1
Source: Author's research

- at City Hall no. 2: we observe an equality between participants and non-participants (50% on each side)

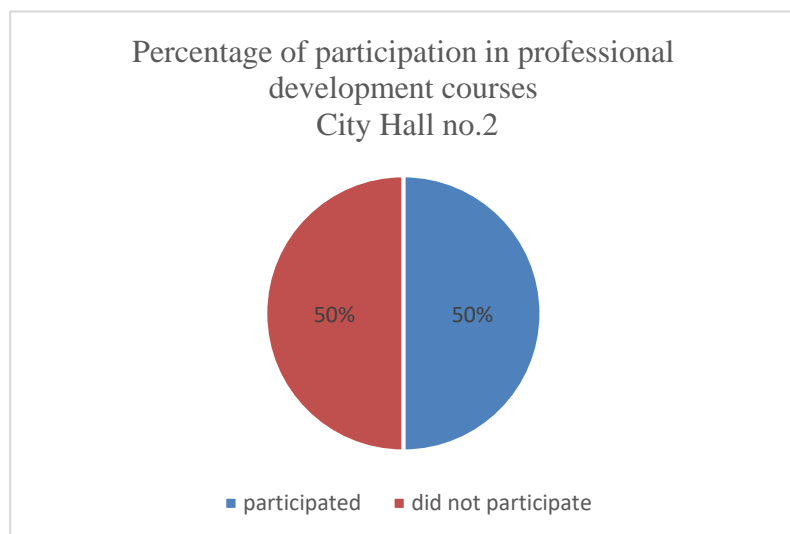


FIGURE 8. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO PARTICIPATION IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 2
Source: Author's research

Respondents were asked **how they participated in these vocational training courses** and, according to Figures 9 and 10, we can observe the following:

- At City Hall no. 1, the vast majority (75%) participated in face-to-face courses and the others participated in online courses (25%);

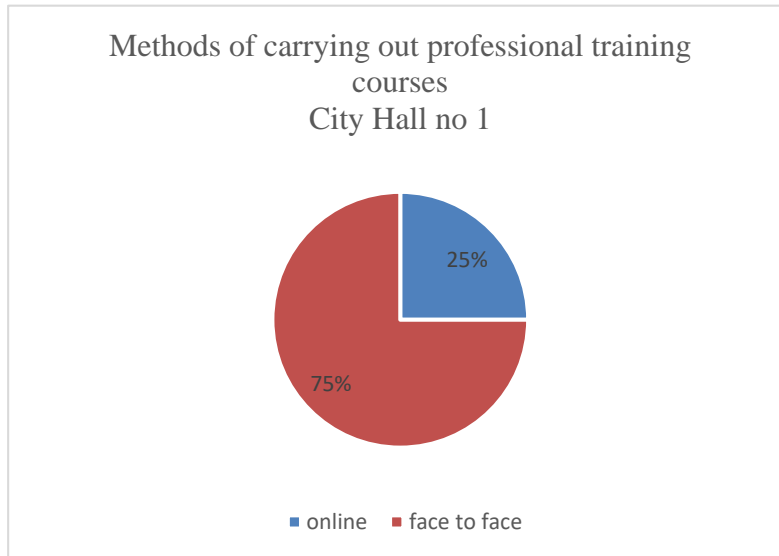


FIGURE 9. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO METHODS OF CARRYING OUT VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 1
Source: Author's research

- At City Hall no. 2, the situation is exactly the opposite: the vast majority (75%) participated in online courses and the others (25%) participated in face-to-face courses.

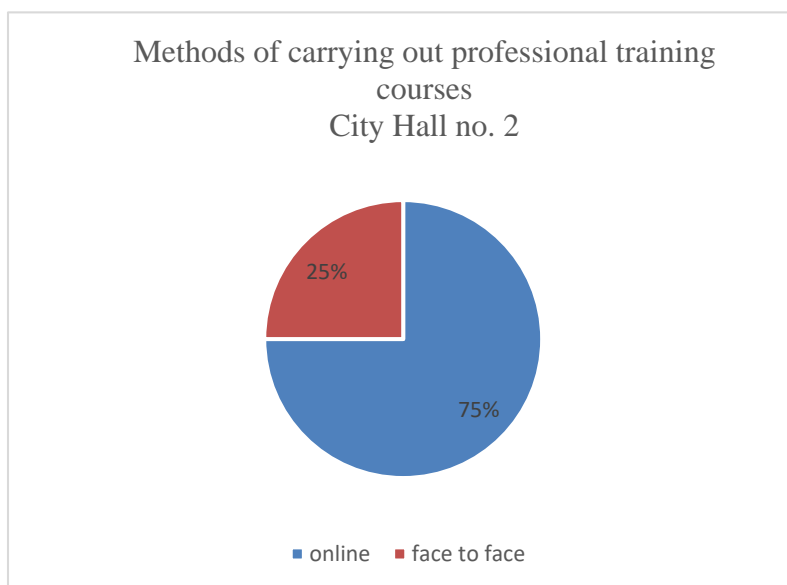


FIGURE 10. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO METHODS OF CARRYING OUT VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 2
Source: Author's research

The respondents were asked which were the **periods when they have participated in these professional training courses**, according to Figures 11 and 12 we can observe the following:

- At City Hall No. 1, participation in these courses was more numerous in the period before COVID19 (62%), during the COVID19 pandemic, the frequency of participation decreased (13%) and then, after COVID19, participation increased (25%).

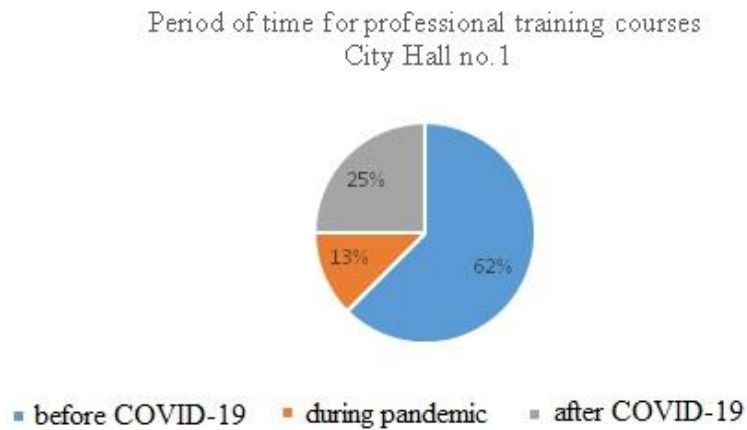


FIGURE 11. PERIODS OF TIME FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 1

Source: Author's research

- at City Hall no. 2 the situation is different: participation in these courses is more numerous in the post-COVID19 period (50%). For the periods before COVID19 and during the COVID19 pandemic, the frequency of participation should be equal (25%). In other words, we are witnessing a greater openness, in this town hall, to participation in training courses!

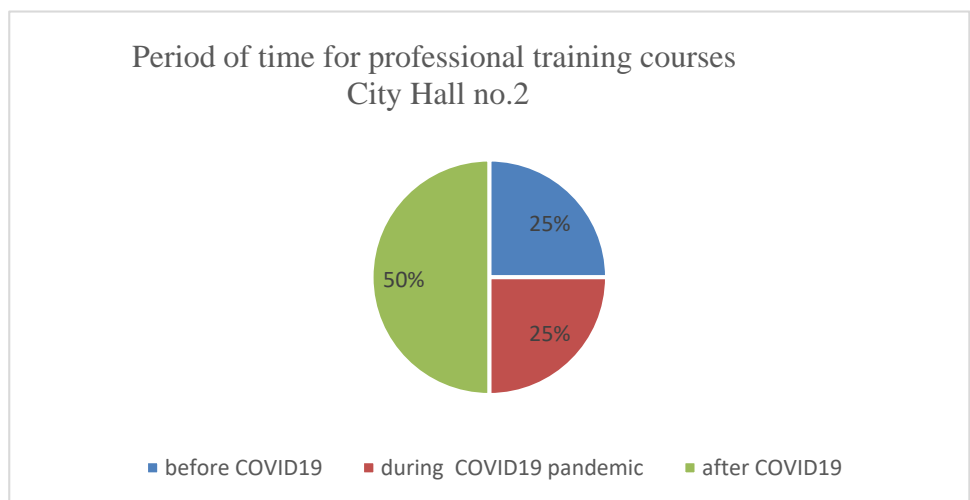


FIGURE 12. PERIODS OF TIME FOR PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 2

Source: Author's research

Taking into account their participation in professional training courses, respondents were also asked a question related to **their preferred way of participating in these courses**. And this time the opinions are divided between the two City Halls:

- civil servants from City Hall no. 1 prefer face-to-face participation (Figure 13)
- and civil servants from City Hall no. 2 prefer online participation (Figure 14)

Prefered methods of participation on professional training courses
City Hall no.1

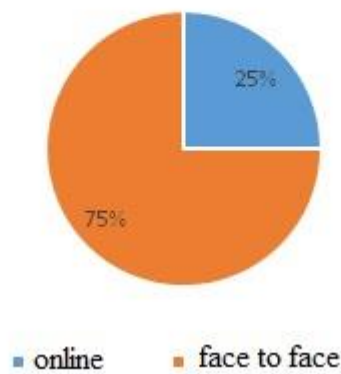


FIGURE 13. PREFERRED METHODS OF PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 1

Source: Author's research

Prefered methods of participation on professional training courses
City Hall no.2

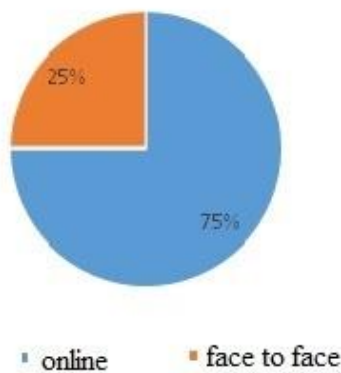


FIGURE 14. PREFERRED METHODS OF PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 2

Source: Author's research

In terms of how much these courses helped in their professional development, the respondents expressed their opinion about their degree of satisfaction:

- those from City Hall no. 1 considered that these professional training courses helped them only to a certain extent (75%), while the real help of the courses was appreciated only by a small percentage (25%) (Figure 15);
- as for the officials from City Hall no. 2, they unanimously believe (100%) that these courses helped to some extent (Figure 16)

The satisfaction level regarding the professional training programs
City Hall No.1

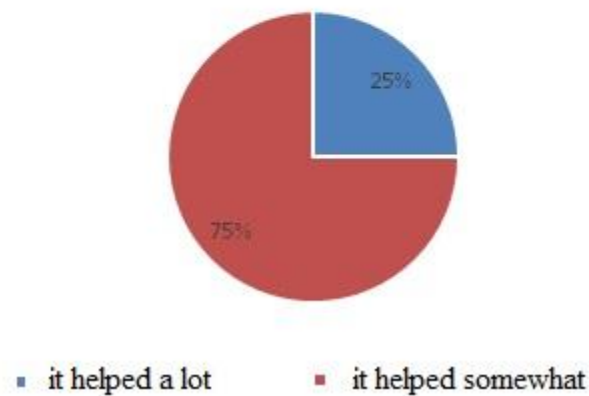


FIGURE 15. SATISFACTION LEVEL REGARDING PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 1

Source: Author's research

The satisfaction level regarding the professional training programs
City Hall No. 2

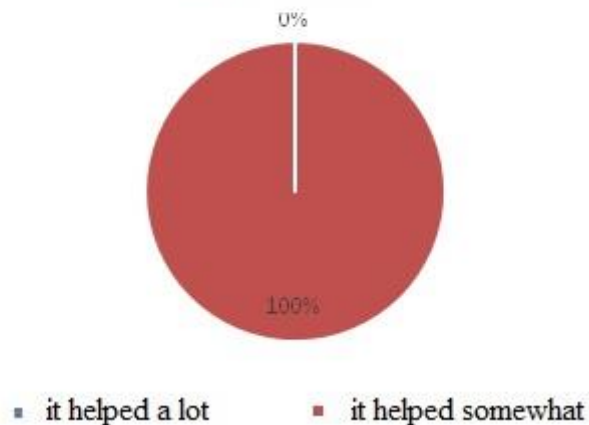


FIGURE 16. SATISFACTION LEVEL REGARDING PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 2

Source: Author's research

Regarding the **providers of professional training programs**, we can say that, from the options offered in the questionnaire, we have the following choices:

- those from City Hall no. 1 participated in courses organized by other providers of such services (75%), and for the courses organized by INA (13%) and ANFP (12%) they went almost equal (Figure 17);
- as for the officials from City Hall no. 2, they are equally divided between the courses organized by INA and other training service providers (Figure 18)

Providers of training programs followed by City Hall no 1 respondents

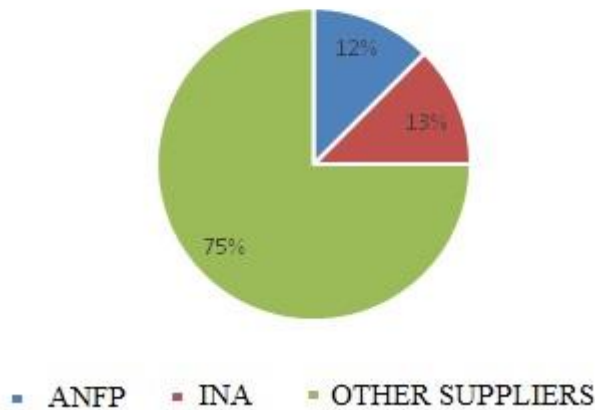


FIGURE 17. PROVIDERS OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 1

Source: Author's research

Providers of training programs followed by City Hall no 2 respondents

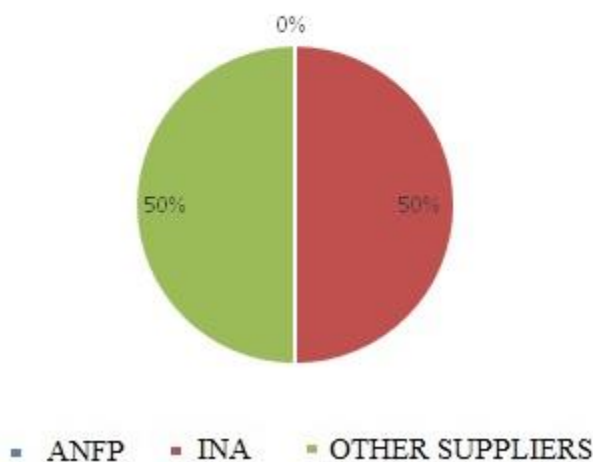


FIGURE 18. PROVIDERS OF PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS IN CITY HALL NO. 2

Source: Author's research

4. CONCLUSIONS

Professional training plays a significant role in the effective execution of reform initiatives and, indirectly, in the modernization of Romania's public administration. Due to the acceleration of the digitization revolution in training program organization, the COVID-19 epidemic marked a new chapter in the history of professional training.

The creation of the online training system requires financial, technological, and human resources from the training providers. Even though hygienic regulations have been loosened and traditional and hybrid system training has resumed, the use of platforms and tools from the pandemic era needs to be maintained while also continuing to be developed permanently so that online training programs play a significant role in professional training. Simultaneously, the online training programs can aid in the participants' enhancement of their IT skills, which can positively influence current activities and raise the level of digitization at the public administration level.

Real and long-lasting changes must be implemented, which calls for the availability of a pool of highly qualified civil workers who can effectively carry out institutional goals and tasks.

Referencing the provisions of the Government's Emergency Ordinance no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code, with subsequent amendments and additions, the draft Government decision was developed in 2022 at the level of the National Agency of Civil Servants for the approval of the methodological norms regarding the training and professional development of civil servants, including the rights and obligations associated with the training process, as well as the norms regarding the system of credits necessary for the promotion of civil servants to a professional grade and to a vacant public management position. The proposed normative act contains regulations pertaining to:

- the procedures for conducting professional development and training programs for civil servants, as well as the procedures for verifying the civil servants' involvement in these programs and the quantity of transferable credits they ultimately earn after completing the programs;
- funding professional training and improvement programs and certain institutional planning measures;
- planning and executing civil servants' training and professional development;
- rights and responsibilities related to the process of professional training and improvement;
- guidelines for the credit system required to promote civil servants to professional grade and open public management positions;
- the minimum quantity of transferable professional training credits required to promote civil servants to professional rank and open public management positions, acquired through participation in training and professional development programs finished with a diploma, certificate of participation, or certificate;

- guidelines for the professional development and training programs that civil servants must take part in to earn the minimum number of credits required for their promotion to a professional degree and to an open public position;
- guidelines for the process of obtaining credits for vocational training that can be transferred to another degree;
- guidelines for allocating the number of credits for vocational training.

In order to support training courses run through the Agency's initiatives, ANFP encourages blended learning and e-learning. Consequently, a large number of civil officials received training in areas including project management, digital skills, state aid, public procurement, reimbursement requests and progress reports preparation, communication, strategic planning, regulatory effect assessment, training of trainers, and electronic signature.

A key factor in the success of initiatives to digitize public services and administration internal operations, as well as to boost institutional resilience and efficiency, is the funding allocated to the advanced digital skills training program for civil servants under Component 7: Digital Transformation. Thirty thousand civil servants will attend management and talent management training, while thirty thousand more will attend training courses to gain advanced digital skills (e.g., database administrators: SQL, MySQL etc.; system administrators; operational analysts; data analysts; programmers on various platforms).

Hence, government workers have opportunities from ANFP, INA, and other professional training course providers; all they need to do is be receptive to growth, change, and advancement. They support the growth of ties between the government and the populace by being receptive to new ideas and, in particular, they make it easier to obtain virtual information.

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