THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF UNIVERSITIES. THE ROLE OF THE FRONT OFFICE PERSONNEL

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Summary

The social responsibility of universities is part of the large theme of community social responsibility. One of the most important role of the higher education institutions, together with the generation and the application of new knowledge and of knowledge in general and the formation of inland human resources, remains the support given to the objectives of the state`s national economy, out of which the most known is the income generation. The literature we have studied proves that the front office personnel can contribute to establish the operational standards of the educational institutions, especially with regards to the content of the curriculum, the habits and the skills that must be developed by the students in order for them to be able to compete for employment. The factors that are limiting the undertaking of social responsibility and the involvement in the sustainable development of society can be the lack of resources, the poor management, the conflicts of interests and the lack of information due to poor process of communication. The success of a company is owed to the employed personnel, which can make the provided service a tangible asset and can reduce the risk of service variability.

Keywords: *universities, social responsibility, front office personnel, management.*

The image and the performances of the organizations are closely connected to the efficiency of institutional communication. As a consequence, we have the task to combine all the elements of the strategic management of the company in order to be known on a market or a new market share and subsequently to maintain the competitive advantage that was won as long as possible.

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Regardless if we are discussing about an organization from the goods production area or from the services production, the communications inside of it, and also the communication with the eternal environment shall allow the manager to conceive the development strategy of the company to ensure the "anticipation of exchanges and modifications which must be operated within the organization and its enterprises for preventing the occurrence of those situations where the goods and services, their manufacture and selling, their entire activity becomes totally overdue, timely incongruent with the changes produced." (Rusu, 1993, p. 92).

For most companies in the field of services, departments and the services that form the so-called front office are responsible to ensure communication. The front office service can be considered responsible both with the efficient internal institutional communication, which ensures a normal flow of information and a fair and equitable treatment of the company`s employees, regardless of the cultural environment where it operates, and also of the external institutional communication, which maintains the connection with the clients and the other econo-mical agents and in this way the organization is undertaking respon-sibilities towards several types of clients (Rogojanu, 2004, p. 8).

The term that was used after 1990 regarding the integration of the organization in the economic environment and in the society through communication is « social responsibility » viewed as the expression of its "civic sense", imposing in the same time the creation of superior quality goods or services, whose reputation in the business should inspire trust to the consumers. On one hand, the social responsibility of each company is reflected also under the aspect of the inter-human relationships and contributes in a positive sense to the socio-economic and political health of society.

This study focuses on identifying the characteristic elements of the inter-human relationships within the front office departments belong-ing to various organizations that carry out activities in the field of services, mostly on the ones from universities, in order to emphasize the current trend that describes the adjustment of the management and of the management strategies to the promotion of those relationships that ensure motivation, training and qualification of personnel, so that

they ensure the efficiency of the organization in the specific conditions of the current socio-economic environment.

In the field of education and more precisely in the field of advanced education, where there are organizations such as public and private universities, we can consider front office to represent *those departments with direct involvement in the promoting the institution`s image,* both for the potential consumers of the services they provide (the future students or their financial supporters), and for the employers within the labor market, with whom they should start a relationship, and also for *the departments with involvement in the process of ensuring the communication* (secretary offices, rector`s offices) both between faculties, chairs, research centers and also with the relevant Ministry and the accreditation and certification institutions for the quality of the services provided, in order to protect the interests of the institution and its employees.

In the same time, the front office shall also include *those departments intended to ensure the mobility of the students and of the teaching and non-teaching staff*, and also the ones responsible with the training of the latter, including the *departments responsible with research*, as a main element in the development of knowledge and as a self-financing source.

But we must not forget the fact that the main source for promoting the image of an university is represented by the teaching act in itself, which depends on the talent and the education of the teaching staff and also on the material base used for its performance, fact that entitles us to consider that also the teaching staff having a direct relationship with the students represent the front office staff.

The changes that occur with regards to the nature and the purpose of advanced education and also at the level of the socio-economic environment, where it is provided as education services within the profile market, have led to a modification in the features of the modern education systems, from those focused on autonomous institutions setting up own regulations for the operation and the organization by season of their autonomy right, so that they decided on their own the way to provide services to the public and to reach their own specific objectives, to those that respect sets of regulations established at super state level,

promoted and founded following some reports from institutions with accreditation and auditing abilities of the quality of the services they provided.

The situation is widespread at international level, as it is shown in the specialized studies. Therefore, in Great Britain the advanced studies institutions perform their activities being subjected to a frame that is more and more restrictive and that specifies the expectations and the practice codes according to which the services for the public at large should be provided. (Johnson, 1994, p. 121). These conditions were imposed because of the more and more pressing need to have convergence connected to the mechanisms that ensure the quality of services in education the field, so that they interlap on the demands of a market that is in a continuous development and diversity.

In the same time, by developing a good relationship with the external environment of the educational institution it shall be possible to follow the efficiency of the education expenses and the public money usage in a more fair manner, and more important, it shall be possible to verify the congruence between the quality of the services and the level of the standards.

As any modern enterprise, a university can be considered an organization of study, according to the definition given by Duke (Duke, 1998), an institution capable to analyze the environment and to act in such a way that it adapts to it. In this case (Barnett, 2002), the four goals of it should be, according to the theory of Barnett:

1. To closely follow the human capital that is being used, so that it consolidates the other capitals that it holds;

2. To have the objective to improve the quality of life, both at the level of the society and for its own employees;

3. To offer life-chances (opportunities that occur once in a life time) to the individuals, so that they may play important roles within the society;

4. To develop a self-teaching capacity at the level of the society, so that the transformations that occur within it are the result of a self-development rational process of the individuals.

Regarding the connection between the university and the labor market viewed as another element from the external environment, the

specialists emphasize the necessity to correlate the educational offer with the needs of the latter, otherwise occurs the risk that the idea of life-learning becomes obsolete, and the role of the universities becomes only a formal one (Yorke, 1999). In this case, the organizations such as the universities must build a specific infrastructure for communicating with the employers that represent the demand on the labor market, depending on the type of educational services and on the professional formation of students, from this point of view the specialized literature is suggesting some categories of areas (Reich, 1991, p. 171):

– the area of classic goods production – for which preparation must have in view the training of the staff that has the basic knowledge, a great loyal spirit and who is fit for management or to be guided by other people in the performance of their job;

– the field of services orientated towards the person/individual – that have as objective to induce and cultivate certain skills such as courteousness, kindness, interpersonal style, the use of the empathic qualities, etc.;

– symbolic-analytical services – category that includes researchers, scientists, engineers, consultants;

– the field of activities from the strategic sectors of national economies, mainly sponsored by the Government, such as: education, health, communication services, infrastructure, etc.

These being said, we can conclude that we must not neglect the involvement of advanced education in the process of achieving the national economy objectives. Therefore, one of the most important roles of the higher education institutions, along with producing and applying the new knowledge, remains to support the objectives of a state`s national economy, among which the most known is the income generation. For this purpose, they must form individuals that are capable to adapt to the economic environment the conditions, eager to adopt the idea of permanent (self) formation, being aware of the fact that nowadays one has to accept the idea of professional reformation as soon as possible in case of failure.

In this context, the role of the employers and of the professional associations grows, and by the development of a cooperation relationship with the universities, through the communication interface made

available by their front offices, they can contribute to the setting up of the operational standards of the educational institutions, especially with regards to the content of the curriculum, the habits and the skills that must be developed by the students in order to compete for employment.

Having in view the current globalization, this role is much more obvious, because the standards according to which the universities carry out their activity and the education level of the students must be proved and raised to the expectation level of some institutions such as, for example, Global Alliance for Transnational Education, (Yorke, 1999, p. 19).

The universities are constrained to modify the view regarding their position within the services market, and also the view regarding their own students, who don`t longer represent only the income source during a period of time that is limited to the duration of an educational cycle, but also the "raw material" that they must transform into a "finished product" offered to the future employers, regarded not just simple clients, but as collaborating partners, who can intervene with solutions for the complex and continuous educational process. The front office of the educational institutions must, under these conditions, emphasize the development of the cooperation relationships, ensure the openness and the free circulation of information, looking to open new communication paths, both between the departments of the institutions and also with the external environment.

This view is embraced not only by the educational institutions from few of the world state, but the necessity for a change is widely accepted nowadays. Practically speaking, openness and communication depend both on the patrimony endowments and on the access to top technology, but also on the formation of the own staff and on the cultural and spiritual values of the society they operate in.

Most universities focus their attention on re-thinking the role played by those offices and departments that establish the first contacts with the future students and take care of their enrollments, especially: secretary offices, promoting offices, marketing departments, by reason of the fact that "they are perceived as some griffins that guard their own institution" (Gunn and Bakers, 1992, p. 184).

Given the bureaucratic nature of the public educational services from some states, especially the less developed ones or the ones known to have a corrupt administrative system, the demand for these services is greatly discouraged, orienting either towards the own private educational system, or, when it is not developed or doesn`t exist, towards the education system from abroad (Abouchedid and Nasser, 2002, p. 199).

The measure in which the students perceive the relation between the way in which the services are provided by the universities and their expectations is reflected in the quality level of the services performed in those institutions. Because of this, the fact that enrollment procedure has transformed into a permissive and accessible process has become an advantage for any higher educational institution. Of course, there still are and shall be differences between what the clients and what the students understand by quality of services, the way in which these must be provided and the vision of the organization.

Of course it is easier to bring all the services provided to the same level within a higher educational institution that has the same values systems in all its departments and faculties, so that the students and the other clients of the university perceive the uniformity of their quality, but within the modern universities, in most case we can see visible differences regarding this quality. And the most visible differences are at the level of the services provided in the front office of the faculties.

Many researchers have asked the question whether the individual perception on the social responsibility of the institution leads to a review of the personnel policies and of the employment conditions, in the current moment. The results of the studies show that the main modifications were observed with regards to the employment requirements (Backhaus ş.a., 2002; Turban and Greening, 1997) and to the attitude of the employers towards them (Maignan ş.a., 1999; Peterson, 2004).

In the same time, the researchers prove that modifying the work climate and ethics can induce to the employees, especially to the public relations staff, the right attitudes so that their work produces the best results at the level of the entire organization (Tervino and Weaver, 2001).

Although the social responsibility of the corporation has become the subject of analysis for numerous researchers, very few studies focus

their attention on the factors that concern the individual level (of the employees) which are affecting the relationship between the expression of social responsibility and the reaction of the other players from the business environment (Aguilera ş.a., 2007, p. 839). There are a lot of questions to which answers were not found yet, linked to the measure in which the differences between individuals, having to do with personal values and education, have an influence on the relationship discussed above.

The social responsibility awareness of the organization at the level of its employees refers to the measure in which an individual understands to contribute to the undertaking of economical, legal, ethical or specific responsibility, imposed by its founders, financers or beneficiaries (Maignan and Ferell, 2000). This conception refers to the assessments or the individual evaluations and to the interpretation of the way in which an institution carries out its activity and less to the interpretation of its economical results. The university has a major role in "integrating a young man in society by the group" e.g. students (Palaghia and Miftode, 2012), and also the socio-cultural space provided.

Due to these reasons, we must keep account of the fact that any possible future employee of an organization who desires to undertake social responsibility for its actions shall be attracted by the organization and shall accept the offer of the employer if he has a favorable perception on the way in which the institution succeeds to reach this objective. Also, the behavior of the employees shall depend on the way in which they will foreshadow in their conscious the responsibilities they have at their job and the role they play within the organization. As a consequence, the role of the employee shall be given by the complete set of responsibilities' associated to their position, including the formal elements that arise from the tasks that they have to perform, and the informal elements that arise from the social system (Murphy and Jackson, 1999).

Therefore, the main elements to be accounted when an organization determines the standards (especially the occupational ones) that must be observed in order to benefit from a favorable perception of the way in which they undertake social responsibility are mentioned in Table nr.1.

Table nr. 1. *The elements to be used for determining the standards within an organization*

Elements belonging to the economical responsibilities:	– Finding the best ways to decrease the costs; – Trying to make the development strategy of the organization known; – Maximizing the performances of the employees at their job in order to increase the profit (this is less valid in the case of a university type organization). – Determining the tasks for each position, in conformity with the financial objectives of the organization; – Finding new ways to increase the incomes.
Elements belonging to the legal responsibilities:	– Establishing the behavior norms of the employees so that there is no possibility to sexual harass the clients or the other work partners; – Abiding all the norms, regulations and laws; – Reporting all illegal actions to the management; – Strict rules for using the documents so there is no possibility to forge them; – Implementing the internal operational and behavior regulations, so that there is a non-discriminatory treatment of the employees.
Elements belonging to the ethical responsibilities:	– Reporting to the higher management any behavior or action that contravenes the ethics; – Not getting involved untruthful practices or behaviors; – Discouraging the generation of any conflicts of interests; – Strictly following the provisions of the professional standards for conduct and behavior; – Correctly treating all employees and business partners.
Elements belonging to the optional responsibilities:	– Giving amounts of money for charity works or providing time for solving community problems; – Taking into consideration the interests of the local communities and of the community in general; – Getting involved in volunteer activities and actions.

Conceived after Evans and Davis, 2008, p. 10

Some authors believe that these four categories of responsibilities that an organization must undertake during their activity could be placed as a pyramid, on which the rest of the responsibilities are based, following afterwards the legal responsibilities, then the ethic and philanthropic ones, as a consequence of the fact that these last two were taken into consideration more recently (Caroll, 1979, p. 289).

On short, the new concept of corporate social responsibility established the existence of a close connection between the organization and the society and stipulates that top managers must permanently keep account of the fact that one of the objectives of the organization is to permanently cultivate this relationship. The most recent studies show that in the case of the organizations that are doing this, they can benefit from what specialized literature calls "the first mover advantage".

In economic terms, "the first move advantage" or "the first mover advantage" refers to the capacity of an organization or of an economical unit to win a privileged position within the market that allows them to easily or rapidly obtain profit (Liebermann and Montgomery, 1988), position acquired following the use of some superior production resources or factors, due to some well substantiated forecasts or simply because of chance.

These being said and considering that social responsibility can be integrated in the strategic activities[1] of the organization represented by a higher education institution, a new series of problems occur and they must be resolved by the managers of the institutions, for example:

1. Establishing the conditions or the factors that could allow the institution to benefit from the "first move advantage";

2. Establishing the right moment to use a certain strategy or to modify the production factors.

In the case of this study, when the emphasis is placed on using the work resources from the front offices of the universities, we suggest that such an advantage could be obtained based on using a strategy linked to the human resources that the university has and focusing on the relationships that must be developed within and with the external

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[1] According to Burke and Lodgson, 1996, pp- 499 and McWilliams et all, 2006, pp. 12

environment, in order to obtain a favorable position and to ensure that it will be consolidated in time. In fact, another approach of social responsibility provides that it must also mean a commitment from the part of the organization for contributing to the sustainable development of society, by developing the relationships with the employees` families, with the local community and with the society as a whole, have the result of an improved quality of life[1].

As the conclusions of some recent studies are showing (Montiel, 2008), an organization that shall rely on a personnel strategy the approach in order to benefit from the first move advantage and to acquire a favorable position towards the other competitors must look to form their personnel so that they hold a rare, inimitable and valuable resource, through which they benefit from the distinctive elements of social responsibility and which brings them both tangible benefits, such as cost decrease, for example, but also intangible benefits, such as reputation (Tetrault, Sirsly and Lamertz, 2008, p. 364).

Together with the concept of the organization`s social responsibility, many studies also use the concept called the *social performance of the organization* or of the corporation, meaning an extrapolation of social responsibility, which integrates three aspects: accountability (at the level of the organization), solicitude (as a consequence of adapting to the society) and reactivity (following the external adaptation to the business and social environment) (Warick and Cochrane, 1985), based on three principles:

– legitimacy at institutional level;

– accountability at organizational level and

– the manager`s freedom of action (Agle, Mithell and Sonnenfeld, 1999)

– measured through eight dimensions, among which: inter-community relationships, work relationships, the matter of the environment, the problem of minorities, etc.

Other researchers take into consideration a greater series of indicators that can contribute to the measure social performance and

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[1] According to World Business Council for Sustainable Development, Corporate social responsibility : Making good business sense, 2000, pp. 10, visited on the 29th of March 2012, http:/www.wbsd.ch/DocRoot/IunSPdIKvmYH5HjbN4X C/csr2000.pdf

social responsibility within the organization, such as the pollution, the quality of the products and of the services provided to the market, the decay of the localities following the organization`s activities, the quality of education, the participation to charity actions, the profit of the corporation, the human resources, the employment and the involvement of minorities in the activity of the organization (Grunig, 1979) or the so called Moskowitz Indicator of reputation, which has in view the control of pollution, the provision of equal opportunities at employment, the representation of women and of the minorities in the administrative councils, the provisions of assisting the enterprises of the minorities, the responsibility share of advertising, the contribution to the funds, the community relationships, the support of cultural programs, a high reaction speed to the need of the service consumers, a fair treatment given to the business partners and to the clients (Cochrane and Wood, 1984).

A large part of the European researchers have a view that is slightly different from that of the American and Anglo-Saxon researchers, supporting the fact that in order for the universities to adopt the social responsibility idea is needed to have the involvement and the regulation of the Government. For example, the Swedish researchers have drawn the occlusion that the largest part of the universities consider that the responsibility for socio-economic environment protection is limited to paper and waste recycling, ignoring the rest of the relationships with the environment that could increase the impact of their actions on society. Furthermore, it is considered that the responsibility belonging to the higher management is only financial, the rest of the responsibilities falling on the shoulders of the personnel from the lower levels (Sammalisto and Arvidsson, 2008).

Because it will be necessary for the personnel, especially the teaching staff, to be trained for becoming concerned with the way in which the life style and the way in which they do their job can have a positive impact on the economic and social environment, it is needed to have established some standards and legal regulations for this purpose.

For the universities with tradition from the developed states, the main elements that make the conceive of environmental management strategies possible, regarded as the main forces for ensuring the

society`s sustainable development are: *the teaching and the administrative staff, the managers and the administrative boards, the state directives and regulations, the students* and last but not least up-keeping of *collaboration and cooperation relationships* with the other community players.

Among the factors that slow down the undertaking of social responsibilities and the involvement in the society`s sustainable development, there are: *the lack of resources, poor management, conflicts of interest and the lack of information due to a poor communication process.* Not be neglected in shaping trends, "aging in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe, and the need for reform extremely diverse, ranging from labor and capital markets, health and education and to pensions" (Alexandrescu, A.M., 2012)

The human resources strategic management was recommended by the specialists in the field from the entire world since the very moment of the first effects of the economic crisis from the end of the seventh decade of the past century (Devanna ş.a., 1984; Angle ş.a., 1985; Lorange and Murphy, 1983; Golden and Ramanujam, 1985).

We can observe here the importance played by the staff, by the department of human resources and by the personnel manager within a university or within any other institution from the services field. In fact, as numerous study are proving, the responsibilities of the human resources manager from the organizations focused on services are in a continuous growth both from the point of view of the content and also of the influence within the organization.

Conclusions

In order to become better orientated from a strategic point of view, the human resources management is confronted today with a series of challenges due to the modifications occurred in the environment where organizations carry out their activity. The main factors of influence have to do with the internationalization and the globalization of the markets, and also with the conditions specific for each activity area and dictate the permanent adaptation of the organizations in order to acquire or maintain an advantageous position within these, this adaption being

conditioned very much by the quality and the education of the human resources.

There are numerous articles in the specialized literature that recommend the use of human resources strategic management and its role in the performance growth of the company, but very few explain how this should be put into practice (Ulrich, 1987). But, it is a matter of course that using the organization`s human resources strategic management depends quite a lot on the field where they perform the activity, and on the production of goods or on the provision of services, and also on the socio-economical context.

Therefore, because of the need to consolidate the relationship with the clients, the roles played by the employees and the responsibilities undertaken by them must permanently be a re-though and adapted, with the objective to align the quality of the services at least at the competition`s standards level. The role of each employee must be very well established and they must be very well aware of it, especially when it comes to the front office personnel, because they are very often associated with the service that is bought, they represent the company in the eyes of the consumer and quite often they are the only ones who sell/promote the service.

We must not neglect the fact that the success of a company is owed to the employed personnel: both the front office staff, who are in fact materializing the provided service, and also the back office personnel, who ensure the effective conditions for carrying out the activities, contributing in the same time to create the company`s image. Also, the personnel is the one who can make the provided service a tangible asset and can reduce the risk of services variability, a risk that is perceived as being very high.

For the nowadays universities, the selection and the employment of personnel that is capable to meet the organization`s needs and to develop the internal and external relationships needed for growing, represent a critical point. In the case of these institutions, as in the case of many organizations in the services in the field, the most precious attributes of the people who apply for certain jobs do not concur with the ones that are appreciated by most employers.

In order to ensure that they make the best choices regarding the personnel, the organization must clearly demark and establish a series of criteria used to tie break the future employees, based on the studies carried out by the specialists in the human resources field (Tews ş.a., 2010) that reflect the strategy of the human resources manager. In this way there shall be a better alignment between theory and practice, an improvement of all employees` performances and a better compliance with the needs of the clients, ensuring and undertaking in the same time the organization`s social responsibility. "The services or the products that are being provided must respond to some concrete demands on the market", without losing from sight the mission of the organization and the needs of the beneficiaries (Sterea, Mathe, 2012).

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