

# Hungarian Public Administration: Creation a New Service Culture

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## **Abstract**

How to create a service provider state if customer orientation has no historical traditions as in the Hungarian Public Administration? The aim of the paper is to present and analyze a nationwide, customer service skills training program for civil servants, highlighting the innovative features of an online app used in that context. While the training program is meant to facilitate the paradigm shift and the adoption of client-friendly practices, the online tool, used with proved success, has the potential to ensure the long-lasting impact of the training. Research method: participant observation and online questionnaire survey.

**Keywords:** Culture-change, Governmental customer service, Experiential learning

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the paper is to present and analyze an online application<sup>1</sup> introduced in a nationwide, customer service skills training program for civil servants in Hungary. The training program was created to help officials in leaving old habits and to shift to a new paradigm, where cultivating a citizen-centered attitude and adopting client-friendly behaviors and practices would be the goal. An online tool, used with proven success, has the potential to ensure that the training has a long-lasting effect.

First, the paper provides a short overview of the Hungarian Public Administration system, where the innovative features of the online app within the training program must be interpreted. This is important as context does matter. There is a profound difference between the characteristic features of the public administration systems of different European countries (Ongaro and Thief, 2018). After a bird's eye view of the context, it is appropriate to spend time discussing the traditional forms of education and trainings of civil servants in Hungary, and the particular customer service skills training program that breaks definitely with the traditions. At the end, the innovative features of an online application will be highlighted and reactions will be analyzed.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://Indapps.com/trainer/>

## Context

Based on a bibliographical investigation it seems clear that – quite conventionally – scholars divide into five main clusters of Public Administration traditions in Europe: Germanic countries, Anglophone countries, Napoleonic countries, Nordic countries, and Central and Eastern European (Post-Soviet) countries (Ongaro, 2018). The Hungarian Public Administration has been traditionally interpreted as “implementation of law” and steeped in legal thinking as in Germany; at the same time, it shares features with the Central and Eastern European, Post-Soviet countries, too. While the idea of the service provider state, citizen-centered public administration, and a client-friendly attitude in service delivery is not new in Western European countries, in Hungarian Public Administration, customer orientation has no historical traditions.

Customer orientation became well-known with the New Public Management in the UK from the 1970s on. In this context, market competition and the consumer-oriented business environment forced public managers to adopt models of the private sector from the late 1970’s. The New Public Management (NPM) model’s values and practices show clearly the cross-fertilization between business and public administration, even if there were / are significant differences between the working logicistics of the two sectors. NPM became an extraordinary popular model of managing the public sector with these main values: **efficiency, effectiveness, economy**. In different forms and to a different extent all Western European countries began to adopt NPM values and practices. It means that competition and market forces, increased managerial autonomy and authority, HRM, rewarding individual success and achievement, entrepreneurship, competition, efficiency value for money, service delivery quality, customer orientation, performance/incentives, privatisation, and outsourcing (Oldfield, 2015) were not adopted in all Western European countries, or were not adopted in the same forms. In neither country were reforms pursued to the same extreme extent as in the Anglophone countries, particularly, in the UK (Ongaro, 2018).

In Western European countries, from the late 1990’s on, a new governmental model, the so-called “governance model”, became popular. The adoption of the “new governance model” was recommended also by the European Commission in the White paper on European Governance COM 428 EC, 2001, emphasizing the interdependence of the different actors in society, the importance of social cohesion and collaboration, shared responsibility and obligations, participation, and citizen engagement. The more the new model was growing in popularity, the more NPM was being criticized. Scholars began to think about it as “a transitory stage in the evolution towards New Public Governance” (Osborne, 2006) and the new public governance appeared as a “radical reinterpretation of policy making and service delivery in the public domain” (Bovaird, 2007). In a meanwhile, new governmental models have emerged (Mendosa-Vernis, 2008), however, some values and attitudes that became important in the NPM remained accepted and persistent in the new governance model, as well. For example, customer orientation in Western European countries became the “default” working style in public service.

Meanwhile, Hungary, after 1990, started a new state building, strongly “influenced by the desire to join the European Union (Hungary joined the European Union in 2004)”. The EU demanded adjustment of the state structures and adoption of EU regulations, and imposed several conditions for accession in line with the NPM, such as liberalization, marketization, and privatization of several public services and the establishment of regulatory authorities to regulate the new markets. The EU demands to adopt state structures and adopt EU regulations have led to a situation in which reforms have taken place mainly at a structural level, rather than at the cultural level. Old habits and patterns of behaviour, like patronage, still survived (Ongaro – Von Thief, 2018). From the 1990’s

the adoption of the NPM values, practices, and procedures became part of the academic discourse as a desired, positive goal to achieve a very less efficient and effective Hungarian Public Administration.

From the 2010s on, due to the will of the government, a strong state with a highly centralized, well-functioning Public Administration - a Neo-Weberian State (Pollitt, Christopher, and Bouckaert, 2004) - has been built, we can find the vision of it as it first appeared in the Hungary Public Administration Reform Program. Enhancing the competitiveness of the economy, increasing the efficiency of government operations, and improving trust in PA became top priorities. In 2010-2013 structural and legal reform took place, and PA was totally re-structured (besides an intensive simplification of the legal system, focusing on the administrative procedures). The reorganization of the government at central and territorial levels made it possible to establish a nationwide network of integrated, frontline customer service centers, "one-stop shops". The so-called "windows of the government" were meant to create the same quality service delivery in all parts of the country and streamline government services.

In the new, ongoing Public Service and Public Administration Development Program 2014-2020, the aim became the realization of the professional, cost-effective, efficient PA, the provision of customer-focused public services. Analysing the ongoing Program from the theoretical point of view, it seems that the Neo-Weberian state model is enhanced by some values and practices of the New Public Management: effectiveness, efficiency, economy.

### **Description**

There was a need to disseminate a new, citizen-centred, customer-oriented, client-friendly attitude, and new concrete practices and techniques among all future and current civil servants - particularly by all those who worked with clients in the „government windows” (one-stop-shops). The question was how to create a new culture in the Hungarian Public Administration, characterized by a strong dependency on the past? Culture is the sum of all the beliefs, values and norms, and assumptions shared by a group of people. Organizational cultures, institutional cultures are extremely hard to change, and making civil servants think and act in a completely new way requires a paradigm shift. The practice, skills, knowledge and attitudes of the employees must be changed. In order to introduce and spread service culture, a series of complex training programs at the National University of Public Service (NUPS) were developed addressing the staff of the integrated customer service centres.

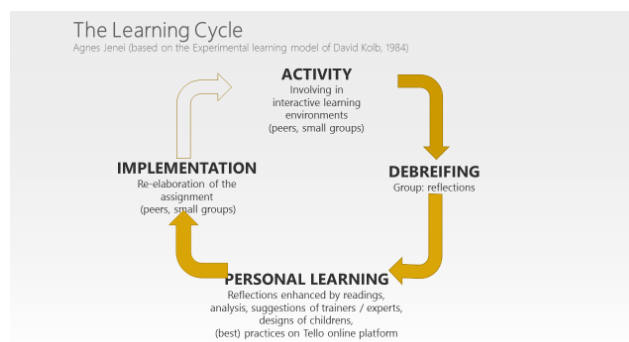
Among the different training modules of the whole program, the Customer Service Skills Training was particularly appreciated by the participants. It was completely different from the traditional Hungarian education and training programs for civil servants. In the education of civil servants at the predecessor of the NUPS, the teaching culture was dominant: frontal lectures, formal instruction, factual knowledge, the learning culture (student-centred stimulation of active learning with case studies, simulations) was present in only a few departments, for example, the Communication Department (Jenei, 2018). In accordance with the statement of Christopher Reichard and Eckhard Shröter (2018). The authors differentiate three main clusters: legal, public and corporate cluster. The legal cluster is characterized by law studies (Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland, Greece, Hungary), while the public cluster cultivates policy studies, political science (Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, France); the corporate cluster prefers management studies, economics (UK, Slovakia, Romania).

The NUPS (responsible for the education of future civil servants and current civil servants), recognized the need for more experimental learning in the education of future

civil servants (at the BA and also at the MA levels and also in the short-cycle and long-cycle continuing education programs for current civil servants), and began to adopt a new approach, characterized by fewer law courses, more management courses, less theory, more practice, skill development, internships, less frontal, more interactive teaching, and trying to move from the „teaching culture to learning culture”. Designing and delivering a new customer service skills training took place in this context.

In the program, designed and delivered from 2013 until now, the objectives were to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes: to make participants understand the concept of being service-oriented and client-friendly, provide them with practical tools and techniques, facilitate dialogue among them, and create opportunities for networking and knowledge-sharing; establish a safe environment where civil servants can experiment with new practices, and new behavior models suitable for the new culture. The main topics (customer-friendly communication, dealing with different clients, communicating with disabled people, handling complaints, conflict management, intercultural conflict management, integrity, stress management) reflect the belief of the designers that communication is the key factor of cultural change.

The training was carefully designed in making an impact on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels. The learning method is structured, interactive training, based on the „experimental learning” model of David Kolb, the educational theorist who - with clear reference to earlier work of John Dewey and Kurt Levin - claimed that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984) and to put emphasis on the central role of the experience. However, in Kolb's holistic, integrative perspective, experience, perception, cognition, and behaviour are all combined. The experiential learning theory can be considered as a four-stage cycle of learning; it embraces four separate learning styles. “Effective learning is seen when a person progresses through a cycle of four stages: of (1) having a concrete experience followed by (2) observation of and reflection on that experience which leads to (3) the formation of abstract concepts (analysis) and generalizations (conclusions) which are then (4) used to test hypothesis in future situations, resulting in new experiences.”



*Figure 1 – The Learning Cycle of the Customer Skills Training  
Source: Jenei (based on Kolb, 1984)*

Only one particular training program hardly create new culture. In order to create long-lasting effect, an online app, developed by one of the – psychologist - trainers (István Soós) seemed particularly useful as it could prolong the learning process. Participants try it to use during the training and they are recommended to use after the training, too. For the trainees it is a free, online “mentor”, a DISC (William Marston, 1928) based instrument. The app creates a profile of a client (any person), based on the behavioural traits, observed and typed into the system by the user in a structured way. Before creating

the profile of the client, the user has the possibility to set up his / her profile, based on the results of a DISC test (he / she filled out before). Once the client profile is ready, the app gives short, personalized guidelines to the user on how to communicate with the client in an effective way during the customer service interaction. The app can be used in the training while analyzing virtual clients (on short videos, created for the training) and discussed by the participants. It develops the communication awareness and observation skills of the participants. The participants are interested in getting to know how to harmonize their behaviour with the client they saw in the video.

The individual work of creating profiles is followed by a group discussion (about how members of the same group see the same client in the video, about the factors that can determine the own viewpoints). The participants enhance their knowledge by some theoretical contribution formulated in simple, well-structured advice. The reflective learning cycle can be continued with the interaction based on the observation of a new client.

Participants can use the app with a personal code after the training, too (obviously not in the presence of the real client, but later, when reflecting on challenging situations). The app becomes a kind of learning mentor or coach for them: it helps structure the observations, helps analyze the client's behaviour; creates the profile of the clients based on the structured observations and provides the trainees with personalized communication advice (golden rules) for the interaction.

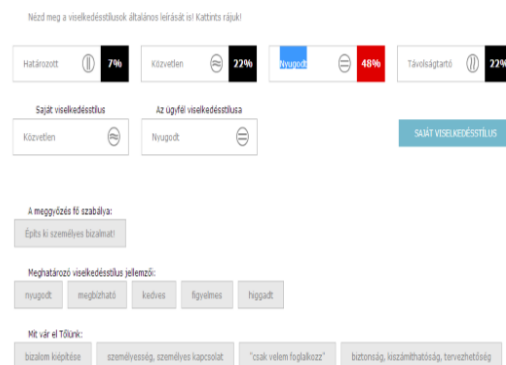


Figure 2 – Online App 1  
Source: Bajnok In Jenei, 2018

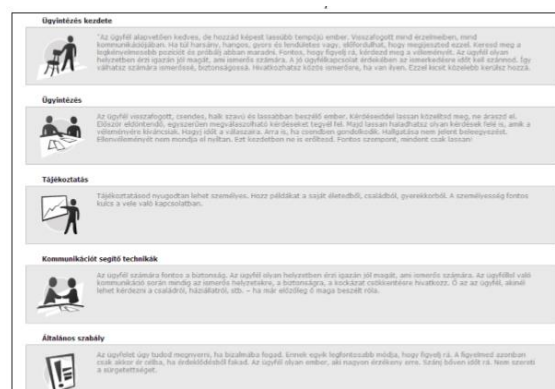


Figure 3 – Online App 2  
Source: Bajnok In Jenei, 2018

The assessment of the Customer Service Training program is realized at the first three levels of evaluation, according to Donald L. Kirkpatrick's method of Evaluating Training Programs (1998):

- At the 1<sup>st</sup> level, the evaluation of the reactions of the participants was made by the trainers, in a structured activity, getting feedback from the participants about their feelings and thoughts relating to the topics and the usefulness of the training, and if the training session accommodated their personal learning styles. The NUPS, from the organizational side, measures the satisfaction of the participants.
- At the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, the evaluation of the learning is made by an online test that participants can complete two weeks after the training.
- At the 3<sup>rd</sup> level, the evaluation of the behaviour is made by trainers in the form of observation. Since May 2017, an online questionnaire is filled out after the trainings which delivers the feedback of the group, as well as their suggestions to the leading trainer (author of the present paper).
- The evaluation of the 4<sup>th</sup> level (the impact that the training had on the organization) was not planned.

### **Research**

The research question was the following: is the app suitable to develop communication skills? Do participants think it is user-friendly? As for the research design, in 2017 and 2018 the author of the presented paper (same person as the leading trainer) measured the reactions of the participants of the training programs through their trainers (it was not possible to reach the participants directly). Trainers had to answer several questions of the leading trainer relating to the participants' reactions about the whole training program in an online survey. Among these question those were related to the online app: a) usefulness of the training program b) usefulness (according to the participants) of the app in developing communication awareness.

There were questions related to the internet speed, to the accessibility of the server of the app, and to technical help, too. The correlation of the results with the results of these questions will be highlighted in the final version (review publication) of this paper. Feedback and suggestions of the trainees had to be gathered by the trainers. Participants had to individually evaluate the online app by giving their rating on post-its. Once they gave their ratings they had to stick them on a flipchart along drawn scale. Trainers had to take a picture with their mobile phone and write the results in the online questionnaire to the leading trainer. Participants could give suggestions, too. They were all collected by the trainers and sent to the leading trainer. Based on the answers, the leading trainer prepared an official report for the logistic organizer of the whole program (Vice Director of the Continuing Education and Leadership Development Institute).

### **Findings**

Feedback and results are related to the following Customer Service Skills Trainings, designed and delivered by the National University of Public Service (Jenei, 2018a), professionally coordinated by Agnes Jenei in May 2017 (34 respondents), September 2017 (25 respondents), January 2018 (23 respondents) and May 2018 (31 respondents).

Usefulness (according to the participants) of the app in developing communication awareness:



Figure 4 – Trainings in May 2017 (34 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2017

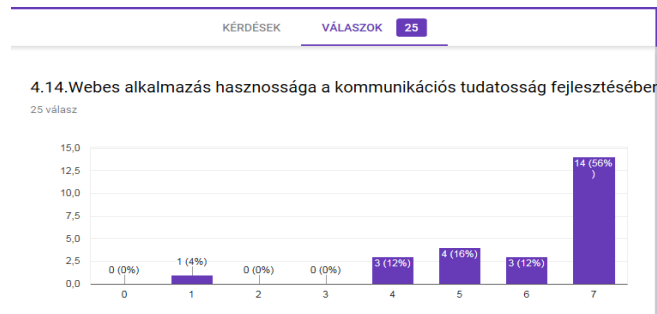


Figure 5 – Trainings in September 2017 (25 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2017

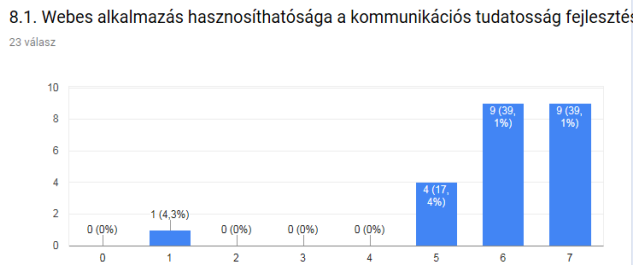


Figure 6 – Trainings in January 2018 (23 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2018

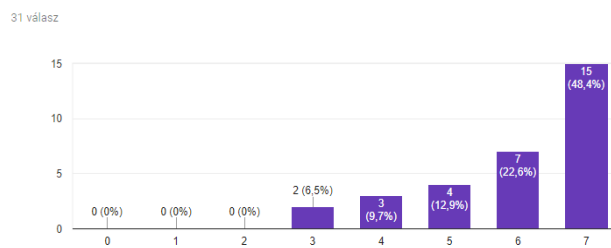


Figure 7 – Trainings in May 2018 (31 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2018

## User friendliness (according to the participants) of the application:

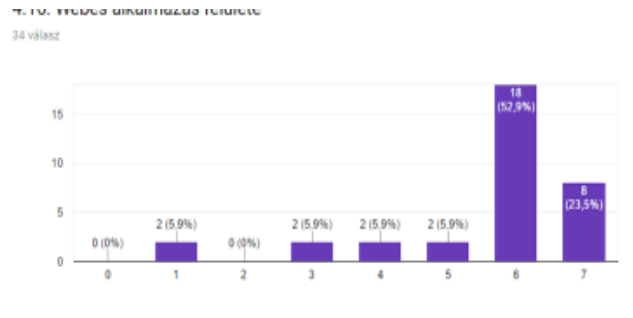


Figure 8 – Trainings in May 2017 (34 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2017

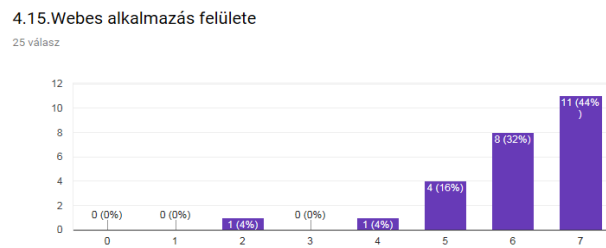


Figure 9 – Trainings in September 2017 (25 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2017

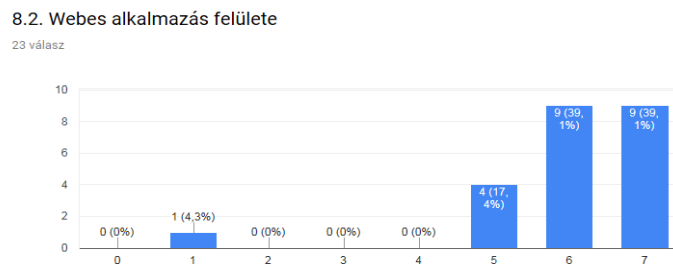


Figure 10 – Trainings in January 2018 (23 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2018

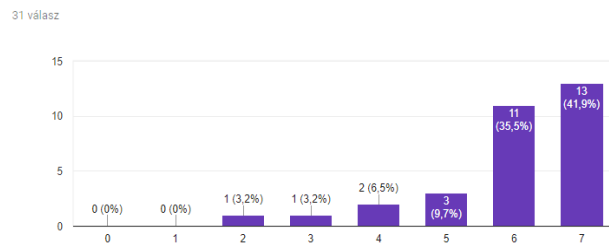


Figure 11 – Trainings in May 2018 (31 respondents)  
Source: Jenei, 2018

## Conclusion

The highlighted online tool is used with proven success within the customer service training program. The application has the potential to ensure that the training will have a long-lasting effect. However, in order to prove the effectiveness of this instrument, the evaluation of the 4<sup>th</sup> level must be taken, as well. Measuring the outcomes of the online



app or of the whole training program over the long term seems rather challenging from a methodological point of view. It is a time and cost consuming operation with difficulty in identifying which outcomes, benefits, or final results are most closely linked to the training; there are too many concurrent factors that can shape the organizational culture of the participants. However, purposeful questions in the form of interviews can confirm the usage and the possible methods of utilization (including multiplying effects) of the app after the training program has terminated.

Besides the online app, several innovative features of the training program have been identified from the feedback of participants, such as the usability of experiential learning strategies; building “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger 2001); the enhancement of social learning, having the opportunity to experiment with new practices for a new culture; creation of an intensive knowledge network. “Communities (...) appear to be an effective way for organizations to handle unstructured problems and to share knowledge outside of the traditional structural boundaries” (Lave & Wenger 2001).

Based on the feedback of the trainers, one of the main advantage of this learning method is flexibility. Although there is a strictly structured script with detailed activities, the trainer can put the emphasis on the different topics depending on the particular composition of the group. In some cases, training groups need to work as a problem solving peer coaching group (like transformative action learning groups, Kramer-Jenei, 2015); instead of having role plays, setting up conversations. “Conversational learning, a learning process whereby learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversations” (Kolb, 2002). According to the trainers, it is always a multilateral learning process.

During these occasions, trainers had clear evidence concerning the deep understanding of civil servants in regards to the dysfunctional elements of the one-stop shop system. For example, the lack of efficient, internal institutional communication, coordination and cooperation (Jenei, 2018), or the unreasonably high number of issues to cover. As the public administration system is organized in a strong hierarchical structure, with one-way, top-down communication by orders, civil servants, in everyday life, working at the extreme points, hardly can be heard at the managerial level; bottom-up proposals are regularly filtered by middle-management.

In this context, the recent novelty of the training program has been the involvement of middle-managers in the roles of trainers, and have revealed extremely valuable opportunities to introduce corrections and adjustments into the system of the one-stop shops. Participants of the training groups could serve as the source of previously-lacking feedback in a system relatively newly emerging system that definitely needs improvement.

In this regards, it worth mention the Japanese Kaizen (Imai, 2012) philosophy (often seen as a change management model) that puts the emphasis on the continuous improvement. The essence of Kaizen is not only the focus on the continuous improvement, but also on the process, on “how” to do the continuous improvement: involving everyone in an organization from the top management to the workers in the process. The value of the presented training program is to plant the seeds this kind of culture.

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