

Punishment of employees – its causes, types, and consequences, as well as factors determining punishment for poor quality

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Abstract ***Purpose.** The purpose of this paper is to identify reasons for punishing employees, prevalent types of punishment, consequences of punishment, and the factors that determine whether employees are punished for the poor quality of products and services. **Design/methodology/approach.** The main research method was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire technique. A personal interview was a complementary method aimed at providing additional data and broaden the extent of research findings. **Findings.** The conducted research shows that employees are punished mainly when some irregularities occur and are detected (someone does not respect the procedures and standards in force in a given organization). Penalties provided for in-work discipline systems are rarely used. They are supplemented by various informal punishments. As a consequence of penalties received, employees feel injustice, a lack of motivation to work, a lack of satisfaction, and an unwillingness to propose improvement actions. **Originality/value.** The factors influencing punishment include the ability to set a quality criterion for a job appraisal, the presence of a quality criterion in a remuneration system, as well as the results of quality audits. The narrow spatial and temporal scope of the conducted research should be considered as its main limitation. The research was of a partial character, so its representativeness is rather limited. The interpretation of data obtained through interviews depends on their structure, the knowledge and skills of interviewees, and their ability to avoid bias.*

Keywords punishment, penalty, quality criteria, bonus, employees, poor quality.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that punishing employees does not lead to lasting change, as rewarding is a better way of modifying behaviors. However, this does not change the fact that, in practice, punishments are used. In most cases, formal punishments are included and described in work regulations. Punishing employees involves using various stimuli aimed to cause the employee to feel bad and uncomfortable. Such feelings are intended to make the employee comply with the standards existing in the organization (Kura et al., 2015; Podsakoff, 1982; Podsakoff et al., 2006; Ostaszewski, 2000; Siang, 2012; Rubin, Bommer, & Bachrach, 2010).

Punishment of employees is not a new topic in management sciences. However, this problem is not willingly taken up in the sciences of management and quality. If anything, it is present in the trend of organizational behavior, and especially in those studies that concern work discipline. The precursors of quality management were against the use of penalties and were in favor of removing fear in relations between employees. Penalties are applied—even indirectly—by taking away bonuses.

In the literature to date, it is possible to distinguish several main thematic groups of undertaken studies. These are reasons for punishment (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Butterfield et al., 1996; Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008; Zhang et al., 2020; Frey et al., 2023), types of punishment (Podsakoff, 1982; Podsakoff et al., 2006; Ostaszewski, 2000; Rubin, Bommer, & Bachrach, 2010; Siang, 2012; Li, Cheng, & Hou, 2021), and the effects of punishment (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000; Bell, 2010; Zheng et al., 2020). In this paper, we want to focus on not only the causes, types, and consequences of punishment, but also the extent to which employees are punished for poor quality.

Quality is defined in international standards—for example, ISO 9000—as the degree to which the needs and expectations of customers are satisfied. Such needs and expectations become quality requirements. The notion of customer refers to both internal and external customers (cf. ISO 9000). Quality requirements may apply to physical and chemical properties of a

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product or a service itself (its timeliness, compliance with established procedures or behavioral standards, etc.).

The problem of punishment for poor service or product quality has not been researched extensively. So far, the following aspects of such punishment have been examined and described: punishing and enforcing codes of ethics to improve service quality (Schwepker & Hartline, 2005), the relationship between punishment and gains from holding a public office (Dal Bó et al., 2006), punishing public officials who allowed low-quality products to enter the market in return for bribes (MLO, 2007), the impact of leadership behaviors on quality management practices and quality outcomes (Laohavichien et al., 2011), the effectiveness of penalties and monetary incentives in managing product quality in a two-tier supply chain (Davis & Hyndman, 2018), and the introduction of a system of penalties and other sanctions to maintain different accreditation standards (Weske et al., 2019).

This state of affairs is probably due to the fact that, in quality management, rewards, incentives, and praise are more important than penalties. Deming and Ishikawa, the forerunners of TQM (Total Quality Management), advocated the removal of all actions and situations that cause fear, such as punishment for poor performance, employee rankings, or merit-based remuneration systems (Ishikawa, 1985; Deming, 1986; Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Penalties generate fear and this emotional reaction is what hinders quality improvement. Therefore, it is rightly assumed that penalties are imposed by customers and the market (Oakland, 2011); if quality improvement is pursued, punishing employees should be avoided.

The conducted review of the literature on the subject shows a lack of publications on the extent to which employees are punished for the poor quality of products or services. However, the fact that such punishments are administered is indirectly indicated by the results of the authors' previous research on the normative and social factors influencing quality improvement in both production and service organizations (Bugdol, 2018) as well as the factors determining rewarding employees for quality (Jedynak & Bugdol, 2020).

Hence, the following questions arise: What are the reasons for punishing employees? Is poor quality one of them? If so, to what extent? Which forms of punishment dominate? What are the consequences of punishments? What factors influence punishing employees for poor quality?

The purpose of this paper is to identify reasons for punishing employees, prevalent types of punishment, consequences of punishment, and the factors that determine whether employees are punished for the poor quality of products and services.

The addressees of this paper include managers responsible for quality and human resources management, as well as all academics specializing in quality issues.

The findings of the research are relevant to management practices, as they show what needs to be done to eliminate factors that foster penalization and thus the collapse of organizational values such as trust and fairness.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Reasons for punishing employees

Employees receive penalties for unsatisfactory performance, insubordination, failure to comply with instructions under existing policies, absenteeism, unethical behaviors, neglect of duties, misconduct after work, lying, falsifying data or theft (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Butterfield, et al., 1996; Cooper, 2012). According to a study conducted by Frey et al. (2023), employees are punished for poor performance, violations of workplace rules, unethical behavior or bullying, but also for actions that are generally considered beneficial, such as whistleblowing (Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008). Sometimes, however, an employee is punished as a result of pressure exerted by a customer (Bugdol, 2018). The use of punishment is influenced by managers' past experiences and the personality traits of both managers and employees, as well as relations between them (Fandt et al., 1990; Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000). Entire organizations, including, indirectly, their employees, are punished for acts of embezzlement (Zhang et al., 2020). The reasons mentioned above lie in the behaviors of employees and their (sometimes incorrect) appraisals made by superiors. They are determined by organizations' internal regulations, legal systems and sometimes the pursuit of self-interest. However, it should be kept in mind that punishment may also result from an individual's psychological traits such as sadistic tendencies (Frey et al., 2023).

Types of punishment

The literature on the subject distinguishes formal punishments (e.g., fine, caution, or disciplinary dismissal), and informal physical punishments (e.g., physical exercise or standing still), as well as other financial or behavioral punishments. Punishment consists of not only the imposition of sanctions or the official recording of cautions in personnel documentation, but also behavioral changes such as excessive emotionality or coldness. Punishment can also be divided into conditional, unconditional, indirect (inflicted by others), direct, intentional, unintentional (due to ignorance) and contractual (e.g., for any product that is

inconsistent with specifications) (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Ostaszewski, 2000; Podsakoff et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 2010; Siang, 2012). Psychology also distinguishes between prosocial punishment and proself punishment (Li, Cheng, & Hou, 2021). This distinction, however, concerns the motives and goals of punishment.

Consequences of punishment

The conducted literature review indicates that punishment is responsible for a decline in satisfaction, employees' questioning the rationality of goals, strengthening the belief that certain inappropriate behaviors may be acceptable (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000), and quality improvement becoming difficult (Craig & Lemon, 2008). The results of these studies are in line with earlier laboratory research which found that the intensity of punishment significantly influenced the allocation of working time. For example, the heavier the punishment was, the less time the subjects spent on the tasks for which they had been punished (Schmitt, 1969).

Sometimes researchers focus on the consequences of inappropriate punishments (as opposed to punishments that restore social order or a sense of fairness in the workplace). Such punishments undermine the authority of managers and trigger negative attitudes towards work (Wiltermuth et al., 2013). Harsh punishments may reduce criminal activities in an organization, but may also increase the effectiveness of members of criminal networks (Garoupa, 2007). Punishing employees destroys their social potential and morale (Bell, 2010). Many studies show that punishment has less impact on changes in behaviors than rewards (Tremblay et al., 2013). It has been demonstrated that changes in employee behaviors resulting from punishment are immediate but often short-lasting (Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000).

Of course, as it has already been pointed out, punishment does not always fulfil negative functions only (Chen, 2016; Earnhart, 2000; Zheng et al., 2020). Punishment fulfils a deterrent function and is aimed at preventing the delivery of poor-quality products to the market (Swathi et al., 2020). Penalties for non-compliance with established rules can prevent interpersonal deviant behaviors of employees (Zheng et al., 2020). A system of punishment for both organizations and employees is used to strive to maintain the quality of natural resources (Earnhart, 2000). Punishment may deter employers from evading legal regulations (Barrett, 2015), although the strictness of penalties does not always influence decisions regarding, for example, participation in informal economies (Williams & Bezeredi, 2018). However, an assessment of a punishment and reward system depends on employees' perception of fairness in the workplace (Podsakoff et al., 2006).

Factors determining whether employees are punished for the poor quality of products and services

Besides psychological aspects (cf. Fandt et al., 1990; Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000) and the existence of a formal disciplinary system, the basic factor is the ability to assess quality, as well as the criteria and methods of quality assessments (Bugdol, 2018). In the case of industrial operations, the establishment of qualitative criteria for work appraisals is objectivized. Indeed, it is possible to link such appraisals as well as sanctions to objective indicators (Tadic et al., 2013). What counts in the case of services includes both quantitative indicators (e.g., the amount of data entered) and qualitative indicators (the correctness of performance in relation to some benchmark or checklist). The extent to which qualitative indicators are included in remuneration systems is also important. Their absence limits the possibilities of penalizing employees for the lack of quality. The literature review also shows that quality is one of the criteria for awarding bonuses (Dale, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODS

The main research method used by the authors was a systematic literature review. The literature on the subject was reviewed over the course of the following stages: (1) selecting key words; (2) searching for works containing the identified key words in the following databases: Historical Abstracts with Full Text, Academic Research Source eJournals, Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, Academic Research Source eBooks, Legal Source, Agricola, ERIC, Green FILE, and Open Dissertations; (3) becoming familiar with the returned publications; (4) reviewing the publications; (5) preparing a map of the available literature; (6) summarizing the selected publications; and (7) arranging the collected research material. The applied procedure is consistent with the general methodology of conducting research (Craswell, 2013) and the methodology of research in management sciences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

The literature review began with the database Historical Abstracts with Full Text, in which, in February 2020, the keyword «punishment» appeared 3887 times (in field), the combination of the words «punishment» and «employee» appeared 67 times, and the phrase «employee and quality» appeared twice. The vast majority of articles dealt with justice and court systems, punishments applied in different centuries, and the quality of mercy.

The second stage of searching for source texts included the following databases: Academic Research Source eJournals, Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, Academic Research Source eBooks, Legal Source, Agricola, ERIC, Green FILE, and Open Dissertations. In these databases, the keywords «punishment-employee» and «quality» occurred 105

times (in field); the three keywords together, i.e., «punishment-employee-quality,» occurred 139 times (in field); the words “punishment-TQM” occurred 9 times in field and 628 times in text. Only peer-reviewed academic journals were included in the search. The majority of the returned publications were rejected because they dealt with criminology and interpersonal relations outside the workplace. In view of the research objective, the systematic literature review was complemented by a grey literature review (Adams et al., 2016).

MIND MAP – PUNISHMENT

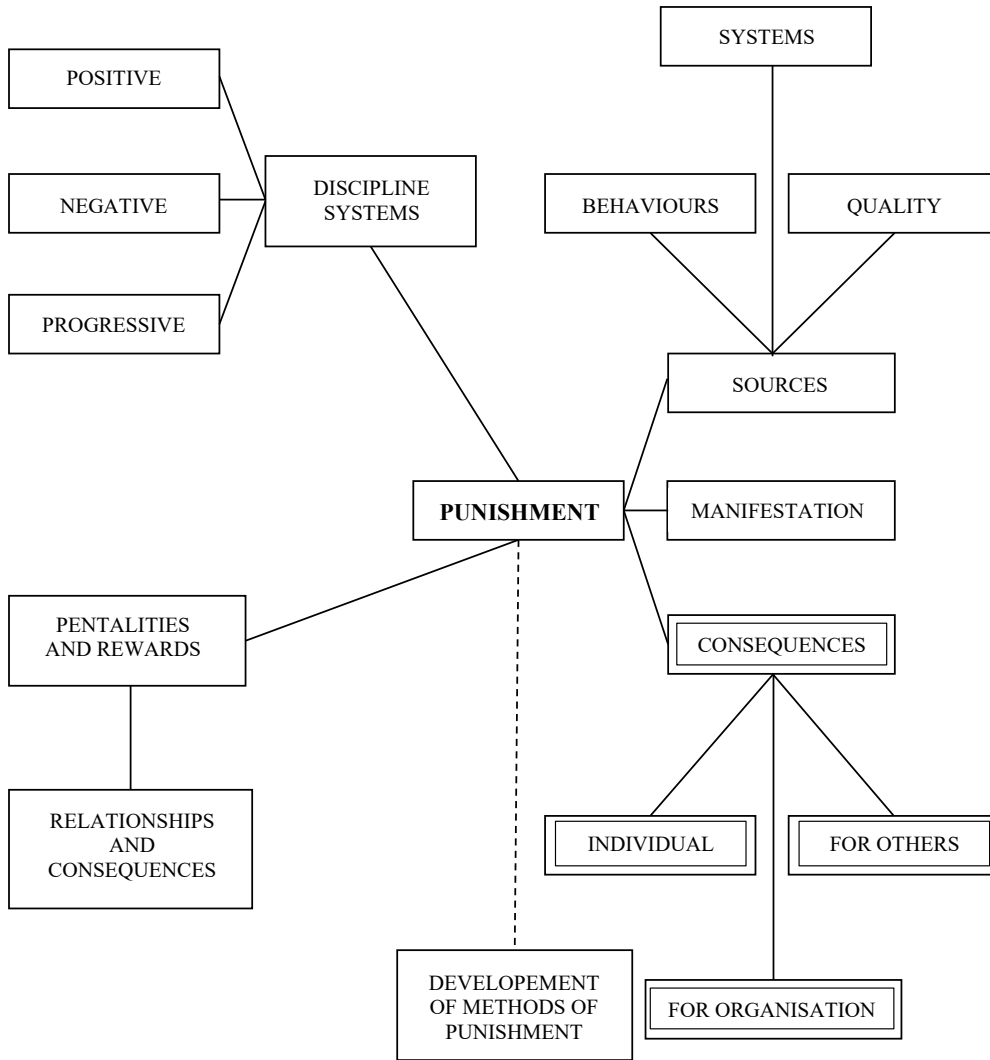


Figure 1. Mind map – punishment.
Source: Own study

The main research method was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire technique. The research tool was an electronic survey questionnaire consisting of 26 closed and semi-open questions. The research was conducted between March 2021 and May 2022. The questionnaire covered the reasons for punishment, the types of punishment, the feelings of those who were punished, and the focal issue of punishment for poor quality. To this end, the questions concerned the existence of these criteria in employee assessment and remuneration systems. The other important factors included the use of management systems dedicated to quality, environment, occupational health and safety, the Lean concept, etc. The authors' focus was primarily on managerial aspects (psychosocial factors were omitted, as it was felt that they could not be fully explored through the

questionnaire technique). The entire questionnaire was tested on a small sample of respondents. If there were any questions to which someone answered yes or no, they only concerned the existence of qualitative criteria in the bonus system. In most cases, the provided answers were semi-open rather than closed. The selection of research participants was not random. As for the interviewees, they were mostly the same people who had completed the questionnaire. The objective of conducting interviews was to obtain more in-depth answers. The method of selecting interviewees was not random. The goal was to gather as much information as possible from the largest number of organizations. Consequently, each respondent represented only one organization.

This paper does not discuss all the questions asked. The empirical material obtained in the diagnostic survey underwent a statistical analysis, which, in addition to a structural analysis (numbers and percentages), also included a χ^2 test of independence and a measure of an effect size (W) for the independence test (Cohen, 1988). Statistical inference was performed with an assumed *ex ante* significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. All calculations were performed using the Statistica 13 software developed by StatSoft Poland.

A total of 391 employees from the Opolskie and Małopolskie provinces (Poland) participated in the research. The selection of research participants was based on the assumption that they had the knowledge of management processes. Therefore, the selected employees were also students of business programs who had already passed examinations in quality management. The selection of respondents was aimed at ensuring possibly the largest number of represented organizations. The questionnaire was available online and participation in the research was voluntary.

Two-thirds of the respondents were women and one-third was men. Almost all respondents had either higher (50%) or secondary (49%) education. Approximately 38% of them were employed as specialists, 27% as administrative clerks, 14% as low- or middle-level managers, 9% as production workers, and 8% as customer service specialists. Top management representatives accounted for 4% of the respondents. Almost 37% of the participants were employed in micro enterprises, 25% in small ones, 14% in medium ones and 24% in large ones. The service, industrial, public, and financial sectors were represented respectively by 47%, 29%, 13% and 11% of the respondents. More than 51% of them dealt with various individual customers, 35% with institutional customers, and 14% with permanent individual customers. Health and safety management systems had been implemented in the organizations employing 36% of the respondents and standardized quality management systems based on the ISO 9001 had been introduced by the employers of 30% of the respondents. 12% of them declared working for organizations without any implemented management system or concept. The use of systems based on Lean management, TQM, ISO 14001 or ISO 27000, and Six Sigma was declared respectively by 7%, 5%, 4% and 3% of the respondents.

A personal interview was a complementary method aimed at providing additional data and broadening the extent of research findings. The qualitative procedure (Creswell, 2013) included: choosing a research strategy, purposively selecting participants, identifying data sources and preparing an interview report form, performing data analysis, and interpretation (including organizing and preparing data, reviewing and coding data describing a situation, determining the way of presentation, interpretation). The data collected during interviews were coded and analyzed using the MAXQDA software. A total of 201 persons were interviewed. The characteristics of the research sample are presented below (Table 1). The participants comprised 75 persons working in micro and small businesses (up to 50 employees), 44 persons from medium-sized companies (from 50 to 250 employees) and 78 persons from large organizations (more than 250 employees). Regarding the type of activity carried out by the respondents' employers, 133 employees represented the services sector, 41 persons worked in various branches of the industry and 20 respondents were employed in the public sector. Two persons declared that their employers conducted mixed service and production activities. One person indicated a non-profit organization as their place of employment. Four respondents did not indicate the size and business profile of their employers. Each interview with open-ended questions included the following sections: qualitative criteria in job appraisals, attitudes towards job appraisals, principles of punishment, reasons for punishment, interviewees' own experiences of punishment and purposes of punishment.

Based on the literature review, the following research problems were formulated:

P.1. What are the reasons for punishing employees?

The results of previous research indicate that employees are punished when they do not adhere to established social norms, perform poorly, commit unethical or criminal acts (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Butterfield et al., 1996; Herrmann, Thöni, & Gächter, 2008; Zhang et al., 2020). However, the authors assume the existence of differences related to the character of individual organizations' processes. In service organizations, service delivery procedures dominate and constitute the basis for employee appraisal, while statistical process control is a characteristic feature of industrial and manufacturing organizations.

P2. What types of punishment are prevalent?

Previous research (Butterfield et al., 1996; Siang, 2012; Bugdol, 2018) has shown that punishments provided for in-work discipline systems, that is, caution or disciplinary dismissal, are rarely used (which is perhaps due to the effort necessary for

the execution or relevant procedures). Therefore, informal punishment occurs alongside formal one (Bugdol, 2018). Thus, it can be assumed that informal forms of punishment (e.g., verbal reprimands) dominate in the case of poor product and service quality. In contrast, where quality can be measured, financial penalties dominate.

P3. What are the consequences of punishment?

The conducted literature review indicates that punishment causes employees to experience discontent, question the rationality of established goals, believe that certain inappropriate behaviors are acceptable (Podsakoff et al., 1982; Bellizzi & Hasty, 2000) and perceive quality improvement as very difficult (Craig & Lemon, 2008). The authors assume that punishment is the cause of perceived injustice. In quality improvement processes, more than 80% of errors are systemic and caused by the management. The goal of quality improvement is not to punish, but only to learn together and reduce process variability (Deming, 1986; 2012).

P4. What factors determine whether employees are punished for the poor quality of products and services?

Based on their experience as quality auditors, the authors assume that what may influence the occurrence of such punishments is the possibility of setting qualitative criteria used in conducted appraisals and existing management systems. The extent to which qualitative indicators are included in remuneration systems is also important. The literature review also shows that quality is one of the criteria for awarding bonuses (Dale, 2001). Still another factor may be the availability of data, for example whether quality audits are carried out. The results of such audits should not be a reason for punishment but, unfortunately, practice in this respect varies considerably.

Table 1. Characteristics of the surveyed organisations

Criterion	Feature	Number	Percentage [%]
Size of enterprise	Micro	144	36.8
	Small	97	24.8
	Medium	55	14.1
	Large	95	24.3
Sector	Services	185	47.3
	Industry	112	28.6
	Public institution	51	13.0
	Finance	43	11.0
Main customers	Various individual customers	200	51.2
	Institutional customers	136	34.8
	Permanent individual customers	55	14.1
Health and safety management system	ISO 9001	142	36.3
	None	117	29.9
	Lean	47	12.0
	TQM	27	6.9
	ISO 14001	20	5.1
	ISO 27001	14	3.6
Applied management systems or concepts	ISO 14001	14	3.6
	ISO 27001	14	3.6
	Six Sigma	10	2.6

Source: Own study

RESULTS

Statistical analysis results

The use of penalties in the surveyed enterprises was not related to their organizational and functional characteristics (Table 2). A stochastic relationship was found only between the fact that penalties were applied and the respondents' job positions ($\chi^2=16.3$, $p = 0.001$). The impact of a job position on the application of punishment was average ($W = 0.202$). Production and customer service employees were punished relatively more frequently (the ratio of those who were punished to those who were not punished was about 7:1), while specialists received punishment the least frequently (1.5:1).

Table 2. Selected organisational and functional characteristics and the use of punishment in the respondents' enterprises

Criterion	Characteristic	Use of punishment				χ^2	p	W
		No		Yes				
		n	%	n	%			
Job title	Specialist	58	44.3	92	35.4	16.3	0.00	0.20
	Production or customer service	8	6.1	58	22.3			
	Management and administration	65	49.6	110	42.3			
Size of enterprise	Micro and small	82	62.6	159	61.2	0.08	0.78	0.01
	Medium and large	49	37.4	101	38.8			
Sector	Services	80	61.1	148	56.9	5.29	0.07	0.12
	Industry	29	22.1	83	31.9			
	Public sector organisation	22	16.8	29	11.2			
Main customers	Individual customers	81	61.8	174	66.9	1.00	0.31	0.05
	Institutional customers	50	38.2	86	33.1			
	ISO 14001, 27001, 45001	54	41.2	116	44.6			
Applied management systems or concepts	Lean and Six Sigma	18	13.7	19	7.3	4.32	0.22	0.11
	ISO 9001 and TQM	43	32.8	94	36.2			
	None	16	12.2	31	11.9			

Legend: n - number, % – percentage, χ^2 – chi-square independence test, p – probability level, W – effect size measure for χ^2 independence test, where: $W < 0.20$ small effect, $W = 0.20-0.30$ medium effect, $W > 0.30$ large effect (Cohen, 1988), values statistically significant at the $p \leq 0.05$ level are shown in bold.

Source: Own study

Among the respondents, there were statistically significant stochastic relationships between the type of imposed punishment and: the job position ($\chi^2=17.16$, $p=0.01$), the enterprise size ($\chi^2=9.82$, $p=0.02$), the enterprise type ($\chi^2=13.29$, $p=0.04$) and the applied management systems or concepts ($\chi^2=15.01$, $p=0.04$). The impact of the enterprise size and type on the type of administered punishment was low, while the impact of the job position and the applied management systems or concepts was medium. The highest percentages of specialists, managers and administrative staff were not punished or received disciplinary penalties, while in the case of production and customer service employees, disciplinary penalties dominated. The highest percentage of the employees in micro and small enterprises declared the absence of punishment or the occurrence of disciplinary and informal penalties, while for medium and large businesses, it was the absence of punishment or disciplinary penalties.

Reasons for punishment

Before discussing the dominant forms of punishment, it should be stated, as previous research has shown, that punishment is used relatively rarely in organizations (Bugdol, 2018). This was confirmed in the authors' research, as two-thirds of the respondents declared that employees were not punished in their organizations and only one-third confirmed the use of punishment. The quantitative research indicates that employees are punished mainly when some irregularities occur and are detected (someone does not respect the procedures and standards in force in a given organization). Penalties were administered as a result of inspections (32.1%), internal audits (37.4%) external audits (22.4%), and financial audits (19.8%). As far as punishment for poor quality is concerned, it is used in about one-half of the surveyed companies, especially where employees can be financially penalized for failing to meet quality objectives (39.4%) or where quality criteria dominate in the bonus system (51.1%).

The qualitative research shows that penalties are applied for several groups of reasons. The first and most numerous group includes deviations from rules and standards (for example failure to comply with the applicable rules and regulations, meet deadlines, perform duties accurately, fulfil sales quotas). One respondent stated: "I was punished for not following the customer service procedure, although, in my opinion, the procedure is bad" (female aged 18–25, service company employing over 250 people). The second group comprises behaviors related to poor customer service (especially in organizations where employees are assessed on the basis of service procedures). Below is a sample representative statement:

"In the event of direct complaints from the customer about unfulfilled procedures or product quality, a talk is held with the employee responsible for this and the regional coordinator (that is me) is asked to exercise more control over such a person" (male, service company employing from 50 to 250 people).

The third group of reasons for punishing employees includes serious misconduct and criminal incidents such as theft, working under the influence of alcohol, proven mismanagement. The fourth group covers reasons related to non-compliance with health and safety regulations.

Punishments for poor quality account for a small proportion of all penalties. In the case of small companies, such penalties were mentioned in 13 out of the 119 collected statements; in the case of medium-sized companies, penalties for poor quality were declared in 9 out of the 72 obtained statements. In the case of service organizations, irrespective of size, penalties for failure to comply with the established standards and procedures dominate, while in the case of manufacturing companies there are also indirect penalties. They are imposed if the bonus system includes quality criteria.

Punishment and its prevailing types

According to the respondents, punishments provided for in work regulations, such as cautions or reprimands, were applied the most frequently (41%). Informal punishments and financial penalties were imposed very rarely (they were declared by 14% and 11% of the respondents, respectively) (Figure 2). The prevalent informal punishments included the following: reducing remuneration – 22%, transferring the employee to another position – 18%, turning down a leave application – 15%, transferring the employee to a “worse” shift – 15%, humiliating the employee in the presence of others – 13%, ignoring the employee – 12%, taking offence – 8%, reducing working hours or increasing standards – 6%, and ridiculing – 5% (Figure 3). The vast majority of the respondents (88%) had not received any punishment in the past 12 months, while 12% had. The received penalties included a disciplinary talk – 4%, strengthened supervision – 3%, a financial penalty – 2%, a caution – 2%, and a reprimand – 1% (Figure 4).

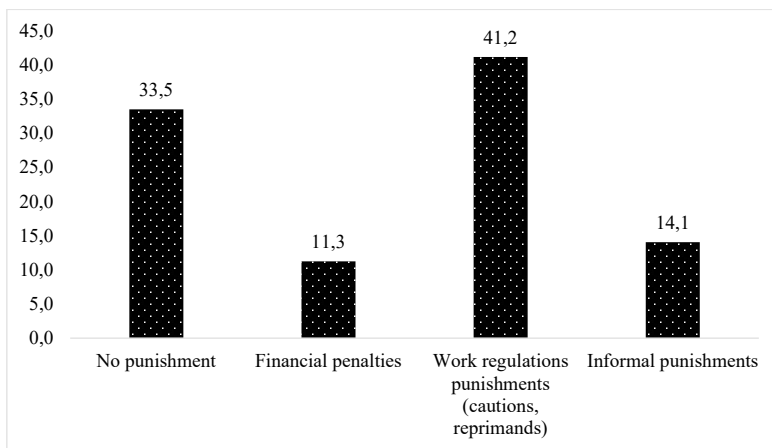


Figure 2. Punishment of employees in the respondents' workplaces.
Source: Own study

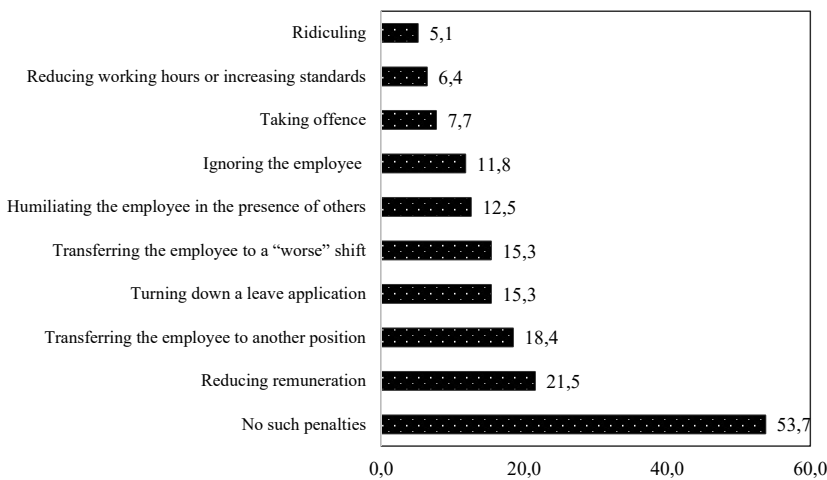


Figure 3. Dominant types of informal punishment in the respondents' workplaces.
Source: Own study

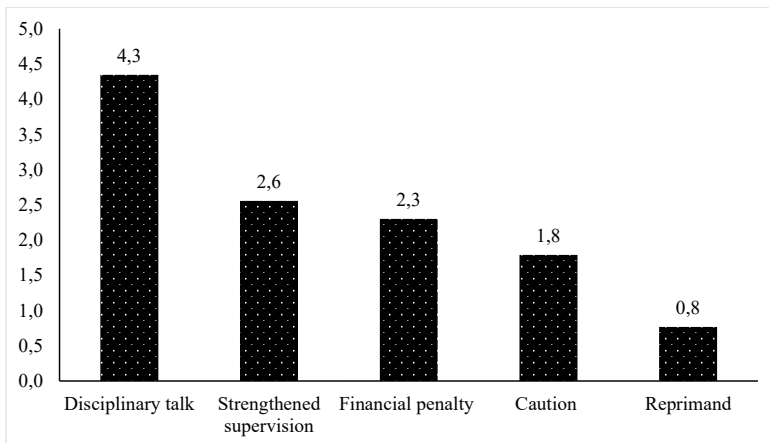


Figure 4. Types of punishment received by the respondents in their workplaces during the past 12 months.
Source: Own study

The qualitative research shows the dominant role of penalties that are not provided for in the Labour Code. These are mostly minor verbal cautions or reprimands (sample statement: “I was reprimanded for the fact that one customer had been fraternizing with me,” female aged 18–25, service organization employing up to 50 persons). Formal punishments are imposed mainly in public sector offices, where a formal approach to management prevails (sample statement: “What dominates is written cautions or reprimands recorded in personnel files,” female aged 40–50, public sector organization employing up to 50 people).

Consequences of punishment

As a consequence of the received punishment, the respondents felt injustice (29%), a lack of motivation to work (24%), dissatisfaction (19%), unwillingness to propose improvement initiatives (8%), relief (1%), and indifference (1%) (Figure 5).

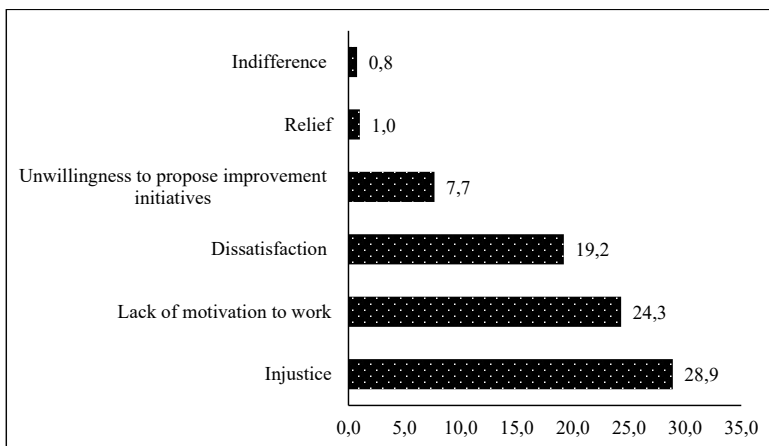


Figure 5. Consequences of punishment received by the respondents in their workplaces.
Source: Own study

Punishments are rarely applied, and this is one of the many factors causing only 11.5% of the respondents to assess the workplace atmosphere as bad. The conducted interviews show that the employees perceive the performance appraisal process as unfair if it does not take into account objective criteria and possible deviations from the accepted appraisal criteria, or it is conducted in a disrespectful manner.

Factors that determine whether employees are punished for the poor quality of products and services.

Punishments are used by 44.6% of the organizations with environment, health and safety management systems, but by only 7.3% of those with an implemented Lean management system. 36.3% of the respondents representing the companies using a quality management system and following the principles of TQM declared that their employers had punishment systems (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the percentage distributions of individual punishments. Financial penalties (50%) and informal penalties (50.9%) are used in the organizations with various (quality, health and safety, environment) management systems. One of the factors that may influence the punishment of employees is the standards and criteria included in quality management systems. In standardized management systems, internal and external audits are used, which, according to the interviewees, provide information on irregularities. Such results are consistent with the reasons for punishment, or rather with the interviewees' statements identifying the circumstances, such as internal or external audits, triggering the imposition of penalties.

Table 3. Selected organisational and functional characteristics vis-à-vis types of punishment applied in enterprises

Criterion	Feature	Type of punishment								χ^2	p	W
		No punishment		Financial penalties		Disciplinary penalties		Informal penalties				
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%			
Job title	Specialist	58	44.3	17	38.6	54	33.5	21	38.2	17.16	0.01	0.21
	Production or customer service	8	6.1	10	22.7	37	23.0	11	20.0			
	Management or administration	65	49.6	17	38.6	70	43.5	23	41.8			
Size of enterprise	Micro and small	82	62.6	30	68.2	87	54.0	42	76.4	9.82	0.02	0.16
	Medium and large	49	37.4	14	31.8	74	46.0	13	23.6			
Sector	Services	80	61.1	24	54.5	88	54.7	36	65.5	13.29	0.04	0.18
	Industry	29	22.1	19	43.2	52	32.3	12	21.8			
	Public sector organisation	22	16.8	1	2.3	21	13.0	7	12.7			
Main customers	Individual customers	81	61.8	26	59.1	110	68.3	38	69.1	2.44	0.49	0.08
	Institutional customers	50	38.2	18	40.9	51	31.7	17	30.9			
	ISO 14001, 27001, 45001	54	41.2	22	50.0	66	41.0	28	50.9			
Applied management systems or concepts	Lean and Six Sigma	18	13.7	1	2.3	15	9.3	3	5.5	15.01	0.04	0.20
	ISO 9001 and TQM	43	32.8	18	40.9	63	39.1	13	23.6			
	None	16	12.2	3	6.8	17	10.6	11	20.0			

Legend: n - number, % – percentage, χ^2 – chi-square independence test, p – probability level, W – effect size measure for χ^2 independence test, where: W < 0.20 small effect, W = 0.20-0.30 medium effect, W > 0.30 large effect (Cohen, 1988), values statistically significant at the p ≤ 0.05 level are shown in bold.

Source: Own study

The performed quantitative research provided knowledge of who was punished, but it was not known whether punishment was imposed for the lack of quality and how quality was assessed. The results of the qualitative research provided answers to these questions. On the basis of the interviews, it was established that small enterprises took quantity (of product sales and offers) into account in their assessment of quality. On the other hand, in the case of services provided for other enterprises, what matters is timeliness, lead time, fulfilment of tasks, execution of plans, and sticking to schedules. In the case of industrial enterprises, technical criteria (size and geometric characteristics) predominate.

In all industrial companies, a set of quality criteria has been developed; even individual positions have their technical specifications defining criteria for classifying products in terms of non-conformity. In the case of service organizations, criteria such as conscientiousness, efficiency, initiative, knowledge, and accuracy of performance (e.g., cleanliness) dominate.

Medium industrial enterprises primarily apply technical criteria (e.g., size, geometrical characteristics). In large production companies, quality norms and standards dominate, often as part of standardized quality management systems (ISO 9001).

In the case of large service organizations, the basic criteria are timeliness, number of cases (colloquially referred to as sorting), compliance with weekly quotas, execution of tasks without delays, working time, absence of deviations and compliance with instructions.

Another identified factor is measuring the quality of products or work itself (i.e., the process of pursuing quality). If an organization has some established standards, quotas, customer requirements, etc., it can punish its employees for failure to comply with them, but, fortunately, it is very rarely necessary.

If appraisal criteria are established, they are sometimes linked to employee appraisal and remuneration systems.

Quality is only indirectly a criterion for the allocation of additional remuneration where performance appraisal systems take into account the results of final and inter-operational inspections, technical specifications and quality standard requirements. In contrast, in the case of service organizations, additional remuneration in the form of a bonus depends on the fulfilment of standards concerning the quantity and quality of provided services (e.g., accuracy, completeness, compliance with project methodology).

When identifying the factors that determine whether employees are punished for the poor quality of products and services, it should be stated that a lot depends on what quality criteria are applied in the appraisal of performance. Objective appraisal criteria (related to functional, physical, and chemical characteristics) dominate in industrial enterprises, regardless of size. What matters in service companies is measurable punctuality and accuracy, as well as the number of executed tasks. It is important, however, if employees receive additional remuneration for their work, in which case, besides penalties included in work regulations, they can be deprived of such benefits.

It was found that 69.8% of the surveyed organizations included the results of customer satisfaction measurements in their employee remuneration systems and about half of them (51.2%) used quality as a criterion for granting bonuses. More than half of the respondents (54.2%) declared receiving some form of additional remuneration for meeting quality objectives.

The factors influencing the punishment of employees are related to not only used measurements, but also management systems. It appears that the basis for punishing employees for variously defined poor quality is mainly the results of financial audits (19.9%) supplier audits (7.2%), internal (37.6%) and external (22.5%) audits, and inspections (32.2%).

An analysis of the obtained research results indicates that punishments are administered rarely because, firstly, there is no reason to punish employees and, secondly, punishment involves emotional and organizational costs. Managers know that punishments are not effective. One of the respondents, a company director, put it like this: *“Why would you punish employees and tire yourself? It is better to let them go...”* (male, technical director, aged 49–59, 250 employees). In contrast, another manager participating in the survey stated: *“In the previous company, financial penalties were often imposed by taking bonuses away from those employees who caused the production of rejects. After some time it turned out that as much as 20% of all products were being returned to the plant with various complaints. We weren’t able to figure out why, despite inter-operational control and self-control, there were so many faulty products. It turned out that the employees were hiding their mistakes for fear of financial punishment. Nowadays my company follows another principle—no more financial punishment. When a quality mistake occurs, the responsible employee notifies me of such an event, which has no impact on their wages. We try to talk to the employees and deal with quality problems together.”* (male, manager, aged 39–45, 250 employees). Employees experience injustice because it is the consequence of punishment. One important reason is the amount of potential reward hidden in complicated bonus awarding systems. Employees are also unaware of whether a bonus depends on the results of team effort (80.3%) or their own individual commitment. Quality is only one of the criteria for bonus allocation. Perceived injustice, on the other hand, is the cause of the break of trust and this value, as is well known, is of colossal importance for productivity.

DISCUSSION

If we are examining the problem of punishing poor quality, we should know how this quality is defined, and on the basis of what criteria.

These criteria are usually quantitative (e.g., the number of calls made and supports) and qualitative (e.g., the number of individual operations that have been carried out without corrections). The problem is that while in the case of production, quality can be measured objectively—because it results, for example, from the study of physical and chemical characteristics; in services, quality assessment is something very difficult, often resulting from subjective assessments made by the stakeholders of the organization.

In practice, punishments, especially those resulting from a work discipline system, are rarely applied. Perhaps this is due to the fact that some managers are aware that punishment is “an emotional event with far-reaching effects on the attitudes and behaviors of the employees themselves” (Butterfield et al., 1996).

It may be supposed that punishing employees is strongly influenced by the existence of various procedural, social, or personal norms, as well as personality traits, closeness of relationships, etc.

An assessment of punishment and reward systems depends on employees' perceptions of fairness in the workplace (Podsakoff et al., 2006; Ball et al., 1994). The authors' research appears to confirm this regularity. Procedural and interpersonal justice may be of particular importance. Managers may use a variety of corrective procedures instead of administering punishment (Neale et al., 2020). Thus, the following correlation exists: The greater the perceived injustice, the weaker the impact of disciplinary systems.

It should be remembered that many factors influence an assessment of the punishment administration process. For example, a lot depends on the structure of the punishment and reward system. One experiment showed that when punishment consisted of the imposition of a fine, paying a fine to the employer was acceptable more than paying a fine to co-workers (Siang, 2012). Negative attitudes towards co-workers, especially supervisors, are associated with a greater fear of punishment for not following established rules, as well as for coming up with new ideas. People who have a clear organizational mission are less likely to fear punishment for proposing innovative ideas, but not necessarily for bending the existing rules (Jung et al., 2020). If a manager is friendly towards employees, it is difficult for them to punish employees; if their attitude is hostile, employees do everything to avoid punishment.

The extent to which people are able to forgive each other is important: higher perceived forgiveness climate is associated with lower punitive intent (Salvador, 2020). Even if they do not play a role in changing behavior, punishments can fulfil a deterrent function (similar to that of Labour Codes).

The very existence of penalties in a work discipline system demonstrates that the organization is serious about its declared values and wants to be perceived as just and fair (O'Reilly & Barton, 1980).

In the case of punishment for poor quality products, what counts is the objectivization of performed actions. But even if punishment is something objective it will discourage employees from quality improvement.

Theoretical contribution and practical recommendations

On the basis of the performed literature review, the authors formulated research problems concerning the reasons for punishing employees, the dominant forms of punishment, the consequences of punishment, and the factors influencing punishment for poor product quality. They established the existence of a certain regularity relating to previous research findings.

Employees are punished mainly for non-compliance with procedures or work standards and for non-acceptable behaviors. Punishment for poor quality is rarely administered because in many cases it is not perceived as something important (what counts is task performance deadlines that may be regarded as elements of the category of work quality). Contrary to the authors' preliminary assumptions, no significant differences among the surveyed organizations were identified, which may have resulted from the character of product realization processes. It is possible that the existence of procedures and data allows for the administration of penalties, but the verification of this thesis would require extending the scope of the research to include psychosocial aspects. Nevertheless, what dominates in many situations is subjective assessment of employees' actions, the scope of supervision over them and other factors.

Penalties stemming from work discipline systems, such as caution or disciplinary dismissal are rarely used (Butterfield et al., 1996; Siang, 2012; Bugdol, 2018). They are complemented by various informal punishments (reduction in salary, transfer to another job position). Informal forms of punishment (e.g., verbal reprimands) dominate in the case of poor product and service quality. In contrast, where quality can be measured, financial penalties dominate. The results of the conducted research confirmed the authors' hypotheses only in the part concerning the frequency of punishment. In the case of the quantitative research, the predominant view was that punishments provided for in work regulations, such as cautions or reprimands, were applied the most frequently (41%). Informal punishments and financial penalties were imposed very rarely.

However, it was the qualitative research that confirmed the authors' belief that informal punishments (as defined for the interviewees) were the most frequently applied. Formal punishments require some effort on the part of those imposing them. This is because such punishments are recorded in official personnel documentation and must be administered in accordance with the applicable legal regulations.

An indirect conclusion is that employees have little knowledge of the existing normative regulations. This is indicated by the fact that admonishments, verbal skirmishes and other similar behaviors of superiors were classified as formal punishments. The Labour Code, which applies to all organizations participating in the survey, provides for only cautions, reprimands, and disciplinary dismissals.

As a consequence of the received punishment, the respondents felt injustice (29%), a lack of motivation to work (24%), dissatisfaction (19%), unwillingness to propose improvement initiatives (8%), relief (1%), and indifference (1%).

Since there are direct relationships among organizational values, it is reasonable to believe that a lack of fairness may be the cause of reduced trust, motivation and, above all, commitment to quality improvement. The statistical analysis shows that punishments are imposed mainly on employees at lower organizational levels, which may further reinforce their perceived injustice.

The obtained results are largely in line with the findings of other studies concluding that punishment causes dissatisfaction, which further hinders quality improvement (Craig and Lemon, 2008). There is a decline in motivation and a lack of interest in improving quality.

The factors influencing punishment for poor quality are the following:

- the existence of standardized quality management systems,
- the possibility of setting a qualitative criterion in job appraisals,
- the presence of a quality criterion in remuneration systems,
- the results of quality, financial and inter-operational audits.

However, it cannot be concluded that these factors alone are the main reasons for punishing employees. It is also clear that the interviewees were confused by different types of audits, as it is only financial audits that are restrictive in character.

The possibilities for imposing punishments do not result exclusively from formal codes and regulations. They are determined by whether an organization has implemented a standardized quality management system, as well as formal employee assessment and reward systems with quality criteria. If only managers are rewarded for quality, then there is a tendency towards hiding all deficiencies and irregularities, which was also a conclusion reached in one of the authors' earlier studies.

Much may depend on the nature of supervision and the quality of interaction among employees. Informal and formal penalties can be based on both objective and subjective criteria. Objectivization is more likely in manufacturing enterprises if they possess data reflecting the course of processes (but the problem may be the assignment of responsibility to employees). If punishment is not accepted because it is perceived to be unfair, it leads to a breakdown of trust. After all, fairness is the basis of trust. Such a state of affairs leads to the collapse of quality improvement activities. Of course, in this description, personality, situational and relational factors are ignored (see the Figure 6 below).

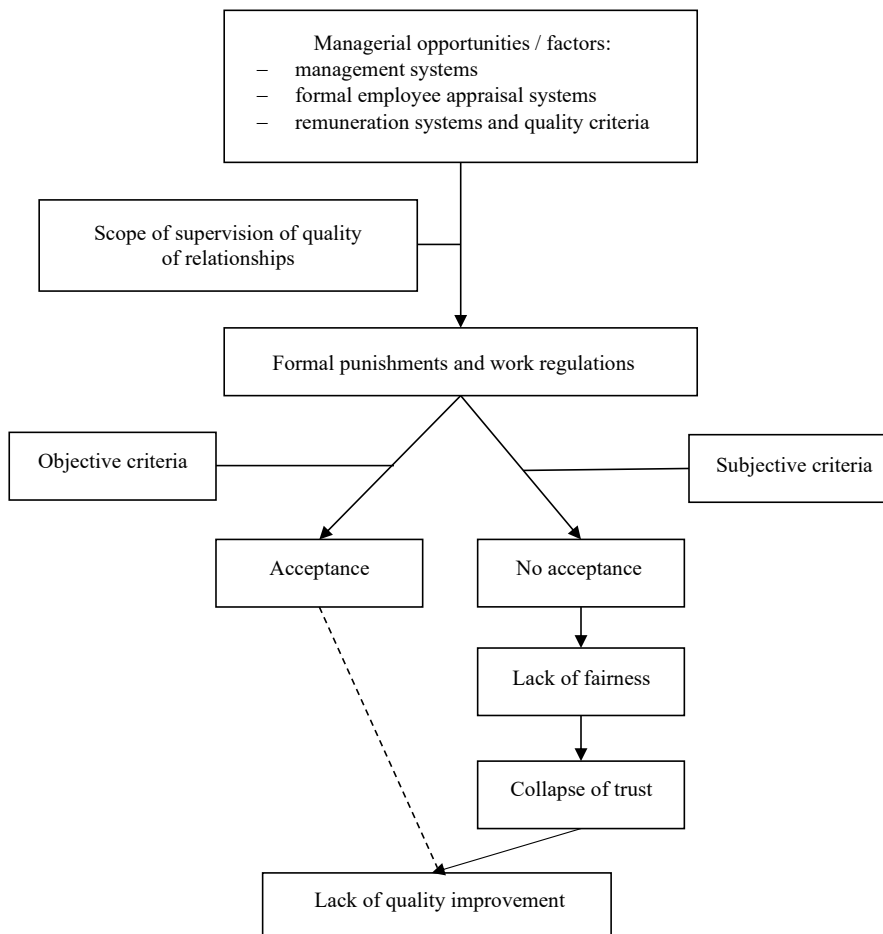


Figure 6. Impact of punishments on quality.
Source: Own study

When formulating recommendations for management practice, it is important to remember that all sanctions and penalties fulfil only a disciplinary and deterrent function. As Deming stated, punishment for a lack of quality makes no sense because most quality problems are systemic in character.

Based on the conducted research, the following recommendations can be formulated:

a) Firstly, any job appraisal system or remuneration system should include qualitative goals in addition to typically quantitative goals. This formulation draws on the views of Deming, who argued that cash incentives are counterproductive because it is impossible to accurately measure employees' performance under the influence of factors that are beyond their control (Deming, 2012). The performance of individuals in an organization cannot be measured in a short period of time. Therefore, the structure of short-term performance compensation can have a negative impact on the organization (Petit, 2009). However, when considering quality objectives, it is imperative to bear in mind that setting quality criteria and objectives is a difficult task, especially in the case of variable processes (Tadic et al., 2013). In services, too, the goal cannot be one or another level of customer satisfaction. Satisfaction is something important but difficult to measure and therefore key factors influencing satisfaction should rather be taken into account.

b) Secondly, a number of indicators can be considered in setting and assessing quality objectives, for example: a measure of process variability, production lead time, a level of delivery in production operations, production capacity utilization, process capabilities, process efficiency, reported improvement activities, savings from process improvement, and complaints about production operations. The achievement of the required values of these indicators should be additionally rewarded. HR department employees should not reward only managers for quality, as this can be a cause of concealing quality deficiencies. The introduction of quality criteria in bonus systems only makes sense if the focus is on the quality of processes (where attention is paid to timeliness and precision) rather than the quality of products, and if it is possible to assess the contribution of each employee.

c) Thirdly, the inclusion of quality criteria in appraisal systems only makes sense if quality is objectivized. For example, in manufacturing enterprises, quality does not depend only on technological processes or raw materials, but also on employees' specialist skills in reducing process variability. However, as advocates of TQM, the authors believe that employee assessments—especially rankings and annual appraisals—are impractical. Assessment, or rather managerial support, should be a matter of everyday interactions.

d) Fourthly, it makes no sense to punish employees by depriving them of bonuses when the fulfilment of criteria for receiving them depends on collective team effort. Consequently, a bonus should be included in base remuneration, as it does not fulfil any motivational function. It is hard to disagree with the classics of quality management, according to whom remuneration is to play another role, i.e., to attract and retain the best employees (Crow, 1996). Both Deming and Crosby concluded that profit sharing was the best form of rewarding (Ivancevich et al., 1994). A poorly designed appraisal and reward system destroys the sense of justice and, consequently, trust and productivity. This is because existing bonus systems are rarely able to recognize an employee's individual effort and presuppose collective responsibility for the lack of quality.

e) Fifthly, in order to eliminate any manifestations of informal punishment, the social system should be monitored on an ongoing basis, employees' opinions should be surveyed, but the most effective way is to interview those employees that leave the organization.

f) Sixthly, positive discipline models should be used, where appropriate. However, in practice, it is necessary to bear in mind the costs of such models and to refrain from variations in the treatment of employees, which could further erode their sense of fairness.

It is difficult to disagree with the proponents of TQM, according to whom punishment, combined with an inappropriate treatment of standardization (as something that is not subject to change or discussion), increases the fear of breaking the rules (Liao et al., 2010). In TQM, a sense of fairness plays an important role, and it is rewards that are supposed to motivate employees to commit themselves to quality improvement (Zeitz et al., 1997). If punishment causes a sense of injustice, then any TQM programme will fail as employees become resentful and disappointed (Brooks & Zeitz, 1999).

In TQM, it is rightly assumed that penalties are administered by the market and customers (Oakland, 2011). However, this is not always apparent in the short term. Therefore, TQM recommends rewarding employees for quality.

Limitations and Suggestions

Firstly, the adopted methods are not a perfect way to obtain information. The surveyed organizations were moderately diverse in terms of business sector and rather homogeneous in terms of culture.

Secondly, the narrow spatial and temporal scope of the conducted research should be considered as its main limitation. The research was of a partial character, so it is difficult to speak of its representativeness. The maturity of the systems implemented

in particular enterprises was not examined, nor were relationships among the factors of various social or organizational systems. Thirdly, it is important to remember the limitations inherent in qualitative research. The interpretation of data obtained through interviews depends on the structure of the interviews, the knowledge and skills of the researchers, and their ability to avoid bias (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

Fourthly, the research did not consider the reasons for punishment that may lie in the individual attitudes and behaviors of superiors themselves.

Possible further research should focus on the following issues:

- the influence of psychosocial factors on the administration of punishment,
- the knowledge of existing disciplinary procedures (factors influencing the process),
- the impact of informal penalties on pro-quality behaviors,
- the quality of interpersonal relationships and the ways in which punishment is administered,
- “punishing” behaviors, i.e., behaviors that are structured to contribute to the feelings of threat and uncertainty (which is the reason for the decline in pro-quality behaviors),
- the issue of refraining from imposing punishment and forgiving,
- the effectiveness of positive discipline models in quality improvement.

Previous studies have found that the fear of punishment reduces the tendency to improve quality (Bugdol & Bortniczuk, 2018). It would therefore be necessary to determine what managerial and psychosocial factors trigger such behaviors.

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