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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVE THE PROCESS OF TRAINING OF CUSTOMS OFFICERS

### Introduction

The changes imposed in the European Union (EU) under the 'Europe 2020' strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth affect the employees of the customs administration. The 'Customs 2020' programme is developed to meet the new challenges in the field of customs [1]. One of its priorities is the development of human resources competencies through training. It gives the opportunity to improve the knowledge, skills and competencies of customs officers.

The *object* of the study is the training of customs officers, and the *subject* is the different methods, types and forms of training, creating opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills. The *aim* is through studying the process of training of the Customs Agency specialized administration staff to identify its strengths and weaknesses and formulate proposals to improve it. With regard to the aim set, the following *tasks* are defined:

- characterizing the competencies under the EU Customs Competency Framework, which customs officers are required to gain;
- analyzing the activities, included in the training process in the Customs Agency;
- studying the types, methods and forms of training, used to enhance the competencies of customs officers and applied in the Customs Agency;
- identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the process of training of customs officers and formulate proposals for its improvement.

The study was carried out based on the annual reports of the National Customs Agency and covers the period 2011-2015.

### 1. Characteristics of the competencies under the EU Customs Competency Framework, which customs officers are required to gain

In recent years, the human resources management competency model based on learning, developing skills and competencies of the employees has received great popularity and has become a "key strategy for increasing the effectiveness and potential of organizations" [2]. The benefits of introducing the competency model are manifested in various areas– in recruitment, job performance and employee training.

The human resources management competency model is also applied in the customs administration. In this regard, the process of updating the Customs Com-

petency Framework in the EU began in 2013, aimed at providing the same quality of customs services throughout the European Union (EU). The main objectives pursued by its implementation are related to:

- establishing standards related to the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviour that customs officers must possess in order to perform their functions effectively and uniformly throughout the Union;
- increasing the efficiency of customs administrations in the EU by providing a better quality of customs services.

The EU Customs Competency Framework is one of the directions of 'the Dublin Strategy'– a strategic performance framework for the customs profession for the period 2012-2015. It was developed on the basis of the professional standards of the PICARD World Customs Organization (WCO) and defines the competencies EU customs officials must have in order to perform their functions effectively and uniformly. In terms of content the Competency Framework encompasses all position levels within the customs administration, divided into 10 functional areas covering the main activities in customs (Politics, Customer Management, Risk, Processing Returns, Control, Investigation, Law Enforcement, Audit, Auxiliary Functions and Cross Functions). It includes 72 competencies together with the appropriate proficiency levels, divided into the following four groups [3]:

*customs core values*, also called key competencies (7). They include the basic competencies every person at a certain position at customs must have, namely *strong ethics, high integrity, etc.*;

*professional competencies* (25). These include professional knowledge and skills necessary for successful performance. They are applied in a broader professional context and include: *problem solving; data management, analytical thinking; decision-making, etc.*;

*operational competencies* (21). These competencies are specific in nature, as they are related to the actual performance of the official duties of customs officers. In order to ensure that customs officers will successfully fulfill their tasks, operational competencies should be combined with professional or managerial competencies. Operational competencies include: *understanding of customs activities; processing customs declarations; control of goods; customs procedures; law enforce-*

*ment; customs investigation; customs tariff and tariff classification; determining the customs value and the origin of goods; risk analysis etc.;*

**management competencies (19).** These are intended to be competencies that are of specific use for people with a management function in the customs administration. They include: *visionary leadership; process management; strategic management of the supply chain and information technologies, etc.*

Customs officers need to achieve different levels of proficiency in professional, operational and managerial competencies, according to their specific role, responsibilities and tasks. The levels of proficiency range from 'Level 1' to 'Level 4' as follows: Level 1 'awareness'; Level 2 'trained'; Level 3 'advanced' and level 4 'expert'. The main customs competencies are not level-assessed as customs officers are expected to have a thorough command of them. Therefore, they are assessed at the stage of staff recruitment by using standardized tests for psychological fitness.

In addition to the general competency guidelines, the competency framework also covers specific guidance related to the development and implementation of adequate professional and academic curricula for the training of customs officers. The EU Customs Competency Framework serves as a basis for establishing a common framework for training, with a view to support the European customs administrations in providing the knowledge and skills necessary for the customs profession. In this regard, in the period 2014-2015, the national competency framework in the process of human resource management was introduced [4]. As a result, the newly recruited for customs officers were harmonized and updated in accordance with the EU programmes based on the Customs Competency Framework.

The application of the competency model in the process of human resources management is crucial both in the recruitment of staff for customs administrations and in their subsequent training. To ensure high standards of customs services, customs must meet the challenges of the dynamically changing conditions during the controls over the protection of economic, financial and social interests of the EU. This requires that customs officers permanently update and expand their knowledge and skills. One way of doing this is to organize training sessions for them. In 'knowledge-based economy', training should be an ongoing process. Systematic enrichment of knowledge and new skills benefit both customs administrations and customs officers. The benefits of employee training find expression in increasing their professional competencies and qualifications, better opportunities for career development, etc.

## **2. Analysis of the activities included in the Customs Agency training process**

The proper organization of the process of training is important to maintain the level of professional com-

petencies of customs officers. The application of a systematic approach to training of staff means consistent implementation of the activities included in the training process [5 p. 37], namely: identifying the training needs, organizing the training process and assessing the achieved results. In the Customs Agency, these activities are completely within the functions and authorities of the officials of the National Training Centre (NTC) Directorate and the Regional Training Centres (RTC).

- **Identify training needs.** Activities related to the **identification of the training needs and planning** are essential to the training effectiveness. The needs for acquiring new knowledge and skills [6] must be determined on the basis of planning at customs administration level, functional level and individually for each customs officer. In the Customs Agency, planning is related to identifying the needs at customs administration and functional department levels. Determining the individual training needs of customs officers is not widely practised. The training needs are studied based on the opinions and judgments of the heads of customs and the direct superiors.

The Customs Agency has developed a system for activity planning in determining the need for training, which is bound with its strategic objectives. At the end of each calendar year, an annual training programme for customs officers for the next year is approved by order of the Director. The programme covers basic topics, which should improve the knowledge and skills of employees, taking into account legislative changes in various spheres of the customs activity and the Customs Competency Framework. For instance, the training programme for customs officers in 2015 at national level included conducting 130 seminars, courses and workshops in the following areas: information systems; implementation of measures by the customs authorities for the protection of intellectual property rights; customs intelligence in the field of drug trafficking; combating illicit trafficking and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, as well as strengthening customs controls of dual use goods; rules for the organization of the work of customs officers when applying the provisions for authorized economic operators, etc. Some of the planned training sessions for 2015 at national level were not conducted (only 106 out of 130 planned). When comparing the planned training fields in the annual programme for 2015 with the problem areas in the activities of customs authorities, it is found out that there were no issues related to the customs value, origin of goods and tariff classification. These are areas requiring competence levels of proficiency 2 (trained) for employees at operational positions, respectively 3 (advanced) and 4 (expert) for those at expert positions. Training of customs officers in the field of tariff policy was planned to be held at regional training centres. This was also observed in previous years. The thematic areas emphasized in subsequent trainings at national level were in the field

of customs intelligence and investigation, excise duties, customs clearance of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) goods and information systems.

- **Conduct training**

The Customs Agency has established its own training centres, forming part of its organizational structure, where the training of customs officers is conducted – a National Training Centre in Sofia and Regional Training Centres in Ruse and Plovdiv. They conduct **two types of training – compulsory and subsequent specialized training** covering three groups of employees, namely new employees in the customs administration, customs officers at expert positions in different fields of the customs and customs officers appointed for the first time in a managerial position [7].

For newly recruited employees in specialized customs administration a 7-month **compulsory basic course** is organized which includes theoretical and practical modules. The aim of the course is that trained customs officers should obtain a wide range of basic knowledge and practical skills, necessary to perform their duties. Training is conducted in the NTC based on a programme unified with the programmes of the other EU member countries. The programme is based on a syl-

labus developed by the European Commission for common EU training in the field of initial customs training, which is periodically updated with any changes in customs legislation. The main subjects taught in the course are related to the common agricultural policy, customs procedures, customs legislation of the Union, customs value and origin of goods, border control at the external borders of the Union, follow-up control, customs intelligence, etc. [7].

To maintain and increase the level of professional competence of customs officers, **subsequent specialized training** is provided. It is aimed at employees at operational and expert positions and those who are appointed to managerial positions for the first time. Training is held annually under the Customs Agency annual programme, as administration provides training for each customs officer within no less than five days a year. Subsequent training is conducted on the basis of the EU programmes and the World Customs Organization. Joint training with professional organizations, other ministries and departments is also organized.

The analysis of data from the annual reports on the performance of the Customs Agency [8] shows that 22 training sessions on average were conducted monthly for the period 2011-2015 (table 1).

Table 1

**Number of conducted compulsory and subsequent specialized training sessions and trained customs officers for the period 2011-2015**

Year	Number of conducted compulsory training sessions	Number of conducted subsequent specialized training sessions	including		Total number of conducted compulsory and subsequent specialized training sessions	Total number of customs officers trained in the compulsory and subsequent training sessions	including	
			at national level	at regional level			Number of customs officers trained in the compulsory training sessions	Number of customs officers trained in the subsequent training session
2011	6	379	135	244	385	4 568	131	4 437
2012	5	275	137	138	280	3 416	126	3 290
2013	7	203	100	103	210	3 477	235	3 242
2014	3	227	97	130	230	4 066	95	3 971
2015	6	186	106	80	192	3 190	171	3 019
<b>Total:</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>1 270</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>695</b>	<b>1 297</b>	<b>18 717</b>	<b>758</b>	<b>17 959</b>

Source: National Customs Agency <http://www.customs.bg/bg/mag/61>, <http://www.customs.bg/bg/mag/82>, <http://customs.bg/bg/mag/90>, <http://customs.bg/bg/mag/96>, <http://customs.bg/bg/mag/103>.

The number varies greatly in the different years – from 33 in 2011 to 16 in 2015. More than half of the trainings were conducted at regional level (55%). On average, each employee participated in 7 training sessions<sup>1</sup>[9] during the studied period. One of the priorities in the Customs Agency training sessions is the initial basic course, which is compulsory for newly recruited staff in the customs administration. Within a five-year period, 5 basic courses were conducted on average, with a total duration of seven months each. On average, 152 newly recruited staff were trained per year as between 28 and 30 employees took part in a basic course.

To organize and conduct the subsequent specialized training, the Customs Agency used the funding opportunities provided by various EU programmes. Over the last five years, it has participated in over seven projects related to the training of customs officials under the Operational Programme ‘Administrative Capacity’ (OPAC). On this basis, over 27 training sessions were conducted in which over 170 customs officers took part. The training under the implemented projects aimed mainly to improve the competence of experts in the field of information systems and to acquire professional knowledge and skills in programming languages. Only

<sup>1</sup> The total number of payroll staff at the Customs Agency as of August 2015 under the terms of the Rules of Organization is 3362, the operational staff consisting of about 2500 customs officers.

three of these training sessions were organized for employees working for the subsequent control units.

To effectively perform their duties, employees of the specialized administration must have good knowledge in fields other than customs, the more significant of which are in the field of international trade, chemical industry, commodity science, technologies, etc. They need knowledge in these fields to be able to counteract illegal drug trafficking and the spread of weapons of mass destruction; to prevent illegal trade in protected species of wild flora and fauna and cultural monuments of national importance; to prevent the spread on the domestic market of counterfeit and dangerous goods which threaten the lives and health of consumers.

In this regard, the Customs Agency organizes and conducts *joint training sessions* both with the respective national and international institutions and with *branch organizations*. They are based on concluded cooperation agreements. Each joint training session aims at a specific field in which customs officers have to develop their knowledge or learn about recent changes in customs legislation and other regulations related to customs activities. The aim of these joint training sessions is not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills in their respective fields, but also the improvement of the interaction between customs and other institutions implementing joint control activities both at national and at international level.

Data shows that on average four joint training sessions were conducted annually for the period 2011-2015 [8] (see table 2). This is because they were organized only when necessary. The main fields in which joint training sessions were conducted are the following: protection of the species of wild flora and fauna; veterinary and phyto-sanitary control; identification of dual use goods; illegal trafficking in weapons and drugs; trans-border shipment of waste, etc.

Table 2

**Joint training sessions conducted with other institutions and branch organizations for the period 2011-2015**

Year	Number of joint training sessions conducted with ministries and establishments	Number of joint training sessions conducted with branch organizations
2011	8	4
2012	8	3
2013	8	7
2014	3	.
2015	.	1
Total:	27	15

Source: Customs Agency <http://www.customs.bg/bg/page/14>.

Key: (.) – no data.

The Customs Agency also organizes joint training sessions with business representatives, especially in delicate fields such as trade in excise goods; goods, infringing intellectual property rights; goods and products with possible dual use, etc. During the studied period, three joint training sessions were conducted annually (see table 2). They aimed to both customs officials and to economic operators.

Knowledge obtained by customs officers as a result of this training contribute to increasing the levels of proficiency in their operational competencies – bans and restrictions, law enforcement and investigation. As a result, they can more easily recognize the different products, verify the authenticity of the alcohol, cigarettes, drugs and the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), identify goods with possible dual use, etc.

To implement the aforementioned types of training two *main groups of methods* are applied. In specialized literature on staff management, they are known as the methods of *on-the-job training and off-the-job training* [10], each of which is conducted in various forms. Both methods are applied in the process of training of customs officers. Priority is given to the *methods of the first group*. They are implemented in the form of *workshops, courses, seminars and conferences*. The choice of one form or another depends on the purpose of the training. Subsequent specialized training, which aims to update and expand the knowledge and skills of customs officers is organized mainly in the form of courses, workshops, seminars [7] on specific topics related to different areas of customs activities. Conferences are relatively rarely used as a form of training as they are considered official scientific forums, requiring more time and money to be organized. Therefore, conferences are organized jointly with other customs administrations, and national or international institutions. The aim of the compulsory training is that newly recruited staff should acquire basic theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the field of customs control activities. Therefore, a basic course is conducted for the purpose.

The *second group of methods* used in the training of customs officers are implemented in the form of *job rotation, distant and e-learning*. Their application provides the opportunity for employees to be trained at their jobs at minimum financial costs. These forms are used in the subsequent specialized training of customs officers at expert positions.

In the *job rotation*, customs officers temporarily change their workplace when it is necessary to perform the same function or another within the customs administration [11]. As a result, customs officers acquire new knowledge and skills. The use of this form of training contributes both to improving the coordination in the customs teams and to reducing corrupt practices.

In order to improve the training process and its availability, since 2011 customs officers have been

given the *distance learning* opportunity, in specially designed workplaces, on topics included in the Customs Agency programme. The training sessions are conducted under the 'Virtual Classroom' project in the regional training centres in Ruse and Plovdiv, and in the Regional Customs Directorate in Varna. Since the introduction of this form of training, about 11 training sessions have been conducted to date.

Another method used in the on-the-job training is *self-education/e-learning*. It is implemented through the learning management system (LMS) under e-learning modules granted by the European Commission. They can be accessed at the learning management system and on the Intranet page of the Customs Agency. The training courses are in the following thematic areas: a single authorization for simplified procedures; authorized economic operators; protecting intellectual property right (IPR) by customs authorities and a system of registration and identification of economic operators. This form of training is relatively efficient and convenient as it reduces training costs while providing an opportunity for employees to study at a convenient time and place.

The above discussed training sessions are attended mainly by customs officers at operational and expert positions, followed by employees, newly recruited in the system (see Table 1). The lecturers are mainly experts and operational customs officers with extensive experience and thorough knowledge of the customs activities. Relatively rarely, university professors and experts from various ministries and other agencies deliver lectures during the training sessions [7]. The training of management staff is organized with the participation of EU experts.

- **Assess the outcomes of the training process**

Training sessions as well as the results achieved are of key importance to the training process. Therefore, after completion of training it is advisable to assess the results. On this basis feedback is received on employees' satisfaction with the training, its effects and the need for conducting further training [5 p. 44]. The assessment, based on feedback received from trained staff, provides an opportunity to assess how effective the applied methods and forms are, and what new knowledge and skills are acquired as a result of the training.

The preferred method for assessing the level of knowledge and skills acquired in the process of the training in the Customs Agency is an exam in the form of a test, carried out after the completion of training. Such assessment is only made with basic courses and training sessions organized under EU programmes. Training in a basic course ends with sitting for a final exam, which is held by a commission, appointed by the Customs Agency Director. Employees who pass the exam successfully (with a grade over Good 4) are certified as customs inspectors and can perform operational activities. The participation of customs officers in training sessions organized under the Operational Pro-

gramme 'Administrative Capacity' (OPAC) ends with testing the acquired knowledge and issuing a certificate or a certification letter. They fill in a feedback form on the basis of which the degree of satisfaction with the training is evaluated. An online questionnaire to evaluate the effectiveness of the training is also completed by newly recruited customs officers at the end of the basic course.

### **3. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the process of training of customs officers and formulating proposals for its improvement**

Based on the research done, the following *strengths and weaknesses* in the process of training of customs officers were identified:

**First.** The management in the Customs Agency realizes the importance of training. The Agency has developed a system for planning the activities related to the identification of the training needs, which is bound by its strategic objectives and the trends in the customs policy of the EU.

**Second.** Joint training for customs officers with representatives of branch organizations, other ministries and departments is relatively well developed. It is applied mainly in delicate fields such as trade in excise goods; goods infringing intellectual property rights; goods and products with possible dual use; protected species of wild flora and fauna, etc. The knowledge acquired as a result of joint training in specific areas contributes to increasing the levels of proficiency in operational competence of customs officers – bans and restrictions, law enforcement and investigation.

**Third.** The basic training of newly recruited staff in specialized customs administration is a compulsory, planned and organized activity, complied with the European requirements for training customs officers.

**Fourth.** Various methods and forms of training process implementation are used. With regard to the compulsory training of newly recruited employees, the traditional forms of training, namely courses are applied. In conducting subsequent specialized training of staff, the Customs Agency uses not only traditional forms but also alternative ones. In order to improve the training process and its availability, customs officers are provided the opportunity to attend distant and e-learning modules.

**Fifth.** Training planning in the Customs Agency relates to determining the needs at customs administration and functional departments levels. The planning of activities related to determining the employees' individual training needs is not widely practised.

**Sixth.** At national level, the emphasis in subsequent specialized training is placed on areas such as customs intelligence and investigation, risk analysis, excise duties and information systems. Topics related to problem areas in the activities of customs authorities such as customs value, tariff classification and origin of goods

are not included. They are rather a priority in the training programmes at regional level.

**Seventh.** Training outcomes assessment is obligatory in regard to the acquired knowledge and skills in the Customs Agency at the end of basic training courses organized under EU programmes.

Based on the identified strengths and weaknesses in the process of training of customs officers, the following *proposals* for its improvement can be formulated:

**First.** The individual needs of customs officers to improve their operational competencies should be taken into account when determining the training needs of the customs administration. For this purpose, it is recommended that checks to determine the level of general and specific knowledge of customs officers should be regularly carried out at regional level. The results must be used as a basis for determining the need for organizing and conducting training sessions. The latter should be intended for the group of employees who have shown unsatisfactory results in particular functional area.

**Second.** The training policy regarding the Customs Agency employees aims to ensure the proper and uniform application of the EU and the national customs legislation. It is determined by the trends in the EU customs policy, the objectives set out in the Annual Plan for employee training and the Development Strategy of the Agency during a particular period. All this determines the themes or topics to be included in the training sessions at national level. When planning the training sessions at regional level, it is recommended that topics should be determined in compliance with the functional areas where operational officers must maintain high levels of customs competency.

**Third.** The assessment of the results is a necessary part of the training process. Otherwise, training sessions will be of no use. For this purpose, it is appropriate to regularly evaluate to what extent training in the training centres has led to improving employees' work. A criterion can be the annual performance evaluation, which is done by direct superiors, based on the following criteria: 'level of achievement of the individual plan objectives' and 'demonstrated competencies' [12]. The Information for the annual evaluations of the employees must be sent by the Regional Customs Directorate –the Human Resource Management Department to the regional training centres, respectively to the National Training Centre. Thus, on the basis of a structural analysis, carried out based on information for the annual performance evaluation, it can be determined what part of the trained employees have achieved 'exceptional performance' or 'unacceptable performance' [12].

**Fourth.** The evaluation, based on feedback on the employees' satisfaction with the conducted training, can serve as a basis for determining the need for future training and the appropriate choice of methods and forms of training oriented to the specific needs of the employees

for acquiring knowledge. In this regard, it is recommended that any subsequent specialized training should end with completing a questionnaire, which will be the basis for evaluating employees' level of satisfaction.

**Fifth.** The Customs Agency training policy aims to organize internal training sessions, conducted by lecturers working for the Agency, namely experts and operational staff. An exception is made in relation to joint training sessions with other international and national institutions, and branch organizations. In such cases, lectures can be delivered by external specialists. To achieve a higher quality of training, it would be much better to invite lecturers – representatives of the academic institutions with traditions in training students in the field of customs control more often. This will contribute to improving the cooperation between theory and practice, mutual exchange of lecturers, etc.

**Sixth.** With the dynamically developing information technologies, it is appropriate to apply modern methods of e-learning in the process of training of customs officers through the introduction of appropriate interactive platforms. One of the advantages of the web-based training platforms is that they are designed in a way, creating an effective learning environment, namely standardized training materials, interaction between the participants in the online training process, customized training courses, tests to check the acquired knowledge, etc. Their application will lead to the implementation of the following: minimizing training costs; on-the-work training; training availability at any time and place; acquiring knowledge according to individual needs, etc.

**In conclusion**, we can point out that the Customs Agency pursues an effective policy in the field of human resources, aimed to provide training complied with the European standards in the context of the strategic EU Competency Framework for the Customs Profession. Enhancing the professional competencies of customs officers is implemented through systematic training, carried out in various forms. Training activities of customs officers lead to developing competencies that make them better professionals. Thus training contributes to the effective implementation of their duties related to protecting the financial interests of the EU and its Member States, ensuring the safety and security of the European citizens and protecting the EU from illicit trade.

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### **Ганчева З. Возможности для совершенствования процесса обучения сотрудников митных служб**

Одним из наиболее распространенных и эффективных путей повышения профессионального мастерства сотрудников таможенных служб является их обучение. В статье рассматриваются различные типы, методы и формы обучения, которые создают возможности для обновления и расширения знаний и навыков. Исследован процесс подготовки сотрудников таможенной администрации, на основании которого определены их сильные и слабые стороны и излагаются предложения по улучшению.

які створюють можливості для оновлення та розширення знань і навичок. Досліджено процес підготовки співробітників митної адміністрації, на підставі якого визначено їх сильні і слабкі сторони та викладаються пропозиції щодо поліпшення.

*Ключові слова:* процес навчання, митники, обов'язковий базовий курс, подальше спеціалізоване навчання, методи, види і форми освіти.

### **Гancheva Z. Opportunities for improving the process of training of customs officers**

Одним из наиболее распространенных и эффективных путей повышения профессионального мастерства сотрудников таможенных служб является их обучение. В статье рассматриваются различные типы, методы и формы обучения, которые создают возможности для обновления и расширения знаний и навыков. Исследован процесс подготовки сотрудников таможенной администрации, на основании которого определены их сильные и слабые стороны и излагаются предложения по улучшению.

*Ключевые слова:* процесс обучения, таможенники, обязательный базовый курс, дальнейшее специализированное обучение, методы, виды и формы образования.

### **Gancheva Z. Opportunities for improving the process of training of customs officers**

One of the most common and effective ways to enhance the professional qualities of customs officers is their training. The article focuses on the various types, methods and forms of training that create opportunities to update and expand their knowledge and skills. The process of training of specialized customs administration officers is studied, its strengths and weaknesses are identified and on this basis, proposals for improving it are formulated.

*Keywords:* training process, customs officers, compulsory basic course, subsequent specialized training, methods, types and forms of training.

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