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Ethical problems at work in the opinion of employees of selected banks^{*}

Abstract

The paper presents ethical problems faced by the employees of selected banks in Poland. The theoretical section of the paper describes the codes of ethics in banking, especially those concerning the moral aspects of working in banking. The empirical part of the paper presents the results of research on the ethos of bank workers. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out using a special Internet forum devoted to the banking sector. The study includes a content analysis of comments posted by the bank employees on the Internet forum.

Keywords: work in banking, ethics at work, banking, work, ethics

JEL Classification: A13, G21, M12, M54

1. Introduction

According to a poll conducted in March 2016 by TNS Polska on the reputation of the Polish banking sector in 2016, 48% of Poles expressed a positive opinion about banks, 42% were neutral, and 10% had a negative opinion. Among the sample, 61% trusted the banks operating in Poland, while 26% did not. This poll focused primarily on bank clients. Since banking, for its workers, represents the

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work environment, it is worth investigating issues such as professional relations, management methods, adherence to ethical principles and values by managers and other employees, and mobbing. This paper is a result of research on the opinions of bank employees and their workplaces—the banks.

A fundamental research question issue for this investigation is the set of ethical dilemmas faced by the bank employees in their workplace and their interactions with the customers while offering customer care and financial consulting. Thus formulated research problem can be divided into several specific areas: the issues regarding ethical dilemmas, workplace atmosphere, occurrence of mobbing, the pressure to sell bank products, salary satisfaction, and other gratifications of working in a bank. The goal this research was also to gain an understanding of the organisational culture of contemporary banks and the operations of the branches employing people who have direct customer contact. We began with a hypothesis that the work atmosphere in the banks currently operating in Poland and the ethical culture of their financial advisors are influenced by high pressure from the bank managers to increase the sales of banking products. Consequently, the importance of utilitarian (business) goals often causes the employees of the banking sector to overlook ethical principles.

The paper consists of three distinct parts. In the first part, we present the methodology and in the second part we discuss its results. The final section presents our conclusions and a short discussion on the results of our research.

2. Research methodology

To achieve our research goals, we used content analysis. We analysed a professional internet forum for banking sector employees.¹ The applied research method, along with statistical analysis and historical and comparative analysis, is one of three strategies for non-reactive data collection (Babbie, 2009, p. 250). It allowed us to insulate the research process so that it did not affect the behaviour of the analysed individuals, which made it possible to look at our research subject from a distance (pp. 356–357). Content analysis involves analysing recorded human communication. Wimmer & Dominick (2008) define content analysis as a method “of investigating and analysing information in a systematic, orderly and quantitative manner in order to measure variables” (p. 211). Sołoma (2002) notes that we call “every linguistic expression a transfer of information” (p. 96). Therefore, content analysis can pertain to the communication of the online forum members, who communicate freely, without any interference from the researcher. This method also makes it possible to analyse communication over a long period of time. However, the adopted method, apart from its advantages, also has certain downsides. The biggest problem is related to maintaining homogeneous standards for qualifying and interpreting the analysed content. This is because of how subjectively researchers receive the content (p. 98).

¹ The forum can be found here: <http://www.forum-bankowe.pl>.

The study was conducted in March and April 2016. 817 posts (messages written by the members of the online forum) were analysed. Specifically, we chose the opinions regarding 10 banks. These banks were selected in a purposeful manner, i.e. we included the institutions whose work conditions were most often commented on by the forum users. Therefore, it should be noted that the interpretation of our results should not be generalised to be representative of all banks operating in Poland. Also, a question arises if the “popularity” of a given bank (i.e. how often a given bank was discussed) was in any way related to the amount of negative and/or positive opinions about it. We should also take into consideration the fact that the users of the forum be a specific group of employees, perhaps more dissatisfied with or more sensitive to moral issues. If this is the case, the opinions they expressed do not reflect the position that can be said to be representative of the entire group of banking sector employees. On the other hand, we should also bear in mind that some positive opinions on the forum could have been inspired by the banks’ executives (especially those responsible for the communication and image of their companies).

Because of us choosing this research method, the research tool we designed and adopted was content analysis questionnaire, filled by the researcher.

More detailed information about the number of posts and how often they were browsed by the users can be found in Table 1.

The analysed content was published on an online forum between 2011 and 2016. Most of opinions (more than a hundred for each bank) pertained to Credit Agricole, Alior Bank, PKO, Getin Bank and ING Bank Śląski. The analysed forum also turned out to be a very popular site and a source of information for internet users (especially the banking sector employees). April 2016 saw more than 322 thousand-page views (which are not equal to the number of users visiting the forum, however). If each person read the opinions about each of the analysed banks only once, their number can be estimated to amount to 32 thousand at most. However, considering the differences between the numbers of views of opinions on each bank, we should assume that this number is lower.

Table 1. The number of posts and the frequency of viewing them by the users

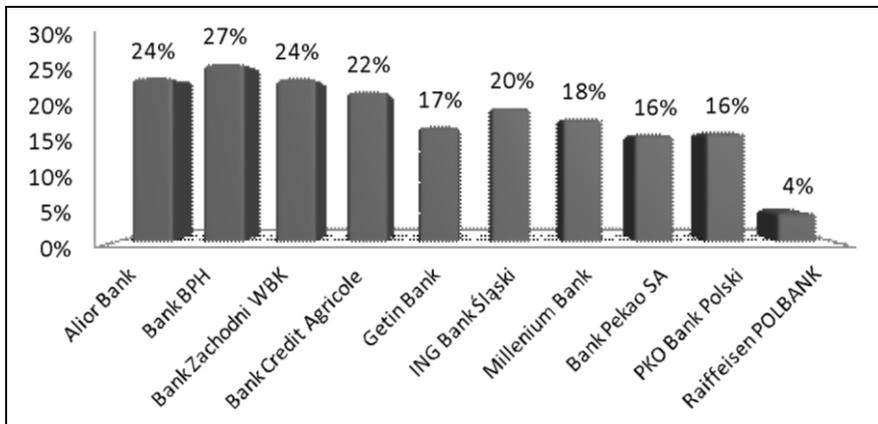
Bank	Number of analysed posts	Number of user views	First entry on the bank
Alior Bank	149	50 080	August 2011
Bank BPH	55	22 342	March 2012
Bank Zachodni WBK	24	18 842	September 2011
Bank Credit Agricole	168	50 205	March 2012
Getin Bank	112	39 485	September 2011
ING Bank Śląski	102	9 781	March 2011
Millennium Bank	27	11 991	December 2012
Bank Pekao SA	16	14 282	September 2011
PKO Bank Polski	125	72 225	August 2011
Raiffeisen POLBANK	39	33 566	December 2011
Total	817	322 799	-

3. Research results

Our research results will be presented in the order of importance of a given research problem, which was assigned according to the frequency of opinions on the topic.

Among all analysed opinions, 163 users (21%) reported bad work atmosphere. In the quantitative perspective, bad work atmosphere was most often reported by the employees of Bank Credit Agricole (37 opinions) and Alior Bank (34 opinions). The highest percentage of negative opinions about the atmosphere at work was presented by the employees of BPH Bank, Alior Bank, Bank Zachodni WBK and Bank Credit Agricole. The distribution of opinion regarding bad work atmosphere is presented in Graph 1.

Selected comments on workplace atmosphere are presented in Table 2. It should be noted that an undesirable atmosphere at the workplace was reported least often in Raiffeisen POLBANK. The results of our research present a very disturbing picture in terms of workplace atmosphere in the banks operating in Poland. The relations between the employees turn out to be very much objectified, especially considering the relationship of the management towards the bank advisors. This attitude is characterised primarily by a high pressure for constant sales improvement, which almost all actions of the employees and managers focus on. Many analysed employees' comments indicate the destructive influence work has on their mental health and family life. We also found many opinions reporting on the sense of relief and satisfaction experienced on ending work for the bank (even if this was a result of being fired). Because some of the analysed comments are very drastic and terrifying, it is worth presenting them verbatim (Table 2).



Graph 1. Percentage of opinions regarding bad work atmosphere in the bank.

Table 2. Example comments on bad workplace atmosphere

ALIOR BANK

"If you want to be treated like a camp number and are a masochist with no family or private life, I wholeheartedly recommend it."

"I haven't worked in that swamp for over a year. When I feel down I always remember that terrible, slave-like time in Alior... I feel better immediately. Working there is disgusting."

"I have never regretted anything more than taking that job. You could feel the atmosphere of that camp almost from the first day of training."

"Cameras and bugs are [...] from the very beginning. The microphone is attached to your screen and everything you say is recorded, and then taken for your evaluation, which obviously affects your bonuses."

"I worked I that swamp for a year and two months and it is a big experience I had here. It's not about the gaining skills but a chance for survival."

BANK BPH

"Employees can't cope mentally—many people are on psychotropics."

"I don't recommend working in a bank to anyone. They are camps, exploitation, humiliation and definitely no fair play."

"I handed in my resignation last month myself and even though I can't find other work I'm very happy."

"And the atmosphere...grave, people who've been working in that bank for more than 2–3 years are mentally exhausted and new ones come and go."

"[...] I quit BPH almost two years ago and my family finally has a mother and a wife."

"The worst thing is that you don't know who informs and whom. You must be careful about what you say and do because you never know what you not right."

BANK ZACHODNI WBK

"I worked there for almost a year, and then I handed in my resignation because I couldn't take it anymore. I have nightmares to this day."

"Working in a bank—never experienced anything positive."

"You want to traumatise yourself—work for BZ WBK."

BANK CREDIT

"Agricole Meeting after hours till midnight... No breakfast break... Stressful atmosphere."

"My heart goes out to all the former and some present employees of that concentration camp."

"Even if I had to chew dry bread and drink tap water, I would never come back."

"I'll put it like this – it's difficult to survive, to understand what is happening. People forget their personalities in their fight for survival—it's pathetic. The worst thing is that our families and friends suffer."

"A dream job became a nightmare job. I pity those who must work there. I quit it and I'm happy."

"To have a drink is almost impossible. Toilet? Forget it! Supposedly you have a 15-minute break (never used it myself)."

"Now I have neurosis... which I got when I was working at that wonderful, friendly company. Meanwhile, my marriage almost broke up (my husband couldn't cope with me unloading my frustration after work)."

"I'm dreaming of a day when this nightmare is over, and I will once again have the will to work and live. I won't recommend working in that bank to anyone, not for the world, it's not worth losing your health and family life."

GETIN BANK

"Watch out because Getin will destroy you and if you have a family, they will destroy them too..."

"I worked in Getin for 5 years and now I'm a wreck of a man."

ING BANK ŚLĄSKI

"A trainer comes at least twice a week, and stands behind us all day long and listens if we plug each client with the same stupid things [...] a complete absurd."

MILLENNIUM BANK

"The employees of MB are treated as objects in a literal sense..."

"You will find no justice in the corporation, unless by some miracle. So, either deal with it, or be among the frustrated slaves. Do your job; don't let everything get to you."

BANK PEKAO SA

"Generally, terror, nervous atmosphere, treating employees like dirt."

PKO BANK POLSKI

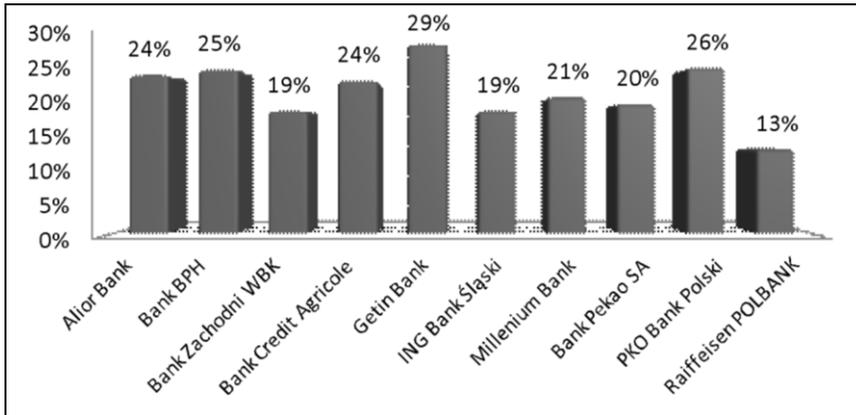
"The only certain thing is depression because you get up in the morning and you don't want to put your clothes on to go to work."

"Frankly, when I get up to work I have stomach-aches, so it's not normal."

RAIFFEISEN POLBANK

"I really don't recommend it, there's unbelievable employee turnover—last year 32% of employees handed in their resignations."

Bank advisors are highly pressured by their management to achieve ever better sales results. All analysed employees' opinions indicated constant high pressure from the management for increasing sales of financial products even at all costs (we found here the most—no fewer than 185 opinions, which amounts to 24% of all analysed posts). The percentage of opinions regarding the scale and amount of pressure experienced by the employees from their management is shown in Graph 2.



Graph 2. Percentage of opinions reflecting high pressure on increasing sales

Table 3 presents selected opinions regarding the sales of banking products. The analysis of the entire forum content showed high employee turnover. The employment policy of these institutions shows a preference for individuals who exhibit the potential to increase sales. They do not necessarily have to be trained in finance or banking. The main recruitment criterion is the ability to sell products and acquire new customers, even at the cost of forfeiting the professional ethics of a bank employee. The pressure to sell becomes the fundamental element of the organisational culture in the analysed banks. Many analysed opinions describe the lies that the employees must tell the customers to achieve the sales goals set by their management.

Table 3. Examples of opinions on sales pressure

ALIOR BANK

"To all those who are considering it—I discourage you, even if you are desperate and have been looking for a job for a long time. Wrecked nerves, pressure and rate race for results are not worth it. You will regret it as I did."

"A job with almost no perspectives because 80% of it involves working with pensioners' account who must be forcibly convinced/lead into loans and such."

"Plans, sales, it'd be best to take all your friends and family to the bank and then they still fire you because you fell 1000 short of the plan."

"The only thing that counts there are sales, knowledge or ethics are less important [...] If you simply have a human, empathising attitude to your customers and you're not a predator, you will quickly perish."

BANK BPH

"Fair play sounds great. It's a pity it's all a show. I'm working in this bank and most certainly there is no fair play there—it's just empty words. Slavery and a work camp, where cheating and pitching products to the customers is your everyday routine. Sales plans which make you lie, employees paying for the accounts they open for nothing for their friends, family, and clients taking loans as technical accounts, free of charge."

"Explaining why a customer took just a 1000 PLN loan for a year, he could have 20 000, he could have paid it off over 96 months—your fault, you can't sell things."

"Clients get poor products because sales pressure makes employees pitch them junk."

BANK ZACHODNI WBK

"As an advisor [...] forget your ethics on the first day because you will be pitching structures for 2 years, the ones which let your client earn 1% in 2 years [...] Now, look that client in the eye."

"Unethical sales are routine, you lie to the clients only to sell the product. The myth of banking is long dead, rat race, stealing clients, no objectivism. These are the norm."

BANK CREDIT AGRICOLE

"They will sooner fire you for not doing your sales plan than for your lack of ethics."

"The tell you to pitch loans to clients who already have several (find it hard to make ends meet)."

"The worst was "helping clients realise their needs"—to me, it's ordinary pitching and lying to the naïve elderly, people who don't know anything about banking."

GETIN BANK

"The fact is that if you are well paid it means that you lie to your clients all the time, only to sell the product."

"Mentally I'm ruined—and the clients are cheated, these are facts. Getin is work for a skilled fraud—and if you're not, they will make you one..."

"Unfortunately, working in a bank is not easy and involves most of all switching off your conscience and sacrificing yourself at the cost of your family life. Lying to clients is painful; unfortunately, we are lied to in every area we know little about."

"And what is worse they plainly tell you—if you want to earn, sell products for 15 years, the client will get nothing, the bank will increase its profit, and you will not look the client in the eye when you

meet them in the street. I know one thing for sure, I can't lie, so I'm running away of here."

"It doesn't matter how you sell—the bank will make you a fraud as it did me."

"You pitch shit to people who don't need it at all. You also don't need the bank to be happy. Seriously, there are many other interesting places where you can make money honestly."

"When it comes to working at Getin Bank, I don't recommend it to honest people who don't like lying."

ING BANK ŚLĄSKI

"Generally, it all lacks humanity, and nobody cares about anything but sales."

"It seems normal that sales results count in banks, after all, today only the results matter, drugstore employees have their sales plans for cosmetics, and so what's so strange about it?"

MILLENNIUM BANK

"And when it comes to supporting, it looks like this: 10 e-mails a day saying: sell, and improve our ideas for sales."

"It's getting more and more difficult to sell anything because people simply can't afford to go further into debt. Despite that, sales plans are still increasing, and nobody cares how you're going to do it."

BANK PEKAO SA

"Sales, sales—customer satisfaction doesn't matter, results matter."

PKO BANK POLSKI

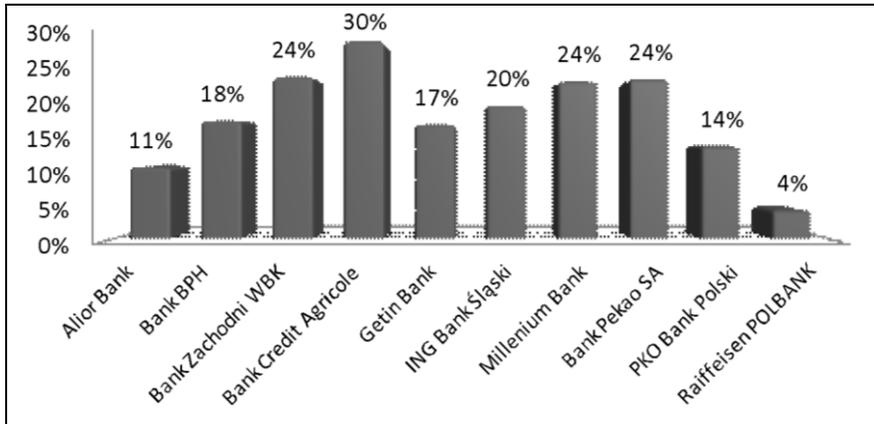
"Sales plans with products majority of which are junk and the clients lose money, earn nothing... sad but true."

"Dear all—I deplore the situation that took place/is taking place in Our Bank. I'm sorry that we can't work in peace—that we are a result, not people."

RAIFFEISEN POLBANK

None.

The third characteristic problem discussed in the analysed forum was the negative evaluation of the management personnel (151 opinions, which amounts to 19% of all the analysed posts). The most negative opinions were expressed about the management at Credit Agricole (30% negative opinions—49 messages about this bank), Bank Zachodni WBK, Millennium Bank and PKO Bank Polski (24% negative opinions each). The smallest number of such opinions pertained to Raiffeisen POLBANK (4%). The percentage of negative comments about bank management is shown in Graph 3.

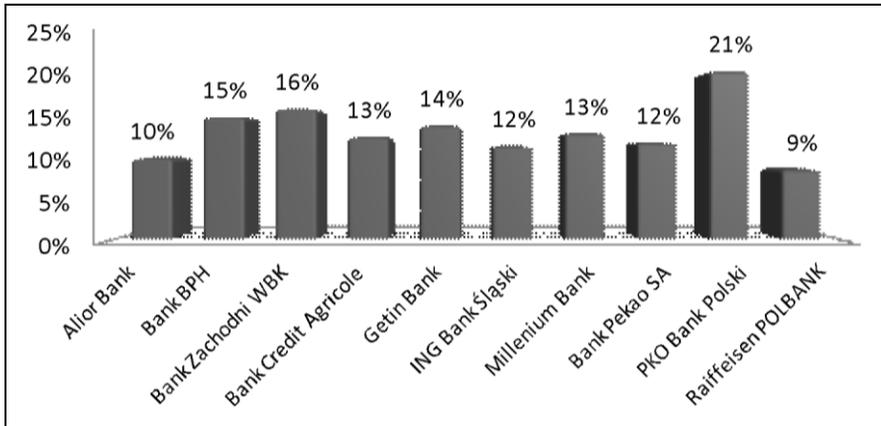


Graph 3. Percentage of negative opinions about management

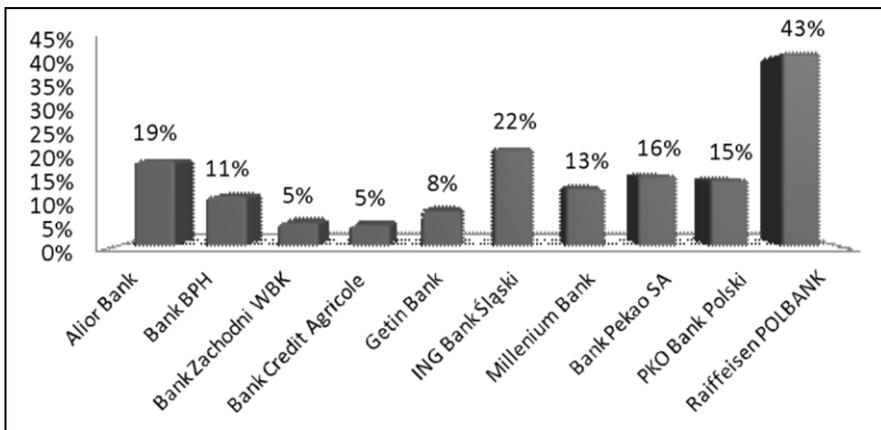
Negative evaluation of the management personnel most often pertained to their lack of competences and management skills, their concentration on the sales process and sales results, constant supervision over the effects of work and the necessity to justify inability to realise sales plans, creating stressful atmosphere, instrumental treatment of employees, unfair distribution of bonuses, building the atmosphere of destructive competition, mobbing practices, threatening, threats of being made redundant or moved to a different branch. The forum users also pointed out either the low quality of, or a lack of training. They had to learn about the banks' procedures and their IT systems on their own. The training conducted in banks aim at developing sales skills; involve frequent rehearsals of sales role-play and teleconferences devoted to sales. The users also noticed that the key to being promoted to managerial positions is most often either good sales results or connections in the bank. As a result, the managers are not selected since their management skills. The role of managers in the banking sector seems to focus on one goal only: increasing sales of their employees. The opinions of the forum users show that they are aware of the situation their managers are in, that they are under constant pressure and control of the executives higher up in the hierarchy. Everybody is focused on achieving the best sales results of banking products, especially the most profitable ones.

The analysed opinions of employees show that workplace mobbing practices are rather frequent. Information on mobbing in banks is shown in Graph 4.

The basic motivation for applying for a job at a bank turns out to be the salary (which is understandable). We learnt, however, that remuneration was not an especially important topic. At the same time, we found a few opinions reflecting an ongoing tendency to lower the basic salary as well as the commission on the sold banking products. We noted several opinions expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of raises, the lack of paid overtime, and arbitrary rules of granting bonuses. Information on the percentage of opinions about low salaries is shown in Graph 5.

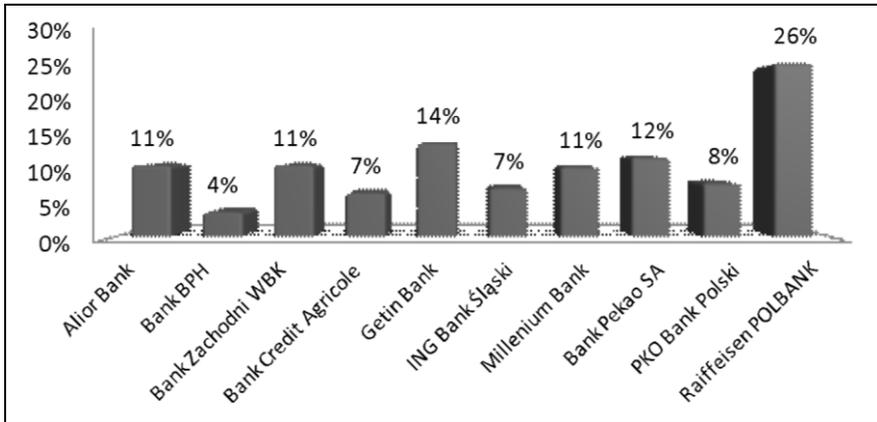


Graph 4. Percentage of opinions on mobbing practices



Graph 5. The percentage of opinions about low salaries

Our analysis of the forum users' opinions about work showed that the clear majority of them were negative. About 9% of the comments (74 posts) reported some positive aspects of working in a bank (some of the analysed comments were mixed—the employees described both positive and negative aspects of their jobs). Relatively the most positive opinions pertained to working in Raiffeisen POLBANK and it was the only institution with positive comments about the work atmosphere. In the remaining banks, job satisfaction was connected most of all with salaries, sometimes with the character of the job which involves customer contact, which is a source of satisfaction to the employees (Graph 6).



Graph 6. Percentage of opinions about work satisfaction

To present the positive opinions about working in a bank, selected comments of banking sector employees are shown in Table 4. It should be noted, however, that they are usually morally dubious.

Table 4. Selected positive opinions about working in a bank

“Salary on time is a plus.”

“It’s not all peachy, but I appreciate what I have. Surprisingly, I can mentally rest even though 8-hour workday is a fairy tale.”

“Bonuses were indeed nice (if you lied to your clients).”

“To sum up, this work pays well but at a very high price.”

“You can cope somehow and the only thing that keeps me here is the really nice clients and a very good department manager, who supports me all the time.”

“Because I work at ING and I’m proud of it—I hope that I will never regret it.”

“If you work fine, you get the results.”

“I have no reason to complain about my salary.”

“I use all this and I’m just an ordinary customer advisor. I do my job with pleasure and a natural smile because I like customer contact.”

We found several positive comments about workplace atmosphere from several years earlier (before changes, consolidation, takeover—generally, based on content analysis, we can say that it was before 2010), when working in a bank involved less pressure on achieving sales goals. It raises a question of if and how it is related to the crisis that began in 2009, which saw western banks face serious problems. Perhaps the increasing pressure on ever better results be an attempt to make up for the losses in parent banks by achieving the highest possible profits in

the countries where the financial crisis did not affect the banks so heavily (as was the case in Poland).

Another potential reason for the worsening of the atmosphere in banks may be the high saturation of their clients with banking products and the increasing difficulty in selling new ones (especially loans).

In 2013, the Polish Bank Association (ZBP) adopted the Code of Banking Ethics, one part of which is devoted to HR policy. According to the Code, each employee “should be treated by their employer with respect and dignity [...]. The employees should be treated fairly and should be provided with opportunities for promotion and development.” The code also obliges banks to “provide the employees with a friendly work environment and to counteract any discrimination and mobbing.” It also mentions that banks should provide a chance for anonymous reporting of unethical practices. Banks also should train their employees in business ethics and promote the adopted ethical codes. If we were to draw any conclusions solely based on the presented above results, it would turn out that there is a vast discrepancy between these recommendations and reality.

4. Conclusions

Our research problem, despite its methodological shortcomings, was to some extent successfully resolved. The results of the content analysis of a professional online forum present the dark side of the banking sector, which is primarily focused on financial results, which results in enormous pressure on increasing sales results of banking products. Such a strategy gives rise to negative consequences for the workplace atmosphere and the relationship between the employees and their managers. The bank managers exert constant pressure on branch managers to constantly increase their sales. Branch managers, with their imposed sales plans, transfer these expectations onto bank advisors, whose work is evaluated according to just one criterion: the effectiveness of their sales. Ethical principles and honesty have in fact no place there—these are the opinions of bank employees themselves. The lack of effectiveness in sales leads to redundancies and significant employee turnover. It is assumed that the newly recruited employees will generate more sales, also because of their families and friends. Working in a bank, in light of our analysis, does not provide happiness or satisfaction. There are just a few exceptions—the opinions suggesting satisfaction from high salary earned in return for sufficient sales effectiveness. For some employees, an advantage of such a job is the contact with customer.

Our research provides an insight into the organisational culture of banks, especially the institutions with customer care units. Our analysis shows deterioration in the banking sector work culture in recent years (we found many comments suggesting that before the financial crisis in the West, which began in 2007, working in a bank involved less pressure on achieving sales goals). Another potential reason for the worsening of workplace atmosphere in banks can be the high satu-

ration of the clients with banking products and, in consequence, the increasing difficulty in selling them new ones (especially loans).

Considering the weaknesses of our research (the problem of representativeness of the professional forum users) we can hope that the full picture of the professional culture in the banking sector is more optimistic and closer to the ethical principles espoused in the Code of Banking Ethics. However, our analysis of the forum provides us with certain information and can make us doubt if ethical standards are adhered to in the banks currently operating in Poland. It seems necessary to conduct further research to investigate this issue in more detail.

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