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Good Practices in Social Security

Good practice in operation since: 2016

Improving the language of communication with the customers: The “Straight from ZUS” promotional slogan

Social Insurance Institution
Poland

Summary

The Social Insurance Institution (Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych – ZUS) introduces plain language standards to communicate with customers.

We have:

- *tested our language of communication with the customers;*
- *developed language standards to communicate with customers in four areas of written communication, namely, forms, letters, documents on administrative processes, and the website;*
- *adopted in 2017 official guidelines on language to communicate with customers, and in 2018 a signed declaration on the use of plain language;*
- *prepared plain language textbooks that are tailored to the needs of these four areas of communication;*
- *trained our employees on comprehensible writing – over 37,000 people in workshops with trainers and 10,000 people in e-learning; and*
- *simplified news articles on the zus.pl website – about a thousand pages and several hundred informational publications, e.g., leaflets, brochures and newsletters.*

We are also:

- *simplifying our document forms and templates; and*
- *working on using plain official language in ZUS decisions and other letters.*

In the 43 branches and headquarters of ZUS, we have a total of 175 internal trainers-consultants in plain official language.

The issue or challenge

What was the issue or challenge addressed by your good practice? Please provide a short description.

The use of official and legal language in letters and official documents often makes it difficult for citizens to understand them. This is compounded by social changes including the speed of life in post-industrial societies, and the development of mass media and IT technologies. As a result, the amount of information that contemporary people have to process may exceed their perceptual abilities. People expect public institutions to communicate effectively with them.

The use of plain language is the solution. Based on findings of contemporary linguistics, there is a return to the structures and lexis of everyday language. The problem may be a result of the existing legal traditions and customs of officials and, in the case of the ZUS, the sheer size of the organization and the significant complexity of issues related to social insurance.

Addressing the challenge

What were the main objectives of the plan or strategy to resolve the issue or challenge? List and briefly describe the main elements of the plan or strategy, focusing especially on their innovative feature(s) and expected or intended effects.

The main goal was to improve the language of communication between ZUS and its customers. By doing so, we expect to increase the efficiency of the social insurance system, the availability of public services for citizens as well as increase their confidence in our institution and in the system, and thus their level of participation.

To achieve this, we have adopted the following operational objectives:

- To examine the language of our organization.
- To create language standards for the organization.
- To train our employees in the use of plain language.
- To promote the use of plain language among our employees.
- To adopt standard patterns in documents, letters and forms when corresponding with customers.
- To regularly monitor the language of correspondence with customers.

Targets to be achieved

What were the quantitative and/or qualitative targets or key performance indicators that were set for the plan or strategy? Please describe briefly.

A study of our institution's language use and linguistic style was carried out.

New language standards were prepared in four areas of written communication:

- forms;
- letters;
- documents on administrative processes; and
- the website.

Based on this and in consultation with linguists, four language manuals were prepared, one for each areas.

Training curricula were prepared for workshops and e-learning.

The project assumed that there would be at least one plain language trainer-consultant per branch, and at least one for the ZUS headquarters. In the end, there was a total of 175 trainers for the 43 ZUS branches and the ZUS headquarters, and a specialised department was established to manage the development of using plain language in the organization.

It was also assumed that 35,000 employees would be trained, mainly from units that deal with customer correspondence. We exceeded the number by 2,000 to include the support units, because it turned out that plain language was also very useful in internal correspondence.

Around 1,000 articles on the ZUS website www.zus.pl were re-edited according to the new standards.

Evaluating the results

Has there been an evaluation of the good practice? Please provide data on the impact and outcomes of the good practice by comparing targets vs actual performance, before-and-after indicators, and/or other types of statistics or measurements.

The standards of the new language for our institution have been prepared in cooperation with linguists from the University of Wrocław. They have also reviewed the textbooks we have produced.

New letters, created on the basis of the textbook, have been also evaluated by linguists.

During the pilot tests, customers expressed very positive opinions about the new forms and information texts.

We have also carried out a pilot monitoring of the use of the plain language in four departments.

We have analysed the e-mails sent by the Telephone Service Centre to respond to customer questions.

In 2019, we will start monitoring all of this at the ZUS headquarters and in all ZUS branches.

We have also practised how to monitor the three elements on which the monitoring will be based:

- neutrality (data anonymity, random sampling, and cross-checking, i.e., one branch will be evaluated by another branch, with no information on the branch to be evaluated);
- objectivity (standard quantitative tools e.g., Gunning fog index, and qualitative assessments e.g., completing a questionnaire based on the ten principles of ZUS plain language);
- effectiveness.

At present,

- the average number of words in a sentence is 17.17, which is below the maximum standard of 20 words to understand a sentence in one reading;
- the percentage of difficult words is 3.44 per cent; and
- the average fog index is 14.

Lessons learned

Based on the organization's experience, name up to three factors which you consider as indispensable to replicate this good practice. Name up to three risks that arose/could arise in implementing this good practice. Please explain these factors and/or risks briefly.

Based on the experience of the project, we consider the following actions to be necessary to carry out a global change in the language of an organization:

- the organization leader's decision to introduce the use of plain language (with comprehensive support activities);
- develop standards, trainings and new patterns;
- constant consultations (the role of consultant-trainers), promotion and monitoring.