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CRONYISM AS A MANIFESTATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL DYSFUNCTION - MANAGERS' PERSPECTIVE

KRONIZM JAKO PRZEJAW DYSFUNKCJI W ZARZĄDZANIU – PERSPEKTYWA MENEDŻERÓW

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to systematize knowledge about cronyism as a manifestation of organizational dysfunction in human capital management and to diagnose the attitudes of management staff toward this phenomenon and its potential consequences. The study covered a group of 100 top-level managers representing medium-sized enterprises. The following research problems were formulated: What is the scale of cronyism in medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland according to managers' assessment? What is the level of awareness among managerial staff regarding the potential consequences of cronyism? What actions are undertaken in enterprises to eliminate the phenomenon of cronyism? The vast majority of respondents encountered the concept of cronyism for the first time during the study, while they are well familiar with and understand its synonyms (nepotism, favoritism). In managers' assessment, the scale of this phenomenon is very significant in Polish reality. The attitudes of managers managing medium-sized enterprises toward cronyism indicate a high level of awareness of potential threats associated with this phenomenon (threats to the team, the entire organization, but also to the manager himself). At the same time, as many as 52% of respondents show a tendency to rationalize and relativize cronyism by pointing to its potentially positive consequences and connecting it with relationship management and networking. They explain their acceptance of promoting people from their circle of acquaintances in employment and promotions by the higher level of trust in them and the expectation of higher levels of engagement from these employees compared to strangers. They are more critical of the phenomenon of favoring colleagues in access to salary increases or deriving other benefits from the motivational system. The majority of study participants admit that their enterprises do not have effective mechanisms preventing cronyism.

KEYWORDS: cronyism, favoritism, management dysfunction

STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest systematyzacja wiedzy na temat kronizmu jako przejawu patologii w zarządzaniu kapitałem ludzkim oraz diagnoza postaw kadry zarządzającej wobec tego zjawiska i jego potencjalnych skutków. Badaniami objęto grupę 100 menedżerów najwyższego szczebla reprezentujących przedsiębiorstwa średnie. Jako narzędzie badań wykorzystano kwestionariusz ankiety. Sformułowano następujące problemy badawcze: Jaka jest skala kronizmu w średnich przedsiębiorstwach funkcjonujących w Polsce w ocenie menedżerów? Jaki jest poziom świadomości kadry menedżerskiej dotyczących potencjalnych skutków kronizmu? Jakie działania podejmowane są w przedsiębiorstwach w celu wyeliminowania zjawiska kronizmu? Zdecydowana większość respondentów w toku badania po raz pierwszy zetknęła się z pojęciem kronizmu, natomiast dobrze zna i rozumie jego synonimy (kumoterstwo, koleśiostwo, poplecznictwo). W ocenie menedżerów w polskich realiach

skala tego zjawiska jest bardzo duża. Postawy menedżerów zarządzających w średnich przedsiębiorstwach wobec kronizmu wskazują na wysoki poziom świadomości potencjalnych zagrożeń powiązanych z tym zjawiskiem (zagrożeń dla zespołu, całej organizacji, ale i samego menedżera). Jednocześnie aż 52% respondentów przejawia tendencję do racjonalizacji i relatywizowania kronizmu poprzez wskazywanie jego potencjalnie pozytywnych następstw oraz łączenia go z zarządzaniem relacjami i networkingiem. Akceptację dla promowania w zatrudnieniu i awansach ludzi z kręgu znajomych tłumaczą wyższym poziomem zaufania do nich oraz oczekiwaniem wyższego poziomu zaangażowania tych pracowników w porównaniu do ludzi obcych. Bardziej krytycznie podchodzą do zjawiska faworyzowania kolegów/koleżanek w dostępie do podwyżek wynagrodzenia lub czerpania innych korzyści wynikających z systemu motywacyjnego. Większość uczestników badania przyznaje, że w ich przedsiębiorstwach nie ma skutecznych mechanizmów zapobiegających kronizmowi.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kronizm, faworyzowanie, dysfunkcja w zarządzaniu

INTRODUCTION

Cronyism is defined as granting privileges to employees based on social and personal relationships and connections, rather than based on their competencies or work performance (Khatri, 2017; Zhang & Gill, 2019, pp. 322-344). It is the favoring of friends and/or acquaintances in hiring, promotion, or granting other benefits arising from the employment relationship. Cronyism is also defined as a network of horizontal connections among friends (*cronies*) who, positioned in their roles, maintain or promote each other mutually, depending on who currently holds power. Cronyism always involves unequal treatment and can occur in organizations in two forms: (a) horizontal cronyism, which is defined as favoritism based on relationships at the same level in the organizational structure (e.g., friends, colleagues, classmates, social groups, and trade unions) or (b) vertical cronyism, which is favoritism toward a subordinate based on factors unrelated to their work performance, thus involving a relationship between a leader and a subordinate (Shaheen et al., 2017, pp. 308-32). It is a manifestation of organizational dysfunction because it entails a series of negative consequences, including reduced satisfaction and job satisfaction, decreased organizational commitment, increased destructive stress, and resignation from work. Despite such serious potential consequences, cronyism

in Polish reality is relatively understudied, and available research focuses on the public sector and the phenomenon of *crony capitalism* (Bartnicki, 2019, s. 65-93). Therefore, the aim of this article is to systematize knowledge about cronyism as a manifestation of organizational dysfunction in human capital management and to diagnose the attitudes of management staff in business entities toward this phenomenon and its potential consequences. It was assumed that it is necessary to identify the attitudes of management staff toward this form of organizational dysfunction, because managers have a decisive influence on shaping the culture of ethical management in enterprises. The study covered a group of 100 top-level managers representing medium-sized enterprises (each respondent represented a different enterprise). The following research problems were formulated:

1. What is the scale of cronyism in medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland according to managers' assessment?
2. What is the level of awareness among managerial staff regarding the potential consequences of cronyism?
3. What actions are undertaken in enterprises to eliminate the phenomenon of cronyism?

To solve the research problems, a diagnostic survey method was used, with a questionnaire survey as the tool.

CRONYISM AS A MANIFESTATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL DYSFUNCTION – LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no consensus in the literature about when this concept was first used. Some researchers maintain that this occurred in 1665, when Samuel Pepys first used the word *crony* in the sense of original, long-term friendship or relationship of people in the context of persons who were associated with universities in Cambridge and Oxford. Other sources indicate that the first use of this concept occurred in 1840. It was defined as *skills and inclinations for making friendships* (Khatri & Tsang, 2003, pp. 289-303). In the meaning used today, it appeared through a New York Times journalist who called the practices used by the Truman administration in the early 1950s cronyism, involving

hiring *through connections* in government offices. It has been confirmed that in the public sector, cronyism negatively affects organizational effectiveness (Awaah, 2022; Coco & Lagravinese, 2014, pp. 443-450), increases the risk of corruption (Roberts, 2010, pp. 1-12), and causes dysfunctional behaviors among employees in public service (Arkorfu, 2022, pp. 708-727; Shaheen et al., 2017, pp. 308-315).

It is necessary to distinguish between cronyism (*cronyism*) and crony capitalism (*crony capitalism*). Crony capitalism is an extension of the general concept of cronyism because it concerns business entities or other organizations that benefit from their political connections (Reinsberg et al., 2021, pp. 607-634; Rubin, 2016, pp. 105-120; Chekir & Diwan, 2014, pp. 177-194). Crony capitalism is a term describing an economy where business success depends on close relationships between businesspeople and government officials and politicians. It can manifest in the form of favoritism in the distribution of legal permits and concessions, government subsidies, special tax breaks, subsidies and loans, or other varieties of state interventionism. Such a politicized economic system poses a threat to the free market because it is deliberate, systematic use of policy to manipulate markets in a way that benefits politically connected entities. Crony capitalism creates political entrepreneurs and stifles market entrepreneurs, killing transparency and competition (Diwan et al., 2016). It is a dysfunctional phenomenon in which relationships between politically connected capitalists and corrupt bureaucrats and politicians perpetuate both petty corruption (bribes in interactions between government officials and social actors) and grand corruption (abuse of power by political elites to increase the spoils of economic elites) (Reinsberg et al., 2021, pp. 607-627). The growth of *privilege networks* causes widespread social frustration, and consequently, *crony capitalism* can provoke serious social revolts, as happened in Egypt or Tunisia (Chekir & Diwan, 2014, pp. 177-184). Crony capitalism can also take another form, namely politicians can use the public sector or state-owned companies to give jobs to cronies at the expense of the efficiency of these organizations and general welfare. For example, research conducted in Portugal proved that employment in the public sector increases significantly in the months just before a new government takes office or just after elections, but only when the new government has a different political association than the previous one.

Cronyism is an interdisciplinary subject of research mainly within economics and finance, sociological sciences, administrative sciences, ethics, and psychology. In management and quality sciences, this phenomenon is treated as one of the key manifestations of organizational dysfunction because it leads to many negative consequences (Turhan, 2014, pp. 295-308; Islam et al., 2025, pp. 90-109). It is a denial of the idea of authentic organizational leadership (Akuffo & Kivipöld, 2020, pp. 369-386). Employees who are not *cronies* feel treated unfairly, which reduces their loyalty to the employer, engagement, and sense of job satisfaction (Mao et al., 2018, pp. 745-755; Christensen-Salem et al., 2021, pp. 619-626), raises the level of work-related stress and readiness to change employment (Erdem & Karataş, 2015, pp. 51-65; Pearce, 2015, pp. 41-44; Erdem et al., 2013, pp. 51-64). Research particularly emphasizes the destructive impact of cronyism on relationships within organizations and on social capital (Shaheen et al., 2020; Jawahar et al., 2021, pp. 657-677). Cronyism causes informal divisions in the organization between those who are and those who are not in the circle of acquaintances, as a result of which members of external groups feel excluded and cut off from key information (Quade et al., 2017, pp. 675-709). They experience ostracism and a sense of being ignored (Ferris et al., 2017, pp. 315-330). Excluded members of external groups have limited opportunities to contribute to organizational processes and less access to organizational resources, including knowledge resources (Bedi, 2021, pp. 861-879). Cronyism significantly reduces the sense of trust within the divided team, which consequently lowers the quality of communication and leads to destructive conflicts between the favored and those excluded from the privileged circle of acquaintances (Howard et al., 2020, pp. 577-586; Riaz & Zaman, 2018, pp. 831-845). Cronyism often goes hand in hand with promoting poor work culture, ultimately causing a decline in the effectiveness of teams and entire organizations. By placing incompetent people in high positions, management quality is reduced (Ignatowski et al., 2021, p. 59; Ali et al., 2022). Moreover, according to social exchange theory and equity theory, when employees perceive injustice and lack of dependency between input and outcome, or when they are convinced that they are not treated according to the principles of fairness and professionalism, they may engage in negative counterproductive or anomic behaviors as *revenge* against

the organization (Kowalewski & Moczyłowska, 2020, pp. 45-76) or quiet quitting (Moczyłowska, 2024, pp. 442-450; Akyol, & Erkoç, 2022, pp. 586-602).

Cronyism is often confused with nepotism (Niemiec, 2024, pp. 475-480). The most important difference between these two phenomena stems from the degree of kinship between the persons showing favor and the favored (Erdem et al., 2013, pp. 52-57; Vveinhardt & Sroka, 2020). On one hand, there are similarities between cronyism and nepotism, because in both cases we deal with assigning people certain privileges, duties, or positions under the influence of criteria other than merit-based (Pasamonik, 2024, pp. 3-23). On the other hand, there are also important differences. In cronyism, the favored person is not necessarily a family member, which is the case with nepotism. Cronyism, which includes, for example, group members, children of friends and colleagues, is a broader concept than nepotism (Kuforiji, 2024, pp. 101-109; Shah et al., 2025, pp. 177-186; Rasheed et al., 2025, pp. 1-17). The foundation of nepotism is the family relationship, and favoritism is amoral familism, which often stems from feelings typical of family members (e.g., love for relatives, loyalty, attachment to closest persons). In the case of cronyism, the emotional context is also important, but these are less intense or more diverse emotions; for example, it can be both sympathy for a college friend and fear of exclusion from the group (Gusman, 2024, pp. 239-237).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study covered a group of 100 top-level managers representing medium-sized enterprises. The principle was adopted that each respondent represents a different business entity. The average work experience of respondents in managerial positions (president, board member, managing director, functional division director) was 11 years. In the studied sample, 63% were men. 97% of respondents had higher education. The selection of the studied group was purposive. Representatives of small enterprises were excluded from the studied sample because in Polish conditions, these organizations often have a family character, which exposes them to a much greater extent to the phenomenon of nepotism rather than cronyism. Representatives of large business entities also did not participate in the research, as compliance policies aimed at ensuring

the enterprise's activities comply not only with legal but also ethical norms are increasingly implemented in these organizations, and these — at least formally — should exclude cronyism (Bello et al., 2024, pp. 42-52; Stöber et al., 2019, pp. 383-402). The following research problems were formulated:

1. What is the scale of cronyism in medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland according to managers' assessment?
2. What is the level of awareness among managerial staff regarding the potential consequences of cronyism?
3. What actions are undertaken in enterprises to eliminate the phenomenon of cronyism?

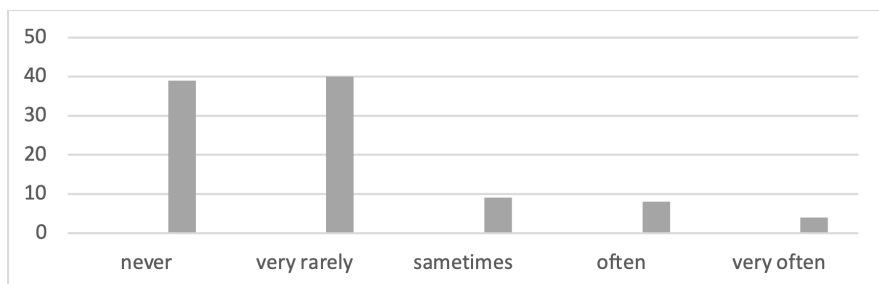
To solve the research problems, a diagnostic survey method was used, with a questionnaire survey as the tool. The research was conducted from January to April 2025.

FINDINGS

1. What is the scale of cronyism in medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland according to managers' assessment?

The vast majority of respondents (88%) did not know the concept of cronyism, while all study participants confirmed that they know the essence and have encountered the phenomenon of cronyism and favoritism during their professional work. When asked *How often do you hire or promote someone 'through connections'?* as many as 79% of top management representatives declare that they do not do this or that it happens very rarely. At the same time, those managers who admit to hiring and/or promoting close acquaintances explain this mainly by drastic shortages of experts from their industry in the labor market (see Chart 1).

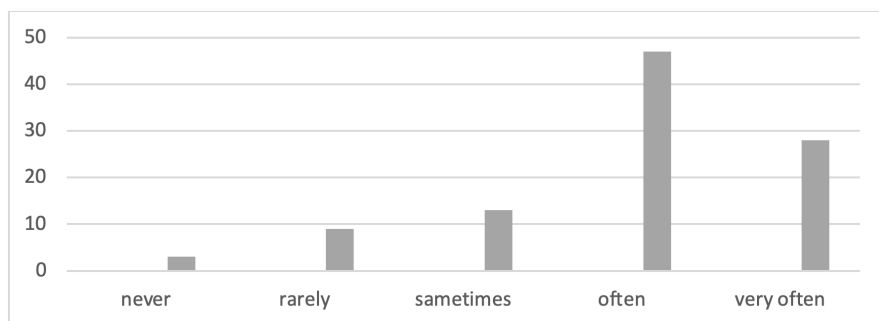
Chart 1. *Frequency of hiring and/or promoting someone through connections declared by surveyed managers*



Source: own work.

Managers evaluate their behaviors in a way typical of the psychological effect of false uniqueness (Chambers, 2008, pp. 878-889), i.e., they declare that they themselves rather do not conduct personnel policy according to the *through connections* principle, while simultaneously expressing the belief that this is a relatively frequent phenomenon in Polish management practice (see Chart 2).

Chart 2. *Frequency of hiring and/or promoting someone through connections in Polish management practice according to respondents' assessment*



Source: own work.

2. What is the level of awareness among managerial staff regarding the potential consequences of cronyism?

Almost all potential effects of cronyism identified based on literature analysis were assessed by at least half of the respondents as occurring frequently or very frequently. The least occurring (from the management staff perspective) is the

risk that employees outside the manager's circle of acquaintances have limited opportunities to contribute to organizational processes (see Table 1). No statistically significant differences were found in the responses of women and men.

Table 1. *Potential effects of cronyism according to managers' assessment*

Please rate the truthfulness of statements on a scale from 1 to 5:	Arithmetic mean	Variance	Standard deviation	Median
Employees who are outside the circle of acquaintances and friends of the manager often feel disfavored, which reduces their job satisfaction	3,5	1,3838	1,176	4
Employees outside the manager's circle of acquaintances have limited opportunities to contribute to organizational processes	3,47	1,3829	1,175	3
Employees who are outside the circle of acquaintances and friends of the manager often feel excluded	3,28	1,3955	1,181	4
Cronyism creates the risk of unfair treatment of employees, and consequently, a decline in work quality and standards.	3,48	1,5046	1,226	4
Due to cronyism, informal divisions arise in the organization between those who are and those who are not in the circle of acquaintances, which creates a deterioration in atmosphere.	4,09	1,4766	1,215	5
Cronyism creates the risk of departure from work by employees "outside the circle of acquaintances."	3,97	1,4637	1,209	4

Source: own work.

Analysis of the open-ended question regarding potential effects of cronyism allowed for the identification of two evaluation perspectives: positive and negative. A significant portion of respondents showed a tendency to rationalize the effects of cronyism, as 52% of study participants indicated that hiring and promoting acquaintances means their greater loyalty to the manager and greater engagement in performing professional duties resulting from a sense of gratitude and emotional obligation. Attention was also drawn to the fact that hiring acquaintances is a way to address shortages of specialists with rare competencies in the labor market. Moreover, a manager hiring someone they know has in-depth knowledge about that employee's predispositions and attitudes, which can translate into better task-to-potential matching for that person.



The relatively high level of acceptance for hiring and/or promoting acquaintances contrasts with the critical assessment of favoring acquaintances in the form of unjustified rewards, bonuses, or salary increases. All study participants evaluated such practices unequivocally negatively. No significant differences were found in the responses of women and men; however, enterprise location was a significant variable. Respondents from entities operating in smaller localities (below 150,000 inhabitants) show a higher level of acceptance for cronyism.

Respondents expressed the opinion that systemic solutions counteracting cronyism are needed; simultaneously, 87% admitted that such solutions do not exist in their workplace.

Management staff performing their organizational roles in medium-sized enterprises, in the vast majority, do not know the concept of cronyism, while they are well familiar with and understand its synonyms (nepotism, favoritism). In managers' assessment, the scale of this phenomenon is very large in Polish reality. The attitudes of managers managing medium-sized enterprises toward cronyism indicate a high level of awareness of potential threats associated with this phenomenon (threats to the team, the entire organization,

but also to the manager himself). At the same time, as many as 52% of respondents show a tendency to rationalize and relativize cronyism by emphasizing its potentially positive effects and connecting it with relationship management and networking. They explain their acceptance of promoting people from their circle of acquaintances in employment and promotions by the higher level of trust in them and the expectation of higher levels of engagement from these employees compared to *strangers*. They also point to benefits arising from the fact that they are hiring a person whose psychological predispositions, including intellectual and personality potential, are well known, which minimizes the risks of conflicts and poor job matching. Management staff approaches the favoritism of colleagues in access to salary increases or deriving other benefits from the motivational system more critically. The majority of study participants admit that their enterprises do not have effective regulatory mechanisms preventing cronyism. A variable having a significant impact on the distribution of results is the location of the enterprise. Respondents from entities operating in smaller localities (below 150,000 inhabitants) show a higher level of acceptance for cronyism and more strongly emphasize its potential positive aspects.

The research results presented in this article allow for the formulation of practical recommendations. Above all, it is necessary to develop effective procedures to prevent cronyism in Polish enterprises and to monitor the scale and effects of this phenomenon. It is also justified to include the topic of cronyism in training courses for management staff, not only to raise awareness of its effects but also to create situations conducive to its moral evaluation.

The research findings of other authors cited in this article (Yu et al., 2023, pp. 121-150; Mao et al., 2018, pp. 745-755; Christensen-Salem et al., 2021, pp. 619-626; Erdem & Karataş, 2015, pp. 51-65) clearly focus on the negative aspects of cronyism. Attention is primarily focused on the situation of employees outside their circle of acquaintances. They experience stress, a sense of being cut off from important information, lower job satisfaction, and demonstrate a higher willingness to change jobs. The conclusions from the research presented in this article indicate that in Poland, despite awareness of the potential consequences of cronyism, management relativizes cronyism. Therefore, there is a need for further, in-depth research into the causes, manifestations, and effects of cronyism in Polish organizational reality. The obtained

results justify the search for a link between cronyism and the specific Polish *culture of entrepreneurship*, which is dominated by distrust of outsiders and a significant tolerance for favoring people from the circle of acquaintances and friends in exchange for psychological benefits (support, loyalty, commitment). Further research should also address the relationship between cronyism and characteristics of national culture. The phenomenon of relational cronyism requires further in-depth research. Relationships are often viewed as the most important element of an organization's social capital and a source of competitive advantage. The dilemma that remains to be resolved is whether, in this context, cronyism can also have positive effects.

LIMITATIONS

The presented research results have their limitations. First and foremost, the study covered only managers. In the author's opinion, it is necessary to extend research on employee cronyism to various levels of the organizational structure. Furthermore, the relatively small study sample does not allow for conclusions regarding the relationship between cronyism and the industry in which the company operates. Nevertheless, the presented research results have both cognitive and applied value. They can contribute to the development of systemic solutions to counter cronyism in medium-sized enterprises, a group of companies where management processes are typically at a lower level of maturity than in large companies.

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