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Key Competencies of a Unit Officer as Perceived by Cadets and Penal System Employees: Alignment with Professional Development Stages



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Abstract

Introduction: the study examines professional reflection of cadets at a departmental university of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia and of current unit officers in correctional institutions. The professional development of employees takes place under conditions of high emotional and regulatory pressure. The effectiveness and psychological well-being of a specialist are based on self-regulation, resilience, and reflexive mechanisms. In the early stages of professional development, external standards predominate; as experience accumulates, the integration of the professional role grows stronger. At the same time, the risk of emotional exhaustion and a decline in creativity increases. Although researchers show considerable interest in the psychological dimensions of penal system employees' work, the evolution of perceptions regarding a unit officer's key competencies during the transition from university training to actual service remains understudied. Identifying these perceptions is important for timely adjustment of training programs, prevention of professional deformations, and development of targeted psychological support measures at different stages of service. *Purpose:* to describe and compare the perceptions of cadets and current unit officers regarding key professional competencies of an effective employee in the department responsible for educational work with convicts, to identify similarities and differences in the structure of these key competencies, and to outline areas for educational and methodological support. *Methods:* an online survey using a custom questionnaire that includes closed-ended questions about the importance

of certain qualities, self-assessment of the development level and development sources, as well as open-ended questions about gaps; frequency analysis (percentage distributions). *Results*: cadets consider psychological flexibility and neuropsychological resilience to be key qualities (70% each), while active-duty personnel consider communication and organizational skills (86.7 %) and resilience (83.3 %) to be key qualities. Creativity is significant only for 10 % of supervisors. However, supervisors identify creative activity (70 %), initiative (63.3 %), and the ability to work in a multitasking environment (63.1 %) as priority areas for development, while cadets identify stability, stress resistance, and confidence. A gap is identified between the importance of psychological flexibility for cadets and their self-assessment of it (70 % and 46.7 %). The focus from personal adaptive resources is shifted to the functional and organizational core of the activity. The low importance of creativity among practitioners, despite the high demand for its development, reflects an awareness of its deficit and capacity for preventing professional deformation. *Conclusions*: a gradual shift in the perception of key competencies is recorded: from personality-adaptive (among cadets) to functional-organizational (among practitioners). The paper proposes targeted educational and methodological support for two stages: university-level training and further professional development of employees. The proposed modules cover self-regulation, communication, and working under multitasking conditions, as well as supervision and training in guided creativity and empathy for incumbent unit officers.

Key words : penal system; professional reflection; unit officer; competence profile; self-regulation; neuro-psychological stability; psychological flexibility; communicative and organizational skills; emotional burnout.

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Introduction

The professional development of employees in the penal system unfolds under conditions of high emotional and regulatory stress, while the effectiveness and psychological well-being of a specialist depend on their self-regulation, psychological resilience, and reflexive mechanisms [1–5]. At the early stages of professional development, external standards and normative ideas dominate; as experience accumulates, internal integration of the professional role and effective strategies become stronger [5–7]. At the same time, vulnerability to emotional exhaustion increases, and creativity and empathy decline [3; 4]. This is consistent with the “demand–resource” model: work demands, such as high workload, time constraints, and emotionally difficult situations, increase stress and the risk of emotional burnout, while organizational and individual resources, such as support, role clarity, moderate autonomy, and self-regulation skills, mitigate this im-

pact and boost work performance. When resources are sufficient, the negative effect of high demands is noticeably reduced [8]. The role of emotion regulation and reflective mechanisms in maintaining the stability of professional activity and improving the quality of work is confirmed in a number of studies [9–11]. Accordingly, comparing cadets’ perceptions of the unit officer’s image with current employees’ self-descriptions helps clarify the stages of professional reflection and the key competence focus during university training.

By comparing how cadets view the professional competencies of a unit officer with how current employees describe their own competencies, one can map the core psychological and pedagogical competencies relevant at various career stages. This approach also helps pinpoint areas of weakness and untapped potential, and identify risks of professional deformation (e.g., over-reliance on

standardized procedures and diminished flexibility in decision-making during official tasks), along with opportunities for preventive measures.

Methodology

Sample. The online survey involved 60 participants: 30 four and five-year cadets at the Samara Law Institute of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia, and 30 unit officers in correctional institutions of the penal system of the Russian Federation. Both groups included individuals of different genders. The work experience of unit officers ranged from 3 to 19 years. All participants provided informed consent.

Tools. An original questionnaire was used, which included:

- closed-ended questions about the importance of professional and psychological qualities (a list of 30 qualities, with ranking);
- questions about self-assessment of the development level of these qualities (on a scale of “very well developed / rather developed / rather underdeveloped / not developed”);

– questions about sources of the development of these qualities (upbringing, education, social environment, heredity, and spontaneous experience);

– open-ended questions about deficits and areas for development.

Due to the descriptive nature of the study and the small sample size, frequency analysis (percentage distributions) is used. The statistical significance of differences between groups is not assessed.

Discussion

It is expected that cadets would predominantly focus on personal adaptive resources and general performance standards, while current employees would focus on the functional and organizational competencies required for the day-to-day performance of their official duties.

According to the survey, cadets believe psychological flexibility (70%), neuropsychiatric stability (70%), professional pedagogical orientation (56.7%), and communicative and organizational skills (53.3%) are important for a unit officer. Cognitive and creative activity (23.3%) is mentioned less often (Table 1).

Table 1

Cadets' perceptions of crucial qualities of a unit officer

Quality / characteristics	Number of answers, n	Share, %
Psychological flexibility	21	70.0
Neuropsychiatric stability	21	70.0
Cognitive and creative activity	7	23.3
Communicative and organizational skills	16	53.3
Professional and pedagogical orientation	17	56.7

When assessing their own competencies, cadets most often mention neuropsychological stability — 63.3 % (the response “very well developed”), professional and pedagogical orientation — 56.7 %, and communicative and organizational skills — 50 %

(Table 2). At the same time, only 46.7 % rate psychological flexibility as “very well developed”, which reveals a gap between the importance of the quality and the self-assessment of its development (70 % and 46.7 %).

Table 2

Cadets' assessment of their own professionally significant qualities

Quality / characteristics	Number of answers, n	Share, %
Psychological flexibility	14	46.7
Neuropsychiatric stability	19	63.3
Cognitive and creative activity	6	20.0
Communicative and organizational skills	15	50.0
Professional and pedagogical orientation	17	56.7

In terms of attribution of the sources of professionally significant qualities, upbringing in the family and early educational contexts (56.7%) and spontaneous personal experience (56.7%) domi-

nate, followed by the education received (53.3%) and the influence of the current social environment (40%). The role of hereditary factors is assessed as low — 16.7% (Table 3).

Table 3

Attribution of the sources of professionally significant qualities in cadets

Quality / characteristics	Number of answers, n	Share, %
They formed naturally in the process of acquiring life experience	17	56.7
Heredity	5	16.7
Upbringing (family, kindergarten, school)	17	56.7
Social environment	12	40.0
Education	16	53.3

This combination of causes indicates the predominance of environmental and unstructured experience and sets the stage for learning modules that translate the acquired elements into stable regulatory schemes [5–7].

Unit officers identify communicative and organizational skills (86.7 %), neuropsychological stability (83.3 %), professional-pedagogical orientation (63.3 %), psychological flexibility (52.2 %), and cognitive-creative activity (10 %) as the most important for their work (Table 4).

Table 4

Unit officers' perceptions of crucial professional psychological qualities

Quality / characteristics	Number of answers, n	Share, %
Psychological flexibility	16	53.3
Neuropsychological stability	25	83.3
Cognitive-creative activity	3	10.0
Communicative and organizational skills	26	86.7
Professional-pedagogical orientation	19	63.3

Cadets' perceptions of the professionally immature yet essential traits of a unit officer (Table 5) most often include stability in day-to-day functioning, stress resistance, the ability to encourage

and motivate, insistence, mental self-regulation, and self-confidence (each area accounts for 33.3–36.7 %).

Table 5

Cadets' perceptions of the professionally immature yet essential traits of a unit officer

Quality / characteristics	Number of answers, n	Share, %
Anticipation and reflection	4	13.3
Creative activity	2	6.7
Stress resistance	10	33.3
Adequate attitude towards criticism	4	13.3
Authority	8	26.7
Goal-setting	7	23.3
Adaptability	8	26.7
High emotional and volitional tone	4	13.3
Empathy	4	13.3
Low level of emotionality	8	26.7
Ability to engage in pedagogical activities	9	30.0
Ability to resolve conflicts	10	33.3
Curiosity	4	13.3
Ability to encourage and motivate	10	33.3
Ability to generate and implement ideas	8	26.7
Insistence	10	33.3
Optimism	9	30.0
Ability to resolve problematic situations	7	23.3

Deep professional and moral interests	9	30.0
Entrepreneurial spirit	7	23.3
Professional observation	5	16.7
Self-control	8	26.7
Logical and analytical skills	6	20.0
Ability to establish psychological contact and persuade others	5	16.7
Patience	5	16.7
Justice	8	26.7
Ability to engage in mental self-regulation	10	33.3
Ability to forecast consequences	8	26.7
Erudition	8	26.7
Psychophysiological endurance	9	30.0
Ability to apply pedagogical methods and technologies	9	30.0
Moral resilience	4	13.3
Self-confidence	10	33.3
Ability to manage and control	7	23.3
Stability	11	36.7
Organized nature	8	26.7
Compliance with professional ethics	8	26.7
Ability to solve problems in a multitasking environment	5	16.7
Ability to plan effectively	8	26.7
High adherence to established norms of behavior	4	13.3

The key qualities that unit officers need to develop are identified as follows: creative activity (70 %), initiative (63.3 %), the ability to solve problems in a multitasking environment (63.2 %), empathy (53.3 %), the ability to use various teaching methods and technologies (50 %), and the stability of role

performance (46.7 %). At the same time, organization, moral resilience, psychological selfregulation, selfcontrol, and the ability to resolve problematic situations are mentioned as the least in need of development (up to 10 %) (Table 6).

Table 6

Unit officers' perceptions of the professionally and psychologically essential qualities of a unit officer

Quality / characteristics	Number of answers, n	Share, %
Anticipation and reflection	6	20.0
Creative activity	21	70.0
Stress resistance	7	23.3
Adequate attitude towards criticism	7	23.3
Authority	8	26.7
Goal-setting	7	23.3
Adaptability	5	16.7
High emotional and volitional tone	12	40.0
Empathy	16	53.3
Low level of emotionality	12	40.0
Ability to engage in pedagogical activities	13	43.3
Ability to resolve conflicts	4	13.3
Curiosity	12	40.0
Ability to encourage and motivate	3	10.0
Ability to generate and implement ideas	10	33.3
Insistence	5	16.7

Optimism	15	50.0
Ability to resolve problematic situations	3	10.0
Deep professional and moral interests	6	20.0
Entrepreneurial spirit	19	63.3
Professional observation	8	26.7
Self-control	3	10.0
Logical and analytical skills	4	13.3
Ability to establish psychological contact and persuade others	9	30.0
Patience	13	43.3
Justice	6	20.0
Ability to engage in mental self-regulation	2	6.7
Ability to forecast consequences	9	30.0
Erudition	4	13.3
Psychophysiological endurance	6	20.0
Ability to apply pedagogical methods and technologies	15	50.0
Moral resilience	1	3.3
Self-confidence	7	23.3
Ability to manage and control	5	16.7
Stability	14	46.7
Organized nature	3	10.0
Compliance with professional ethics	12	40.0
Ability to solve problems in a multitasking environment	19	63.3
Ability to plan effectively	11	36.7
High adherence to established norms of behavior	8	26.7

It is worth mentioning that in Table 4 (the most significant qualities), creativity / cognitive-creative activity ranks last (10 %), whereas in Table 6 (qualities necessary for development), creative activity takes the lead (70 %). This is not a contradiction, but a reflection of two different dimensions: the current significance of the quality for everyday performance, the area of deficit, and the potential for improvement. Practitioners recognize a deficit in creative initiative and multitasking ability – whether in themselves or in younger employees – which drives a strong need for development, even though creativity currently holds relatively low relevance in routine operational tasks.

Conclusion

Thus, the obtained results confirm the hypothesis about a stage-by-stage shift in the emphasis on the key qualities of a unit officer: cadets place greater importance on psychological flexibility and neuro-psychological stability (70 % each), while unit officers place greater importance on communicative and organizational skills (86.7 %) and stability (83.3 %). This reflects a transition from focusing on personal adaptive resources during the training phase to the functional-organizational core of the role in practical activities.

Creativity is rated as a low-priority attribute by

both cohorts, particularly among unit officers (10%). This suggests that strict regulation and high workloads may lead to reduced cognitive flexibility and stifle innovation. However, as demonstrated above, practitioners themselves identify creative initiative as a priority area for professional development. This discrepancy highlights their awareness of the existing deficit and points to the potential for mitigating occupational burnout and deformation.

Unit officers emphasize the importance of creative activity, initiative, and the ability to work in a multitasking environment, while cadets see them in the stability of everyday functioning, stress resistance, and confidence. This creates an asymmetry in expectations and real development vectors: at a departmental university, training should be strengthened to develop skills for working in a multitasking environment and for proactive activity within the framework of established regulations, while for practical employees, it is necessary to foster managed creativity and empathy.

The observed differences serve as indicators of the stages of professional development: among cadets, the focus is shifted towards personal adaptive resources and normative ideas about effectiveness; among squad leaders, it is focused on functional and organizational competencies in day-to-day ac-

tivities, with a relative decrease in the priority given to creative and socio-emotional variability. The overall picture aligns with the “requirements–resources” model, according to which requirements increase the workload, while resources mitigate its negative impact and support task completion [8], as well as with data on the role of emotion regulation and reflective mechanisms in maintaining efficiency under conditions of high work intensity [10; 11].

In the professional training of cadets, it is primarily necessary to develop stable self-regulation, communicative and organizational skills, the ability to work in a multitasking environment, and the capacity to take initiative within the framework of established procedures. This involves solution of tasks according to standard algorithms and protocols and beyond them, followed by the analysis of the choices made and their consequences. Thus, “core” patterns are consolidated, and the ability to match them with a specific work situation is developed in advance.

It is crucial for current unit officers to develop empathy, creativity, to use various management and pedagogical techniques, and to ensure stable performance. In practice, this is achieved through the analysis of non-standard situations, supervision, mentoring, and workshops on communication in conflict and emotionally charged situations.

The balance between standardization and adaptability in this context means, on the one hand, strict adherence to regulations and standard algorithms, and, on the other hand, the ability to choose appropriate measures provided for in the instructions, taking the situation into account, while remaining within the scope of one’s authority. This understanding is methodologically consistent with domestic works on professional reflection and self-regulation [1; 5; 9] and with foreign approaches to experiential and reflective learning [11; 12].

A scenario in which unit officers adopt a “cadet-style” prioritization scheme and deprioritize empathy, adaptability, and initiative is prognostically unfavorable. In actual field service, this leads to a constricted range of responses in non-standard situations, an increase in communication errors and conflict intensity, diminished training efficacy for

personnel, and – within the framework of the Job Demands–Resources model – results in a chronic deficit of socio-emotional and regulatory resources.

Further steps may include longitudinal observation, the use of validated scales for self-regulation [5], emotional intelligence and burnout [3; 10], observational indicators, and independent expert assessment.

Practical recommendations

Based on the identified differences and requests from practical staff, the following targeted measures can be proposed.

For professional training of cadets, it is recommended to:

- develop and implement the training module “Self-Regulation and Multitasking in Penal System Operations” (minimum duration: 10 hours). The curriculum must include case study workshops based on real-world field incidents, task-switching drills under time constraints (including practical exercises at a tactical training facility), and mental self-regulation techniques;
- include training in communicative competence with a focus on conflict and emotionally charged situations in the curriculum of psychological disciplines (at least 6 hours);
- develop skills in proactive activity within the framework of established regulations by analyzing non-standard situations, identifying permitted courses of action, and subsequently analyzing the decisions made.

For current unit officers, it is reasonable to:

- organize supervision groups (once a quarter) to analyze non-standard pedagogical and managerial situations with the participation of psychologists and experienced mentors;
- conduct a training session on “Controlled Creativity and Empathy in Educational Work” (16 hours), focusing on practicing varied methods of influence, developing empathic listening skills, and fostering flexible responding.

Implementing the proposed measures will help reduce the asymmetry of expectations between the training stage and real practice, lower the risks of professional deformation, and increase the effectiveness of educational work with convicts.

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