

THE USE OF EMPLOYEES AS EXPERTS IN UNUSUAL SITUATIONS: SERVICE SMES PROSPECT

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Abstract: Nowadays, the role of employees, especially those who have contact with clients of an enterprise, is becoming crucial for determining the opportunities for putting into effect, innovative business solutions. The challenge behind the described issue is also for the enterprise to react efficiently to unusual situations. This paper answers the question whether there are significant differences in the way employees are used as experts in unusual situations depending on how long the enterprise has been conducted its business activity. A survey in the Mix Mode Survey Design formula was conducted for this purpose. Altogether there were 260 respondents representing small and medium-sized service enterprises from the territory of Poland who participated in the research. The obtained scientific results indicate that among the surveyed respondents, there are opinions that answer the posed research question in a positive manner.

Keywords: SMEs, service, employees, knowledge.

1. Introduction

The nature of service business makes business entities that provide services, a specific research subject. This specialness is, above all, based on such features of service business as: service intangibility, performing activities within a direct contact between the client and the enterprise (this very contact may also be achieved by means of appropriate devices) and the possible influence of the very client on the effect of the service provided (Hollkins, Shinkis, 2009). The formula of positive direct contact with clients forces service companies to conduct a specifically designed personal policy towards employees (Filipiak, Panasiuk, 2009). Not only should it be related to ensuring a proper level of customer service in accordance with the procedures applied by the enterprise, but it should also come with the possibility to react to non-standard expectations of clients and to unpredicted situations. Response requirement to market

challenges, as well as internal organization shaping are important for knowledge management in an enterprise (Soto-Acosta et al., 2018). Knowledge management in small and medium enterprises is associated with the issue of competitive advantage (Lee et al., 2016). However, the problem of using knowledge in these companies seems to be poorly understood (Durst, Runar Edvardsson, 2012).

It should be also reminded that nowadays in the economy of many countries, especially in developed countries, services are regarded as the largest economic sector or as the most dynamically developing sector. The industry structure of the Polish sector of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in 2016 indicated that as much as 51.7% of all these business entities represent the service sector. Simultaneously, service companies in the above-mentioned sector (data as of 2015) produced as much as 42.8% GDP (Tarnawa, Skowrońska, 2018). It may also be noticed that the most dynamic increase in the earned GDP in the years 2008-2015 concerned small and medium-sized enterprises (Tarnawa, Skowrońska, 2018). In the light of the presented facts, small and medium-sized companies constitute an interesting subject of research intentions in the management sciences.

2. Employee context versus developmental challenges of Polish SMEs

One of the key factors for innovation of the SME sector is looked for in appropriate resources of knowledge that enterprises possess (Matejun, 2015). Among sources of this knowledge, information from both clients and enterprise employees is indicated (Drews, 2018b). At the same time, the newest results of the research conducted on Polish enterprises from SME sector indicate that the role of low- and medium-level employees in determining and implementing new solutions for enterprises is becoming more and more important (Drews, 2018a).

The above-mentioned arrangements suggest that for the innovativeness of enterprises from the SME sector, it is important, firstly, to know the clients and obtain knowledge from them (Komańda, 2010), secondly, for employees of the enterprise to know the industry in which it operates, as well as all external conditionings of the company (Janczewska, 2018). This perspective is specific for service enterprises whose employees operate between the enterprise and the client. Simultaneously, it was indicated that innovative behaviour in enterprises, to a large extent, depends on factors related to the management process, including the roles and style performed and represented by the managers (Głód, Kraśnicka, 2015).

It is emphasized that in the presented problematic context it is important to shape the so-called internal innovative potential of the enterprise related to staff (Kokot-Stępień, 2017), their experience, qualifications, information management and other resources of the enterprise as well as possessed and used ICT (Karaś, 2012). However, basing innovativeness of the enterprise on personal experience and employees' knowledge (Baruk, 2014) makes it necessary

for the innovative potential in the management sphere to be based on the autonomy of employed persons expressed by relative freedom of performing professional duties, as well as developing new ideas (Lipowska, 2013).

This situation means that in order to efficiently implement innovations, enterprises have to seek flexible activities. The manner of functioning of the enterprise should meet the challenge of overcoming unpredicted difficulties (Machnik-Słomka, 2018). Therefore, business activity of the enterprise has to be based on the exchange of knowledge and ideas and continuous education. However, this must occur with the acknowledgement of the above-mentioned employee autonomy, that, from the point of view of the enterprise, means expressing the consent to a certain specific level of unpredictability - which is an inherent part of its business activity. The implementation of this postulate boils down to treating employees as experts (acknowledging their experience, knowledge, skills) in order to break organizational routine (Gadomska-Lila, 2011). This practice makes it possible to develop a habit of recognition of non-standard proceedings which may turn out particularly important when unusual circumstances for the enterprise occur that could cause a moment of discontinuity in its operations.

3. Methodology

The theoretical context highlighted in the above-mentioned points of this paper resulted in the decision to refer in the research intention to small and medium-sized enterprises operating on the territory of the country and representing the service sector. While applying nonprobability sampling of respondents in the form of convenience sampling (Rószkiewicz et al., 2013), the total number of 260 people was obtained for the research. Two separate ways of gathering data from the respondents were also used. These were: CASI (Computer Assisted Self Interview) – 60 respondents; and Paper & Pen Personal Interview (PAPI) – 200 respondents. This means that in the course of realisation of the research intention, a specific research formula was applied, i.e. Mix Mode Survey Design (MMSD) (De Leeuw, Hox, 2011). The research was designed in such way as to make it possible to overcome the problem of obtaining respondents for the research, as well as to enhance the efficiency of obtaining information from them with the aid of a survey questionnaire (Sztabiński, Żmijewska-Jędrzejczyk, 2012).

The very procedure of gathering data was conducted by the Research and Knowledge Transfer Centre operating at the University of Economics Centrum in Katowice. People who were managers or owners of SMEs and directly supervised activities conducted by the employees between the enterprise and the client within the framework of services provided, were the respondents in the research.

In 61.5% of all cases, the obtained respondents represented small enterprises, and in 38.5% – medium-sized enterprises. They were mainly from the Masovian (55.8%) and Łódź voivodeships (21.2%). Several groups of respondents which did not include more than 10 people represented the remaining voivodeships. This situation means that their percentage in the general number of respondents did not therefore exceed 3.8%. However, it should be noticed that each voivodeship was represented by at least one respondent.

In case of the indication concerning the length of the existence of the enterprise represented by the respondent, information from economic reports was used. What results from their content is that market verification of a business activity of a newly established enterprise takes place two years after the commencement of the business activity. Simultaneously, it is reserved that in the period of up to 5 years, significantly less than half of these enterprises survive (Survivability of companies..., 2016). Therefore, the research assumed the following ranges expressing the length of the existence of an enterprise (together with the percentage of the respondents): “up to 2 years” (14.6%); “more than 2 years and up to 5 years” (39.2%); “more than 5 years and up to 10 years” (26.6%); “more than 10 years” (19.6%). The count of enterprises in this case is illustrated by Figure 1.



Figure 1. Count of enterprises surveyed by the period of business activity.

The data gathered in the research were analysed with the use of the selected methods of statistical description. The carrying out of the analysis was ancillary to answering two research questions:

- What does the distribution of respondents’ answers concerning their opinion about the use of employees as experts in unusual situations look like?
- Is there any relationship between the respondents’ answers concerning their opinion about the use of employees as experts in unusual situations and the length of the existence of the enterprise they represented?

Answering the latter required verification of the hypothesis regarding a statistically significant relationship between the variables mentioned. Correspondence analysis was applied for this purpose.

4. Results

The distribution of the respondents' answers to the question regarding their opinion about the use of employees as experts in unusual situations is shown in the figure below (Figure 2). The percentage for particular answers given on a seven-point scale amounts to: "difficult to say" 40.4%, "rather yes" 32.7%, "rather not" 15.4%, "definitely yes" 8.8%, "no" 2.3%, "definitely not" 0.4%. None of the respondents indicated the answer "yes" (0%).

While analysing the distribution of answers, it should be, above all, noticed that both the mode and the median are equal to 4.0 (the answer "difficult to say"). The average value is slightly higher (it is equal to 4.38), whereas the standard deviation is equal to 1.1241. The respondents indicated also the lowest, as well as the highest marks: "definitely not" (1.0) and "definitely yes" (7.0). As it has already been noticed, nobody indicated the answer "yes" (6.0).

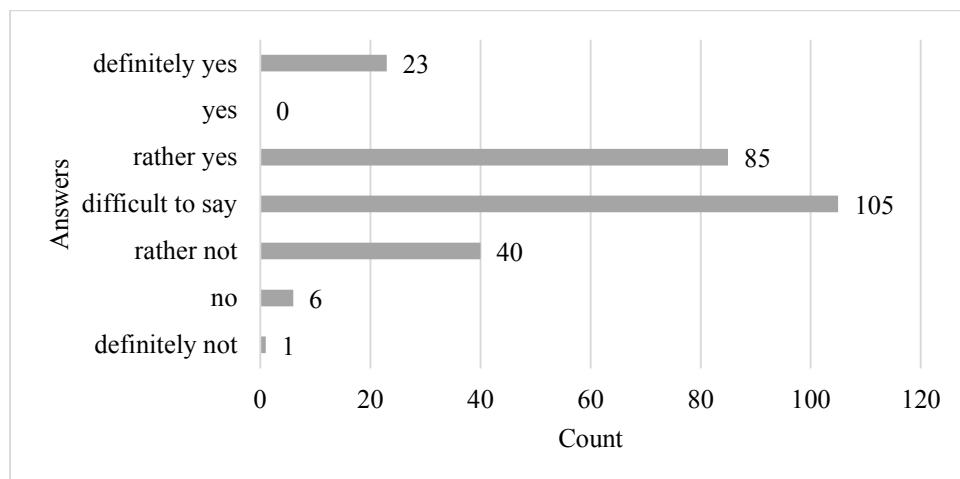


Figure 2. Distribution of the respondents' answers.

Table 1.

Distribution of the respondents' answers with regard to the length of conducting business activity by an enterprise

Answers/Length of existence	Up to 2 years	More than 2 years and up to 5 years	More than 5 years and up to 10 years	More than 10 years
Definitely not	0	1	0	0
No	2	1	1	2
Rather not	13	11	7	9
Difficult to say	19	38	34	14
Rather yes	4	44	20	17
Yes	0	0	0	0
Definitely yes	0	7	7	9

We also assessed what the distribution of the respondents' answers to the posed question with regard to the length of conducting business activity by the enterprises looked like (Table 1). In order to determine whether there is a statistically significant distribution of answers shown in Table 1 the decision was made, due to the nature of the variables, to apply correspondence analysis (symmetric normalisation). The results obtained within this scope are shown below (Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2.

Selected results of the review of line points

Answers	Mass
Definitely not ^a	0.004
No ^a	0.024
Rather not	0.158
Difficult to say	0.415
Rather yes	0.336
Yes ^a	0.000
Definitely yes	0.091

Note. ^aPassive points.

Table 3.

Selected results of the review of column points

Answers	Mass
Up to 2 years	0.142
More than 2 years and up to 5 years	0.395
More than 5 years and up to 10 years	0.269
More than 10 years	0.194

In case of the review of line points (Table 2), some versions of the respondents' answers obtained so-called masses below the value of 0.05. This means that they had to be marked in the correspondence analysis as passive points (Górniak, 2000). With such assumptions, the value of the Chi-square statistic for the distribution of the answers indicated in Table 1 amounts to 34.426, whereas the significance level (at 9 degrees of freedom) is equal to 0.000 ($p \leq 0.01$). Therefore, statistical differentiation of the respondents' answers in the answer to the question concerning the use of employees as experts in unusual situations with regard to the length of existence of an enterprise may be confirmed. Figure 3 illustrates the relationships indicated in the correspondence analysis.

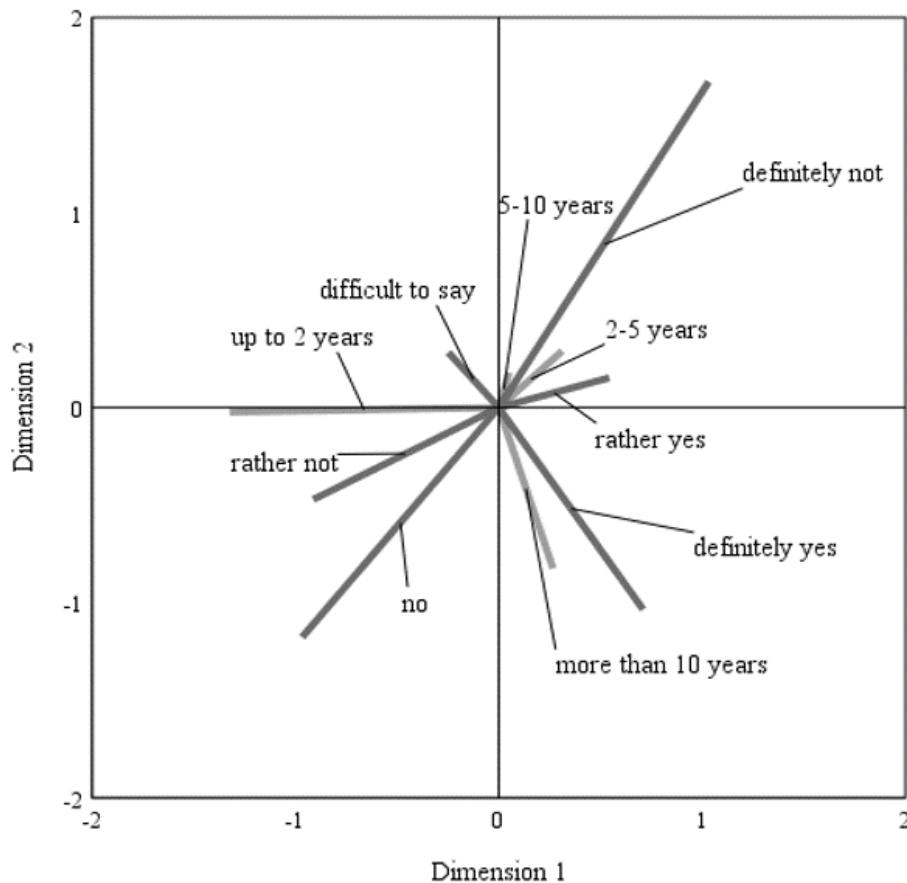


Figure 3. Graphic result of the correspondence analysis.

While undertaking the analysis of the graphic representation of the results, it should be highlighted that the answer "yes" was not taken into account in the chart due to the fact that none of the respondents indicated it. Simultaneously, the so-called passive points do not undergo analysis. Dimension 1 explains as much as 67.1% of inertia and the results should be interpreted from its perspective. This means that the main relationships in the respondents' answers occur between the answer "rather yes" and length of the existence of an enterprise of "more than 2 years and up to 5 years", "more than 5 years and up to 10 years" (the length of the pins shows that the answer "rather yes" constitutes a larger percentage in the first of the answers concerning the length of conducting business activity). There is a clear relationship between answers "definitely yes" and "more than ten years" on the graph. The length of the pins indicates mutual influence of answers for these two variables in this case. Another main relationship is connected with the answer variant "up to 2 years" and indications "rather not" and "difficult to say". The length of pins implies that the answer concerning the length of conducting business activity has in this case the largest influence on the differentiation of answers. This means that these versions of respondents' answers ("rather not" and "difficult to say") constitute a high percentage of the respondents' indications representing enterprises which have operated for up to 2 years.

5. Conclusions

Summing up the results of the study, first of all, it should be noticed that 40.4% of all the respondents gave the answers “difficult to say” to the question regarding the use of employees as experts in unusual situations. Simultaneously, as much as 41.5% of all the respondents altogether answered the question with “rather yes” and “definitely yes”. Therefore, in their opinion they expressed indecisiveness about this issue or approval of it.

In case of the distribution of the respondents’ answers with regard to the length of the existence of an enterprise, it should be noticed that in the initial stage of conducting business activity (up to 2 years), lack of acceptance and indecisiveness of the respondents dominate in the studied issue. Such a situation might signify the typical, dominant role of owners in conducting the enterprise’s operations in this period (Drews, 2018a). In the crisis period for the functioning of the enterprise (more than 2 years and up to 5 years), the respondents asseverate, in turn, mainly indecisiveness and acceptance of the issue expressed in the question. It seems that this fact is related to the necessity to look for solutions that will let the enterprise survive this specific period in their existence. While analysing the respondents’ opinions for the next two designated periods of conducting business activity, it should be stated that they again represent mainly indecisiveness and acceptance of the use of employees as experts in unusual situations. It should, however, be noticed that in case of the last period (more than 10 years), they indicate mainly acceptance of the studied issue.

The results of the research look particularly interesting in the light of the research achievement which suggests that market-experienced enterprises are characterised by lower level of flexibility and decentralisation of organisational structure, however, market conditionings, at the same time, require higher level of adaptiveness of the enterprise (Machnik-Słomka, 2018). These arrangements show that the issue of the postulated autonomy of employees is becoming a significant practical and research problem (Karpacz, 2016). This situation may be referred to it being a mature approach to knowledge management in small and medium enterprises – which is also associated with the implementation of new technologies and utilisation of capabilities associated with them (Centobelli et al., 2017). This means that there is also a need for appropriate employee trainings (Komańda, 2019) as a key factor for maintaining crucial employees in the company (Nowak, 2018). Further research on the presented issue may therefore focus on the issue of dynamics of organisational conditionings of using employees as experts.

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