

CHANGES IN COMPANIES' PERSONNEL POLICIES – TOWARDS OPTIMISING THE MANAGEMENT OF KEY EMPLOYEES (CASE STUDY)

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to analyse the actions taken by companies to create optimal working conditions for their main stakeholders - their key employees.

Design/methodology/approach: In order to achieve the research objective, the author used a critical analysis with reference to the collected literature; an observational method (which made it possible to obtain and use a number of scientific insights into the behaviour of business actors in changing external and internal conditions); an intuitive method (which involves considering a number of concepts, problems and terms in the area of employee management and governance); and a method based on individual case studies in 10 companies, which made it possible to explore the use of tools to manage identified key employees.

Findings: Companies are aware of the challenges they are facing due to the new determinants of the economy and are striving to move towards developing their employees and providing them with the right working conditions that influence the results they achieve.

Practical implications: What we can say for sure is that the core competencies of the employees employed will remain a permanent feature of management, just as physical assets, organisational structures, strategies, processes, systems, financial or information resources have become.

Social implications: For employees, intelligently organised work can be lighter, more useful, more satisfying and allow a wider range of needs to be met.

Originality/value: Thanks to the research process carried out in 10 large enterprises from various countries in Europe, the author believes that the main objective of the prepared material has been developed and realised. In turn, the conclusions obtained may find theoretical and practical application, in building competitive advantage of enterprises on the market, with the use of competences of key employees.

Keywords: key personnel, human capital management, key competences.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Globalisation, technological innovation and the rapid development of knowledge and information have forced changes in the structure of employment and a change in the approach to the competences needed to perform a specific job. In today's world, without knowledge we will not build an optimal competitive model and we will not be able to manage a company. It is human capital that has become the most valuable resource in a company. It is the only capital that can acquire, collect and select the necessary information. It has the knowledge that we use to make decisions and solve problems at every level of management.

Therefore, according to the author, nowadays the most important and valuable strategic resource of any organisation is knowledge, which is an attribute of the staff employed. Why? Because it is thanks to the employees, consciously acquired knowledge (sometimes also created), adapted to the needs of the organisation and properly disseminated (used), with the help of developed methods and available information technology tools, that is the key attribute in building a sustainable competitive advantage. In the 21st century, in the era of turbulent conditions in the environment - technological, social, political and economic changes - it is no longer possible to compete effectively on the market based on investments in traditionally understood material resources - the global economy has been redirected in a new direction. Gone to the "pool of ancient times" is not only the economy in which agriculture dominated and the quality of the soil determined a country's wealth, but also the era of mechanical production based on a predatory policy of environmental exploitation and unlimited investment in technological processes. We are slowly entering an era in which "greatness" is determined primarily by the ability and aptitude to acquire, process and use information (knowledge), which is the basis for gaining market and thus economic success.

According to the author, the findings obtained through the research process (in 10 large companies from different countries in Europe), can find theoretical and practical application in building the competitive advantage of companies in the market, using the competences of key employees.

2. Literature Review

The most important value for companies is starting to be the knowledge possessed by people - it is this group that is becoming particularly important to them and it is to this group that all activities associated with changing management systems will be adapted. The emerging new economy is forcing the creation of new organisations, and is even creating new organisations

itself, in which new employees with hitherto unheard-of (or unnoticed and so far unneeded) competences are “coming to the fore”.

Table 1.

Determinants of human capital management in the 21st century

New economy	New organisation	New employee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – globalization – tough competition – constant innovation – breaking up of monopolies – technological progress – computerization – cultural diversity – customer orientation – changes on the labour market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – intellectual capital – core competences – reduction of hierarchies – project management – network organisations – virtualisation of activities – management of professionals – talent acquisition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – knowledge worker – lifelong learning – changes in occupations and functions – less job stability – work as a task, not as a place to do things – creative thinking – working as part of a team – managing one's own time and career

Source: Own study based on Poczowski (2007).

Increasingly, so-called ‘intelligent organisations’ are appearing on the market, i.e. organisations that develop their capacity to continuously adapt to a changing and unpredictable environment. They also acquire, create and store knowledge to improve their productivity and efficiency or to create innovative products. An intelligent organisation is also often referred to as a learning organisation and in this context is defined as one that continuously learns and practices to achieve mastery in self-improvement (Senge, 2014).

Already these two cited definitions, clearly indicate the very important role of employees who, while working in an organisation, demonstrate their knowledge, skills and experience. It is today's economic realities that force managements to recruit and retain (this seems to be an even more complicated process than recruitment itself) people with high potential. The 21st century, therefore, requires organisations to continuously improve and innovate - these activities are determined precisely by the potential of the organisation's key people, created by a group of interrelational factors between the organisation and the staff employed.

This leads to the conclusion that, in the 21st century, the competences of key human capital are a strategic element in the fight against competition, which makes it possible to create the expected advantage on the market. Of course, the success of this process is determined by the people employed in the organisation. Therefore, it is very important not only to attract people with promising potential, but also to create working conditions for them that are conducive to their development, motivation and commitment. This is possible primarily by supporting and encouraging employees to behave in a pro-innovative manner, creating a climate conducive to innovation and shaping the right organisational culture. In the face of today's challenges, the comprehensive management of high-potential employees, the so-called key employees, is of particular importance here (Król, 2017).

But on the other hand, we must remember that different employees, just like different people, have different qualities, skills or talents. The problem is to identify those who are the most talented, the most ambitious and the most motivated to work. This skill, is undoubtedly crucial to the success of any organisation operating in today's market. However, many entities have a problem with this - they don't quite know how to do it. Why is this the case? What are the characteristics of key employees? What characteristics make them unique? Analysing the definitions of this group of employees available in the literature, the author describes them extensively in Table 2.

According to the Encyclopedia of Management, the term key employees refers not only to technology specialists who possess unique knowledge, experience or skills, the loss of which may lead to a significant decrease in the market value of the organisation, but also to those individuals who can facilitate the process of preparing and carrying out the integration. Depending on an organisation's sector of activity or the nature of the organisation, the 'key' employee may be something radically different for an individual employer. For one employer it will be the most experienced employee, for another it will be the scarce, hard-to-replace skilled IT specialist, and for yet another it will be the manager who can skilfully and effectively resolve internal conflicts (Cynk, 2016). All of these people are referred to as essential employees, the most valuable people, who are difficult to replace - and therefore cannot be afforded to lose, as they have the right potential and are particularly valuable to the organisation (valued employees) (Branham, 2011). They also have critical skills, are high performers or have high potentials, which can be crucial in achieving the organisation's diverse goals (Morawski, 2014).

Table 2.

Analysis of the definition of key employees

Author(s)	Key worker characteristics
G. Waisburg (2016)	They are primarily characterised by a high degree of flexibility in crossing obvious boundaries, demonstrating a fluidity of ideas in creating multiple possible solutions to a given problem and an independence of thought, subjecting any task that is put before them to close scrutiny. They also have the ability to manage conflict efficiently (tolerance for ambiguity), are inquisitive, and recognise and understand the needs of others. They also demonstrate a high degree of systematic work, action orientation and commitment.
R. Stuart-Kotze, C. Dunn (2021)	A high-potential employee who, in addition to his or her talent, is highly committed to the company, is motivated to climb the organisational hierarchy and wants to succeed in top positions.
A. Poczowski (2004)	The term key employees refers not only to technology specialists with unique knowledge, experience or skills, the loss of which can lead to a significant decrease in the market value of the organisation, but also to those individuals who can facilitate the process of preparing and carrying out the integration, such as managers.
M. Białasiewicz (2015)	They are compared to another group of employees, the so-called talents, i.e. individuals who are original, have flexible thinking skills, creative approaches to problem solving, are characterised by openness, the ability to take constant risks, are very committed and persistent in their pursuit of their goals, have emotional intelligence, and are aware of the value and importance of their work.

Cont. table 2.

A. Cowling, O. Laudy (2016)	There is a strong emphasis on combining capability and commitment with aspirations to develop, advance and fulfil key roles in the organisation. Capability has to be defined as agile learning and consists of innate skills, (intellectual agility, emotional intelligence) and acquired technical and interpersonal skills that are used in daily work. Abilities also include predispositions to: process complex ideas, think logically, perceive and understand other people's emotions and learn new skills, e.g. technical, interpersonal. They also have a direct impact on employee performance.
M. Morawski (2012)	They are the top-class professionals who form the core of the company, its intellectual and substantive elite. They are the group of employees who decisively influence the value of corporate competence. In a highly competitive economy, such as the knowledge-based economy, having unique and at the same time important competences for the enterprise is a source of unique organisational positioning.
C. Fernández-Aráo (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Striving for excellence in achieving a given goal - this is expressed in the employee's ambition and expectations of recognition, but also in his or her modesty and continuous investment in his or her own skills. – Curiosity, which implies a propensity to seek novelty, gain knowledge, seek feedback, and be open to learning and change. – Perspicacity defined as the ability to gather and learn from information that can create new opportunities. – Commitment defined as the talent to use knowledge and logic to share one's vision with others. – Determination defined as the ability to fight for complex goals and deal with difficulties and adversity.
D. Ulrich, W. Brockbank (2014)	Employees defined as A-class (category) workers who achieve productivity many times that of average or weak workers.
J. Kopeć (2012)	Individuals who have a special ability to use their tacit knowledge.
E. van Stadem (2016)	Emphasis is placed on attributes that relate to leadership skills, the ability to analyse and synthesise sizable sets of information and to deal with uncertain and unclear situations. These individuals have a passion for continuous learning, for improving existing situations and for the ability to collaborate and communicate with other employees.
W.M. Grudzewski, I. Hejduk (2004)	A small number of professionals in an organisation who have a pool of individual skills, experiences, beliefs, intuition, non-formalised practical information and many others that make up a person's knowledge.
M. Kowalówka (2015)	Individuals who have the potential, ability and aspiration to successfully perform leadership roles in the organisation - only 3-5% of employees in companies are of such high potential.

Source: own study.

All of the above qualities and skills should be assessed not only from a current perspective, but above all from a long-term perspective, as this is the approach that is important in planning for the success of the organisation. The results of a highly committed employee are his or her hard and long-term work and citizenship, i.e. engaging not only in the obligations of a signed agreement or contract (Zdonek, 2015).

At this point, it is worth attempting some systematisation of the cited definitions and referring to the four factors characterising a high-potential employee created by D.A. Ready, J.A. Conger and L.A. Hill (2015):

- Striving for excellence - the constant striving for success can lead to extreme results. For it is not enough to achieve only very good results at work, one has to be the best - even at the expense of one's personal life.

- Acquisition and application of knowledge in business processes - to be recognised as a key worker you need to be a lifelong learner - taking knowledge and experience from every situation - in your professional and personal life.
- Entrepreneurial spirit - key workers must not be afraid to leave their comfort zone (in the professional and personal sphere). They need to adapt their personal style and develop new strategies.
- Ability to react appropriately - high potential also poses great challenges in terms of making key decisions. This is coupled with the risk of making a mistake - all of which can be a source of stress. The key worker must be aware of this and react appropriately (without emotion) in any situation.

On the other hand, the key employee also has expectations that are mainly about the organisation's support and investment in his or her development - he or she is committed to his or her career path and expects challenge and diversity. However, it is difficult to find a one-size-fits-all model (set of actions) to improve the performance of an organisation based on the potential of the employees it employs. It certainly needs to start with including employees in decision-making processes and introducing various forms of participative management. In the author's opinion, giving more and more autonomy to employees and making strategic decisions, based on their knowledge and skills, is an element of management in modern organisations. Therefore, getting creative people on board is a fundamental step towards increasing the creativity of all organisations (Igielski, 2017).

Once again, therefore, one cannot escape the question of who is this key employee and how to identify him or her? How to explore and assess his or her unique potential? According to the author, the main elements that can indicate the role of a particular employee in the home organisation include: motivation, determination, creativity and conceptual skills. Why these four and not a dozen others? Because they best reflect the 21st century employee and are the answer to most of the determinants of the modern market.

3. Materials and methods

On the basis of his observations, the author of this article believes that the optimal management of key employees and their competences in a given economic organisation is entirely dependent on the specific characteristics and development determinants of all its components. Therefore, investment in this type of capital involves quite a significant risk, compounded by the fact that, for the most part, this capital does not belong to the organisation in question at all. It is held by employees or external stakeholders. For this reason, many company managements, although aware of the importance of implementing and managing this capital in their organisations, choose not to base their strategy on it.

The preparation of this article was preceded by the observation of economic phenomena and processes and a review of the literature. Theoretical considerations in this regard were complemented by empirical research, which was carried out in 2023. Qualitative research methods were applied, including a review of the Polish and foreign literature on the subject and an analysis, in 10 large enterprises, of a wide range of cases of personnel policy towards the management, perhaps not of identified key employees, but of those most important for individual organisations.

The basic normative act defining what the status of a large entrepreneur is Annex 1 to Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of 17 June 2014. According to this act, large entrepreneurs are considered those who:

- Have 250 or more employees.
- Have fewer than 250 employees, but their total balance sheet exceeds €43 million. At the same time, their total turnover exceeds €50 million. 25% or more of the capital, or voting rights at the shareholders' meeting, is controlled directly or indirectly, jointly or individually by one or more public entities.

The choice related to the analysed group of organisations resulted from the author's observations over the last years and from his personal experience related to his professional and scientific work - the research was therefore conducted based on probabilistic sampling techniques. In addition, the entire research process was conducted on the basis that the management of key employees can be determined by the organisational structure of the business entity, the nature of the organisation and its size, the number of employees and their knowledge and experience, together with the manner and type of employment.

The author used a number of research methods to achieve the research objective:

- critical analysis, including with reference to the collected literature,
- an observational method. which enabled a number of scientific insights into the behaviour of economic agents in changing external and internal conditions to be obtained and used,
- the intuitive method, which involved considering a range of concepts, problems and terms in the area of employee management and governance, which led to the development of new concepts that could support the process of improving the management of key employees with their competencies,
- intuitive method was also supported by the author's extensive practical experience in consulting activities, including those related to human capital management,
- a method based on individual case studies, which made it possible to explore the use of tools to manage identified key employees.

In addition, the research method proposed by R.S. Kaplan (1998) i.e. “research through action” (Action Research), was used to achieve the presented research objective. He claimed that this research method helps to create theories in the field of management, including human

capital management, by observing and documenting innovative practices in this area, discussing them, presenting them in scientific articles and finally implementing them in specific business organisations.

4. Results and discussion

In this part of the article, the author presented an analysis of a wide range of cases of conducting personnel policy towards the management of the most important capital for the organisation - people. In addition, there could be no lack of an assessment of the adaptation measures undertaken, combined with the implementation of related systems. Such system actions (in the author's opinion, this is what they can already be called in these particular cases) occurred in the 10 companies involved in the study. The primary source of information used for this analysis, were reports from individual diagnoses carried out in the individual companies. Additional sources used in the work on these issues were publications, company websites, as well as various thematic articles posted on the Internet.

Table 3.
Analysis of the definition of key employees

Company No. 1	Description of the company
	The company focuses on providing telecommunications solutions for small and medium-sized enterprises and individual customers. Industry: Telecommunications. Country: Sweden. Company size: large company - approx. 750 employees.
	Case study
	The first stage of the work to implement specific principles for managing the identified key employees was to organise the responsibilities between the departments in which they were employed. "Blurred" responsibilities at different levels of the structure up to that point were translating into staff attitudes and mindsets. The existence of a contractual division of competences between departments translated into interpersonal relations and work atmosphere. In its development, the company's structure grew disproportionately to the responsibilities assigned. The first stage of the development of the competence structure extended to the development of a coherent organisational structure. The next stage was team coaching, which aimed to strengthen the sense of belonging to the project team and to define the objectives of the individual teams. Teams in which key staff members were identified (in addition to all managers and the entire company management) were subjected to this process in the first instance. During the session, the following topics were covered: training policy, internal communication, communication with the client, the company's HRM policy. The next step was to create assumptions for the new employment policy - among other things, current methods of motivating employees were analysed - with a view to unifying them and creating packages for individual groups.
	Benefits for key employees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reinforcing at all levels of the organisation a culture of an active pro-active approach to work; - improving the ability to work as a team to achieve success; - increasing awareness of the responsibilities of the organisational unit to which the key employee belongs; - increasing awareness of responsibility for the individual tasks delegated within the organisational structure of the company; - increasing awareness of responsibility for the individual work performed within the company's organisational hierarchy. 	

Cont. table 3.

Company No. 2	Description of the company
	The company offers a wide range of products to adapt any type of engine to gas supply. Industry: Automotive. Country: Germany. Company size: large company - approx. 530 employees.
	Case study
	The target model in the area of key-employee management was to create a company image as an employer that would not only enable the company to retain its best specialists, but also to attract new experts from the market who would bring unique (core) personality competencies, expertise and valuable contacts. It was a necessity for managers to acquire the awareness that a company's most valuable asset and competitive advantage is its people. Actions taken: - attracting and hiring employees according to the developed recruitment procedure; - obtaining the right level of motivation for key employees - a remuneration system linked to performance; - career planning - building employment stability within the company.
	Benefits for key employees
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - identification with the company - building loyalty; - increased comfort at work; - stronger cooperative attitude; - stimulation for self-improvement and transfer of knowledge to others.
Company No. 3	Description of the company
	A rapidly growing technology company operating in the global IT software market. Industry: IT Country: Germany. Company size: small large company - approx. 320 employees.
	Case study
	The company is characterised by a high awareness of the needs and processes for the optimal involvement of employees (including key employees) in building the development of the organisation, based on the competences of the future. Aware of the global competition, the company has implemented a number of adaptation measures that specifically address the identification of key employees and their development: - the outline of the key employee appraisal system includes not only the evaluation of performance but also elements of assessment of their competences, skills and attitudes and behaviour; - description of the company's employee selection process - standardising the company's recruitment process; - description of job levels - developing job levels for key employees so that a precise salary grid can be defined and entry criteria for each level can be precisely described.
	Benefits for key employees
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gain practical tools to improve their own performance; - improve their ability to work as a team to achieve success; - increase the level of management equity; - to receive feedback on assessed competencies and potential; - to be able to self-evaluate and compare one's working solutions with others; - being able to plan and monitor one's own performance.
Company No. 4	Description of the company
	The company is a leading producer of precast polymer concrete in the Scandinavian market. Country: Denmark. Company size: large company - approx. 810 employees.
	Case study
	Competence (mainly key) management is a way of conducting personnel policy - the concept of competence has become the main link between recruitment and selection activities, career paths, employee appraisals and motivation systems. Key employee management activities - tools used: - non-financial employee motivation system; - employee satisfaction and commitment survey; - schemes for the development of managerial competences; - principles of constructive communication in the superior-subordinate relationship.

Cont. table 3.

	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – stimulating motivation - proposing real action to meet employees' needs; – improving teamwork skills for success; – feedback on employees' needs, how they perceive the company they work for and whether they associate their future career plans with it.
Company No. 5	<p>Description of the company</p> <p>Partner of the world's largest automotive filter companies. Industry: plastics. Country: Lithuania. Company size: large company - approx. 700 employees.</p>
	<p>Case study</p> <p>The company has implemented a human capital management strategy including the identification of key employees, which is combined with an expansion strategy aimed at gaining an even stronger market position by penetrating the market and leveraging the strengths of the management against the competition. It focuses primarily on optimal communication, building the authority of supervisors (including those with little experience) and well-motivated project teams.</p>
	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – improving communication skills, which influences the building of good relationships with others - this translates into success in professional and personal life; – identification of strengths and weaknesses in the company's information flow; – increase in internal and external customer orientation.
Company No. 6	<p>Description of the company</p> <p>The company is one of the European market leaders in the production of specialised software for asset, receivables and records management. Industry: IT. Country: Latvia. Company size: large company - approx. 290 employees.</p>
	<p>Case study</p> <p>The procedures and standards that have been developed relate primarily to the area of internal communication and the development of managerial competences of Board members and executives. In addition, identified key employees were prepared to improve the condition of the company through knowledge and tools to overcome the leadership crisis. Activities and tools used in the area of key employee management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – individual and team coaching (key employees, Board members and executives); – systematisation of employee recruitment and selection rules.
	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – increased motivation to build good relations with the company's clients - increased work efficiency; – ability to consciously manage the change process and work effectively in a rapidly changing environment; – identification of strengths and weaknesses in information flow; – diagnosis of own communication style; – developing skills of active listening, asking questions, directing the conversation; – improving communication skills and building good relationships with others; – reducing stress levels and resistance to new situations; – ability to react in conflict situations.
Company No. 7	<p>Description of the company</p> <p>The company provides innovative lighting solutions for customers in a wide range of industries. Industry: Manufacturing. Country: Estonia. Company size: large company - approx. 270 employees.</p>
	<p>Case study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – creation of assumptions for personnel strategy, including identification of key employees and competences for the company; – interviewing employees in a satisfaction survey process to determine the level of motivation; – examining job satisfaction and cooperation between subordinates and superiors; – initiating actions related to the assignment of additional competences to selected individuals. <p>An important element was also to work together with identified key staff to develop a job card template, and in connection with the creation of new posts in the future and recruitment plans for existing posts. A competency profile form was also jointly developed.</p> <p>An additional issue was the creation of a system to effectively manage key competencies.</p>

Cont. table 3.

	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – gaining knowledge of promotion opportunities and developing career paths within the company; – having knowledge of the tasks, responsibilities and authority of their position; – having knowledge of the company's expectations in terms of competence requirements for their job; – higher job performance and satisfaction.
Company No. 8	<p>Description of the company</p> <p>Germany's largest construction machinery and equipment rental company. Industry: Construction. Company size: large company - approx. 890 employees.</p>
	<p>Case study</p> <p>The preparation of precise job descriptions - so-called "key jobs" to be "filled" by key employees - was identified as the most important activity. A participatory method was used to create these descriptions - employees described their tasks and activities, which were then analysed and correct in terms of content and methodology. This process was complemented by an interview with the employee describing the job. This process made it possible to obtain not only a description of the activity, but also guidance from the job holder on what is particularly important or difficult to do. The next steps were to work on the creation of a selection procedure for the positions and activities to prepare managers to recruit and manage new employees.</p>
	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – acquiring practical skills to carry out a professional selection process for key employees; – improved competence in the accurate selection of the right people for the right positions.
Company No. 9	<p>Description of the company</p> <p>The company is a global supplier of smart power sources. Industry: Energy (power sources - manufacturing). Country: Sweden .Company size: large company - approximately 1200 employees.</p>
	<p>Case study</p> <p>The company has structured and defined rules for identifying and working with key employees in HR documents.</p>
	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – increased level of management fairness; – ability to self-evaluate and compare their performance with others; – greater sense of belonging to the company; – clarified feedback on assessed competences; – having knowledge of the scope of tasks, responsibilities and authority of the job occupied by the identified key employee; – higher job performance and satisfaction.
Company No. 10	<p>Description of the company</p> <p>The company provides comprehensive services aimed at institutions and individual clients in the field of advanced IT tools. Industry: IT. Country: Germany. Company size: Large enterprise - approx. 320 employees.</p>
	<p>Case study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a plan was developed to identify and develop key employees (the development plan also covered management); – the existing motivation system and employee appraisal system were synchronised with the identified key employees (any shortcomings diagnosed in these systems were removed in the process); – the flow of information across HR was improved.
	<p>Benefits for key employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – gaining tools and information to build their own professional development; – increased commitment to their work; – increased sense of identification with the company; – increased job satisfaction in a company investing in staff development; – to learn about the multifaceted diagnosis of employee capabilities and potential; – the opportunity to create an individual, time- and cost-effective professional development plan.

Source: own study.

The above list is a case study of identified good practices in supporting outstanding and highly valuable employees (one could say key employees) and implementing systems to manage them. Unfortunately, the list does not include representatives from the Polish market, which is certainly not the result of them not taking any action in this respect - simply that the examples described have already been implemented on the basis of the methodology developed. Importantly, most of the situations described, bearing in mind the very complicated and not always going in the right direction process of functioning of the existing HR policy in a given company, were implemented with the participation of external experts, who provided advisory support, after an earlier analysis of the current situation. This means that the changes introduced did not happen on their own, but were the result of direct assistance from consultants in developing procedures and tools as a response and solution to the need to implement specific actions for a given organisation in the field of key personnel management. It is therefore unlikely that the current organisational structures or the human capital management systems in place will evolve on their own to identify and exploit the competencies of these key employees.

It is also worth noting that often the effect of the measures outlined has been to streamline the entire human capital management system in the day-to-day running of a given enterprise. It should also be remembered that the implemented changes will not produce immediate effects - there is a rather long period of adaptation to changes at certain levels, and the results of the applied tools and prepared procedures are, or will be, visible after an appropriate period of time.

Furthermore, the analysis of the research carried out in the area of overall human capital management in many companies, further highlighted the extensive and diverse practices aimed at 'stimulating / activating' the most valuable employees for their organisation. This, of course, implied that the surveyed organisations had to develop and apply appropriate HR practices resulting in attracting, retaining, developing and motivating their employees. Through these examples, it is possible to see that the managers of the companies, realise that the changing conditions in the labour market, which are moving towards the crystallisation of the employee market, are forcing them to transform their personnel practices and enrich them with elements aimed at employee satisfaction (even if the key ones are not taken into account).

On the other hand, the measures presented, which should be seen as a 'test' of key worker management, show how rich and varied the practices undertaken by companies operating in Europe can be. Some rely on tried and tested solutions, others seek to meet the needs of employees in creative ways that are probably more appropriate when assessing the changes that are taking place in their environment. However, the objectives guiding these processes are the same for all. First and foremost, company managements are concerned with a high level and quality of education, decent work and economic growth.

Conclusions

In conclusion, in the new economic reality created by globalisation, technological advances or the rise of intellectual capital, at the dawn of society 5.0, there will be changes in the perception of employees in every workplace. In every industry - in the factory and in the law firm - employees will need new competences in the face of the dominance of digital tools. They will expect completely different treatment and support from their employer. Daily experiences with Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things, robotics and automation will imprint on them and trigger unprecedented feelings and needs. This means that HR departments around the world need to be prepared for this.

At this point, the author would also like to point out that, in his opinion, business executives are aware of the challenges they face with the new determinants of the economy. They also understand that their workplaces will become digital age organisations that produce physical products and provide innovative services based on data analytics - there will be a radical transformation in the way they operate and the dynamics of market processes will also increase. They also know that data and information are the main elements of the changes to come and they have a long and arduous road ahead of them leading to advanced analytical capabilities. All of this undoubtedly confirms the trend described by the author, perhaps not yet, but certainly already the beginning of it, which is the desire of companies to develop their employees and provide them with the right working conditions that will influence the results obtained. These efforts also testify to an organisation's awareness of the importance of such valuable capital as people - valuable individuals - and their impact on the results achieved by companies. This is also very important in the long term. It is not just the "here and now" that counts, as in the face of a changing labour market, pro-employee measures, including those aimed at assisting and rewarding the most valuable, can contribute to attracting "new" and retaining "old" employees who pay attention to the organisation's attitude to the needs of its employees. Creating development opportunities for identified key employees, "opening the door" to their participation in the organisation's management, without limiting their ability to generate ideas and new solutions, always provides a double benefit, Firstly, it is an opportunity for the company to develop and achieve its business goals, and secondly, professional fulfilment for the employee who feels appreciated and needed by his or her organisation.

Of course, the author is aware that due to the limited research group, the conclusions should not be generalised and we should consider the study as a pilot. But he hopes that the need for science to develop conceptual frameworks and methods to study the management of key employees in companies will not disappear, and that the research presented in this study is headed in the right direction.

To sum up, all the presented corrective actions and prepared tools are, in the author's opinion, characterised by the best available practice applied in the field of personnel policy in organisations. Importantly, they are effective and innovative and at the same time universal, as they can be applied by different companies, in different industries and in different circumstances. This is undoubtedly evidenced by the fact that the companies described - although they come from many parts of Europe - operate on national and global markets, in a variety of industries. But they still face the same problems, major or minor, when it comes to identifying and optimising the management of their key employees and thus maintaining their position among their competitors.

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