

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WELL-BEING – THE EMPLOYEE PERSPECTIVE

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Purpose: The purpose of the article is to present the results of the research and identify factors that allow to take care of well-being of the personnel employed in the SMEs. According to observations, various personnel management strategies are emerging in enterprises. One of them is work-life balance (combining private life and work), and there is also talk of work-life integration (combining work with private life) or workation (combining work with vacation). The assumption is that employers in the SME sector are just beginning to use this type of solution, allowing them to retain the best employees and increase the attractiveness of the company in the eyes of future candidates. The tools used are chosen intuitively and are not part of personnel management programs. It was also important to show the place of these concepts in the corporate social responsibility strategy of SMEs.

Design/Methodology/Approach: For the purpose of the article, an attempt was made to identify factors to take care of the well-being of employees and to propose a toolkit that can be applied in the practice of SMEs. In order to identify the needs of employees in these areas and the most important elements of programs aimed at staff, a survey was conducted using a diagnostic survey method and the sample was purposively selected. The survey covered employees of micro-, small- and medium-sized companies from the area of the Silesian province. In addition, source data from secondary reports, academic publications and scientific sources was used. The time scope of the study is from August to November 2024.

Findings: The sector of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises is now the overwhelming majority in Poland. Employment in these companies is also higher than in large enterprises. SMEs operate in an ever-changing market environment, influence the development of the local economy, create jobs and often engage with local communities, resulting, among others, in an image of socially engaged businesses. Corporate social responsibility programs aimed at employees are one of the important elements of an organization's personnel management strategy. One of the challenges of for the companies socially responsible in the area of caring for employees, is the use of practices consistent with work-life balance (WLB). According to the survey, the SME sector personnel notice and expect such solutions to be applied. By identifying the expectations of their employees, small and medium-sized companies can even better cope with the turbulent environment. The proposed solutions should be similar in terms of functionality compared to large enterprises. In turn, they should be different in terms of tools and subjects. This is often due to the resources (financial, tangible and human resources) available to the surveyed organizations.

Practical Implications: The text identifies the most important measures that can be applied in small and medium-sized enterprises to meet the needs of employees, create attractive jobs and nurture the image of a socially responsible company. In addition, barriers to the introduction of some work-life balance and well-being solutions are presented.

Social Implications: By responding to the needs of today's employees and addressing their self-development, well-being and work-life balance, the proposed solutions can be important components of personnel management programs. It is a challenge for entrepreneurs today to implement long-term programs to create balance, increase motivation, engage in work and make it comfortable and attractive. Employees who are aware of their needs will look for work that they enjoy and do well. Employers, on the other hand, need to be aware of it and treat it as a strategic investment in the success of the company.

Originality/Value: The issues presented in the article have not been widely discussed in the literature with regard to small and medium-sized companies in Poland. Well-being, work-life balance, and attention to employee satisfaction are rather the domain of larger companies.

Keywords: work-life balance, well-being, SMEs, enterprise, personnel, personnel management.

Category of the Paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Today's businesses operate in an ever-changing, often turbulent environment. Business conditions, external and internal environment factors, are changing. Internal factors are the ones that determine development of the company, and the company itself has the capacity to directly influence them. One of the key internal factors is people. The human factor is undoubtedly the most important resource of any enterprise. The involvement of employees in the implementation of the company's strategy, the execution of daily tasks, the level of knowledge and creativity, and the willingness to take on new challenges, require business owners and managers to use a number of different tools. The purpose of the article is to present the results of the research and identify tools that allow to take care of well-being of the personnel employed in the SMEs. According to observations, various personnel management strategies are emerging in enterprises. One of them is work-life balance (combining private life and work), and there is also talk of work-life integration (combining work with private life) or workation (combining work with vacation). The assumption is that employers in the SME sector are just beginning to use this type of solution, allowing them to retain the best employees and increase the attractiveness of the company in the eyes of future candidates. The tools used are chosen intuitively and are not part of personnel management programs. It was also important to show the place of these concepts in the corporate social responsibility strategy of SMEs.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility, Work-Life Balance and Well-Being – Literature Review and Discussion

Corporate social responsibility is one of the key research areas of 21st century strategic management. Another factor from the point of view of this study is strategic talent and human capital management (Bieliczyński, 2024, p. 33). The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), as the name suggests, focuses on micro-level problems (Brzozowski, 2013, p. 11). In practice, the concept is about companies undertaking various activities in response to the needs from stakeholders. These are activities that often serve the local community, activities that are often image-building and philanthropic. As I. Ścibiorska points out, companies are responsible to the broader environment of the organization: employees, suppliers, intermediaries and other stakeholders, as defined in the Davos manifesto. The personal interest of the owner can no longer be separated from the general good (Ścibiorska, 2008, p. 350). Among the many benefits that a socially responsible enterprise can achieve are better relations with its employees (Błaszowski, 2024, p. 125). There is no single universal definition of the concept of corporate social responsibility. The ISO 26000 standard, published in 2010, defines social responsibility as “an organization's responsibility for the impact of its decisions and activities on the society and environment, through transparent and ethical behavior that contributes to sustainable development, including the health and well-being of the society, takes into account stakeholder expectations, complies with applicable law and is consistent with international standards of behavior, and is implemented throughout the organization and practiced in its operations within its sphere of influence” (Jastrzębska, 2013, p. 38). According to I. Ścibiorska, “the concept of corporate social responsibility is often defined as conducting production and service activity aimed at building lasting, positive relationships with all stakeholders both inside and outside the organization” (Ścibiorska, 2008, p. 351). In terms of internal factors, the following aspects are characterized: workplace safety, human resource management, management of raw materials consumed by the company and the environmental impact of the company's operations, shareholder relations and corporate governance principles. The external factors, i.e. the company's impact on the environment, include: impact on local communities, relations with business partners, suppliers, customers and public institutions, respect for human rights, concern for the environment (Zuzek, 2012, p. 199). With regard to the issues discussed above and the subject matter addressed in this paper, it makes sense to treat the well-being and work-life balance of employees as important elements of corporate social responsibility. In the context of small and medium-sized enterprises, this is mentioned by F.A. Sanusi and S.K. Johl (Sanusi, Johl, 2022, p. 9). Other authors point out that most of the previous studies on well-being had been conducted in larger companies (...). In small companies, the psychological well-being of employees is often worse than that of the staff of large companies (Tabala et al., 2024, p. 1043). Here we can give examples of companies such

as Decathlon (Work-Sport Balance campaign), Santander Bank Polska, Jeronimo Martins, PKO Cargo, Danone, DB Shenker, Leroy Merlin, etc. (Responsible Business in Poland Report, 2023). The modest state of knowledge in human resource management with regard to small businesses is indicated by Szmidt, Król, and Kołodziejczyk-Olczak (Kołodziejczyk-Olczak, 2013, p.117). “Human resource management in small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland has its own characteristics and differs from practices in this area in large companies. (...) Relatively simple methods and tools prevail” (Król, Ludwiczynski, 2007, p. 89).

The concepts of work-life balance and well-being are a very topical area being addressed in the literature and research today. Maintaining a work-life balance allows employees to be able to reconcile professional responsibilities with family life, passions, travel, further education and personal development. This aspect is pointed out by N. Ngaliman, I.W. Catrayasa, K. Khairil (Ngaliman, Catrayasa, Khairil, 2024, p. 49). Work-life balance also contributes to employee loyalty. M. Stor, Ł. Haromszeki and J. Poór point to professional recognition and respect as undoubtedly the most important factors in building employee commitment and loyalty. They also point to work-life balance as another key factor influencing employee loyalty. Flexible work arrangements, prioritizing employees' leisure time send a message about how important employees' well-being is to the employer. Implementing health programs and providing a safe work environment are ways in which organizations can show that they care about the health of their employees. Interest in the welfare of employees directly translates into an increase in the loyalty of employees, who feel protected and valued (Stor, Haromszeki, Poór, 2024, p. 28). Heavy workloads and extended working hours pose challenges to maintaining employees' personal and professional lives. As a result, they quit their jobs and experience stress and sadness (Sharma, S., Sharma, K., Saini, 2024, p. 593). The experience of a work-life imbalance leads to problems in family life, private problems for the employee, as well as problems at work. The situation of not achieving work-life balance leads to absenteeism, increased employee turnover, strikes, workplace accidents, decreased productivity and employee resignation (Sarkbay, 2024, pp. 1430-1431). Thus, one can speak of a two-way conflict between work and family. It is mentioned by R.P. Zhang, P. Bowen, P. Edwards who proposed a model grounded in boundary theory and work-family boundary theory (Zhang, Bowen, Edwards, 2024).

The effect of introducing work-life balance programs is improving the well-being of employees. Well-being is called a positive attitude of experiencing emotions and a cognitive positive evaluation of one's life (Czerw, 2017, p. 20). As mentioned by I. Zerbe and A. Springer, employee well-being can be assessed in two aspects: eudaimonistic and hedonistic. In the eudaimonistic view, it means living a meaningful, valuable, and purposeful life, while in the hedonist view, well-being is defined as experiencing pleasure and as individual satisfaction with the life one has (Zerbe, Springer, 2023, p. 4). E. Kulawska stated that “mental well-being plays an important role in all professional groups, but it is particularly important in the professions that have direct contact with other people” (Kulawska, 2019, p. 130).

Table 1.*Examples of well-being activities in medium-sized enterprises in Poland*

Company name	Company size	Well-being and work-life balance activities
Anpharm Pharmaceutical company	Medium-sized company – 250 employees	family picnic, celebration of service anniversaries, training and skiing trips, support for sports initiatives and competitions for employees and their families, employee volunteerism and farewell events for retirees
Natural Pharmaceuticals	Medium-sized company – 240 employees	flexible working hours, tailored to the individual needs of employees who can work remotely, in the company's headquarters employees can adjust 8 hours of work to their needs in the time range from 7.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., meetings are organized from 9.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m., in the Rzeszów branch they enjoy flexible hours, which are adjusted to their personal lives, for example taking into account university classes or children's school hours
Urtica	Medium-sized company – 300 employees	sports, educational and integration activities for employees, joint initiatives, provide employees with the opportunity to get to know each other better, making their cooperation even more effective
Job Impulse	Medium-sized company – 150 employees	Job team – it is an internal initiative of employees who do sports, like movement and prefer a healthy lifestyle associated in group, the members of which support and motivate each other, share advice and jointly perform in competitions
Fabryka Mebli Balma	Medium-sized company – 200 employees	the company has reduced the strain on the musculoskeletal system of production workers by using electric pallet trucks and tables with adjustable tops

Source: Raport Odpowiedzialny Biznes w Polsce, (2023). Responsible Business Forum, accessed: <https://odpowiedzialnybiznes.pl/publikacje/raport-2023/>

Well-being in an organization is a new phenomenon in Poland and has not yet been fully recognized. It refers primarily to shaping the conditions of the work environment to build the well-being of employees and positively affect their professional development, sense of security or strengthen the bonds between them, and ultimately - the sustainability of the company. Examples of measures used in medium-sized companies in Poland are shown in Table 1.

There are many factors that determine the well-being in an organization. These include the new generation's demands on employers, changing perceptions of quality of life, diseases of affluence, and the employee market (Kulig-Moskwa, Nogieć, 2018, p. 354). K. Muszyńska declared that “more and more employers are looking for solutions with young parents in mind, introducing the principle of work-life balance, taking care of the equality of men and women on the job and the general well-being of employees” (Muszyńska, 2021, p. 202).

3. SME Sector in Poland

Classifications of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are based on quantitative and qualitative (or mixed) criteria. Quantitative criteria may include the number of employees, the value of the balance sheet total, the value of annual net turnover or the value of fixed assets (Dziemdziała, Krzyżanowska, 2020, p. 90). The small and medium-sized enterprise sector is of great importance to the economy. As Jowita Trzcielińska showed, “in Poland in 2014 there

were 1.84 million non-financial enterprises, 99.8% of which were MMSPs. Their share was 96%, 3% and 1%, respectively. According to 2013 data, these enterprises generated 50.1% of GDP, and the share of each group was 30.8%, 8.8% and 10.6%, respectively. At the end of 2014, the number of employees in MMSPs in Poland was 6.3 million people, 38.2% of whom were employed in micro-, 13.4% in small, and 17.6% in medium-sized enterprises” (Trzecińska, 2020, p. 5). The SME sector continues to grow. According to the data published in the Report on the Condition of the Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Sector in Poland in 2024: “enterprises operating in Poland currently produce nearly two-thirds of Poland's GDP (67.9%). The largest contribution comes from SMEs, which generate nearly one in every two zlotys of GDP (45.3%)” (Raport o stanie sektora..., 2024).

4. Material and Method

As mentioned above, there is no shortage of analyses and studies in the literature on work-life balance and well-being in large companies. Corporate social responsibility issues are more often related to activities aimed at external stakeholders. According to observations, small and medium-sized enterprises apply some work-life balance solutions to their employees, taking care of the well-being of their staff. These are often based on intuition and applied on an ad-hoc basis. The aim of the study was to identify factors that allow to take care of the well-being of personnel employed in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector and to identify the most important elements of programs addressed at personnel in this type of companies.

Research questions:

1. How do employees of small and medium-sized companies rate the corporate social responsibility of the companies where they are employed? Does this responsibility only apply to the external elements of the company's environment?
2. Do SMEs recognize the need to take care of the well-being of their employees? How do employees evaluate the measures taken?
3. What measures are applied by SMEs to take care of the employee's mental and physical health and work-life balance? What is the level of awareness of employees in this regard? How do employees rate their well-being?

The assumption is that employers in the SME sector are just beginning to use this type of solution, allowing them to retain the best employees and increase the attractiveness of the company in the eyes of future candidates. In addition, it was assumed that SMEs intuitively apply certain work-life balance and well-being tools, without yet seeing the effects of their application on unlocking employees' potential. This may be due to some financial and organizational constraints. In order to identify the needs of employees in these areas and the most important elements of programs aimed at staff, a survey was conducted using a diagnostic

survey method. The research tool was a survey questionnaire. The survey covered employees of micro-, small- and medium-sized companies from the area of the Silesian province. The sampling was purposive and the time scope of the survey covers the period from August to November 2024.

Fifty-eight people participated in the survey, of which 52 questionnaires were accepted for further analysis. The sampling was purposive, and a questionnaire consisting of 10 factual questions and demographic questions was used. The snowball method was used to reach the respondents. Due to the small sample, the results of the survey should be treated as a prelude to further research on the social responsibility of SMEs.

The majority of participants in the survey were women (77%). The largest number of respondents were in the 18-25 and 26-35 age groups (both 38.5% each). Those between the ages of 46 and 55 accounted for only 19.1%, with the least number of people between the ages of 36 and 45 (3.8%). Information about the age of the respondents is very important in this case. Indeed, the largest group was made up of 18-35 year olds. A large proportion of these people are representatives of Generation Z (it is assumed in the literature that Generation Z are those born between 1995 and 2012). Employees of this generation appreciate flexible working hours and benefits such as extra days off. Details of the age of the respondents are shown in Figure 2.

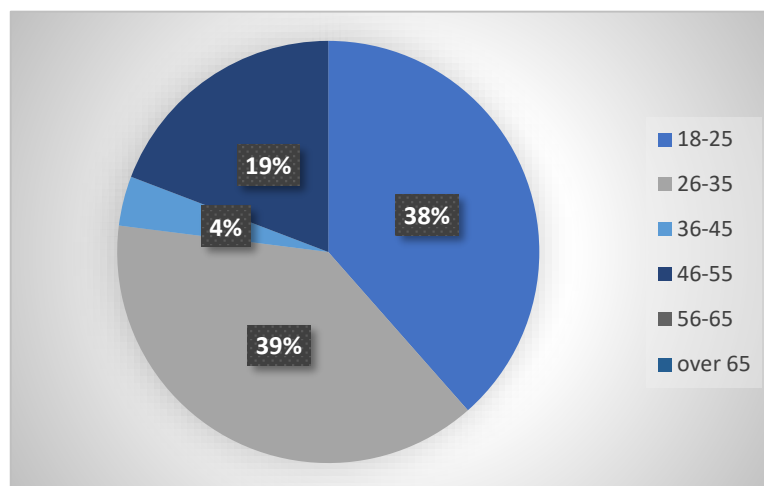


Figure 1. Age of respondents.

Source: own research based on conducted surveys.

Most respondents were residents of large cities (100-500 thousand residents) – 61%, rural residents – 15%, and 8% of residents of very large cities (over 500 thousand residents). Small and medium-sized cities were ticked by 8% of respondents each.

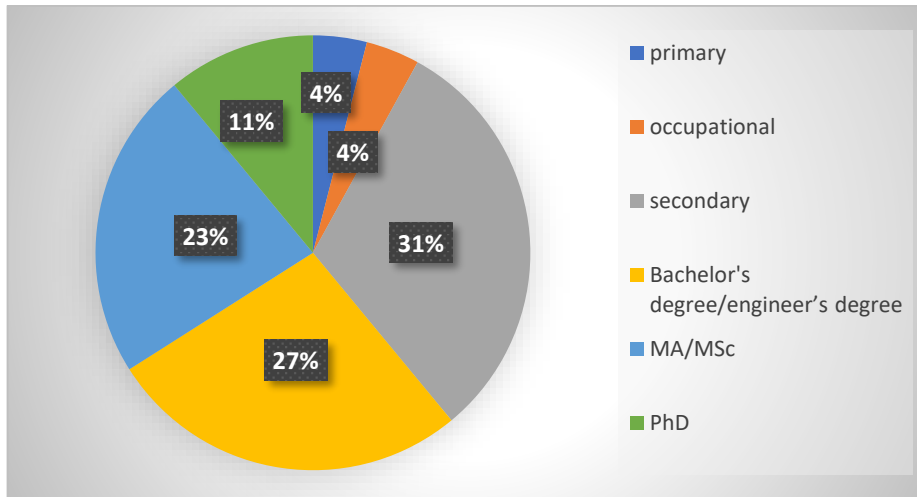


Figure 2. Level of education of respondents.

Source: own research based on conducted surveys.

A question on family structure provided interesting data from the point of view of the topic addressed. The responses obtained showed that singles and couples were most numerous among the respondents – 31% each. There were fewer families with one child (23%) and families with two children (11%). Families with three or more children accounted for 4%. As mentioned above, the survey using the questionnaire method was a pilot study to assess the manifestations of three areas of SME activity from the perspective of their employees. The areas that were analyzed were corporate social responsibility, work-life balance and well-being. It was assumed that work-life balance (WLB) as an element of corporate social responsibility can be the basis for building employee well-being. Introducing well-being into an organization is about managing the well-being of an employee in order to address their needs in a multidimensional way while achieving an organization's business goals. Well-being also means improving the organization's image and many benefits for the employee. Most of those surveyed were employees of private companies (85%). Local government units or other public entities were represented by 15% of respondents. All the respondents work in companies located in the Silesian province.

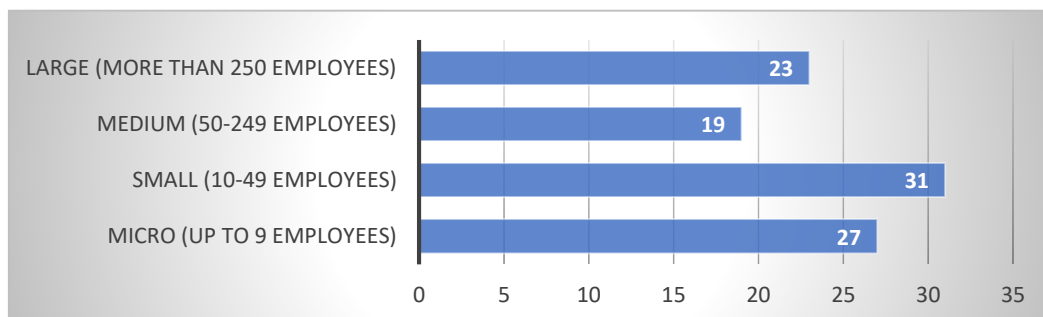


Figure 3. Size of the company where the respondents are employed.

Source: own research based on conducted surveys.

In the next two questions, the respondents indicated activities that they believe demonstrate social responsibility and identified CSR personnel activities that they have noticed in their workplaces. According to the respondents, the following activities are indicative of a company's social responsibility: caring for the well-being of employees (65%), measures to protect the environment (61%), support for employees' work-life balance, and responsible management of raw materials (50% each). Among the most frequently cited CSR personnel management tools that respondents see in their workplaces are workplace safety (81%), subsidized training, postgraduate studies, etc. (54%), a friendly atmosphere that fosters employee creativity and loyalty (46%), and respect for human rights (38%). According to the respondents, the companies where they are employed do apply work-life balance measures (as indicated by 73% of the respondents). Detailed responses on the work-life balance activities applied are shown in Figure 4.

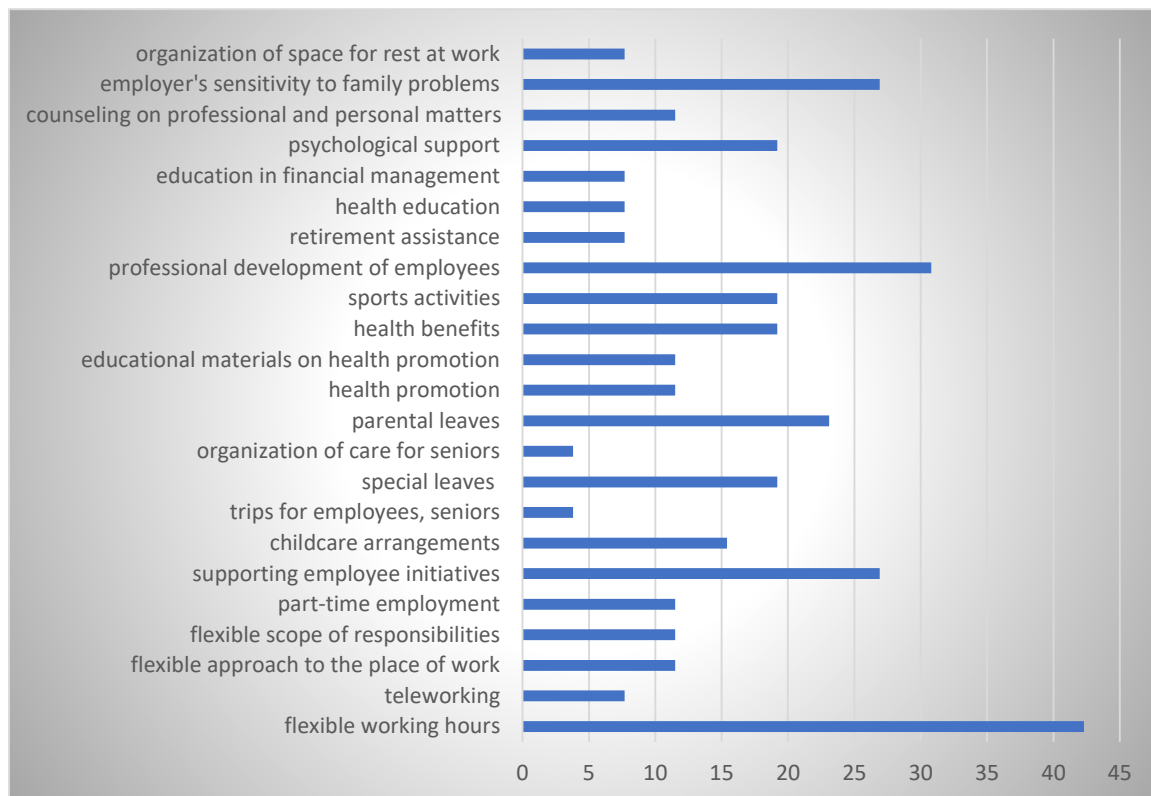


Figure 4. Activities aimed at ensuring employees' work-life balance (WLB) applied by the employer in the respondents' current workplace.

Source: own research based on conducted surveys.

As shown in the chart above, the most common solutions in the surveyed small and medium-sized enterprises are flexible working hours (42.3%), measures for the professional development of employees, training, counseling, financing foreign language courses (30.8%), support for employee initiatives and employer sensitivity to employee family problems (26.9% each). Interestingly, respondents did not indicate such issues as education for young parents, programs/activities to support parents in returning to work after a prolonged absence (to develop and improve professional skills), incentives for fathers to increase their participation

in family life in order to relieve women of the burden of parental responsibilities, the creation of new patterns for fulfilling social roles, and assistance in choosing types and forms of training taking into account the psychophysical characteristics of employees.



Figure 5. Benefits of employer's introduction of WLB activities according to respondents.

Source: own research based on conducted surveys.

Respondents also indicated the benefits they felt after employers introduced WLB solutions. The most frequently cited health aspects were: reduced stress and illness (57.7%) greater job satisfaction (50%), greater satisfaction with being able to reconcile different parts of life (work, family, personal life) – 50%. Increased self-esteem and motivation to work were also important aspects for respondents. As one can see, the use of work-life balance measures has a positive impact on employees' attitudes, well-being and health. What is surprising, however, is the aspect of identification with the workplace – 15.4%. In the next part of the questionnaire, respondents were given the opportunity to suggest measures they felt employers could introduce (and which are not currently being applied at the company) to take care of the well-being of their employees. The ones most frequently mentioned were introduction of flexible working hours, the possibility to work remotely, the provision of psychological support, the organization of well-being programs, including health benefits, such as passes to the gym or relaxation classes, psychological assistance. There were also suggestions such as a 4-day work week, knowing the planned work schedule several days ahead, hiring additional staff to relieve the burden on others, and a clear separation of work and free time (not contacting employees after working hours). Among additional benefits, respondents pointed to subsidies for training, sports and relaxation activities, and organizing team-building events.

In the last part of the survey, the respondents assessed their well-being, i.e. their subjective feelings resulting from professional fulfillment and low levels of stress at work, and indicated the elements of well-being they have recently felt that improved. The issues indicated by the respondents are shown in Figure 6.

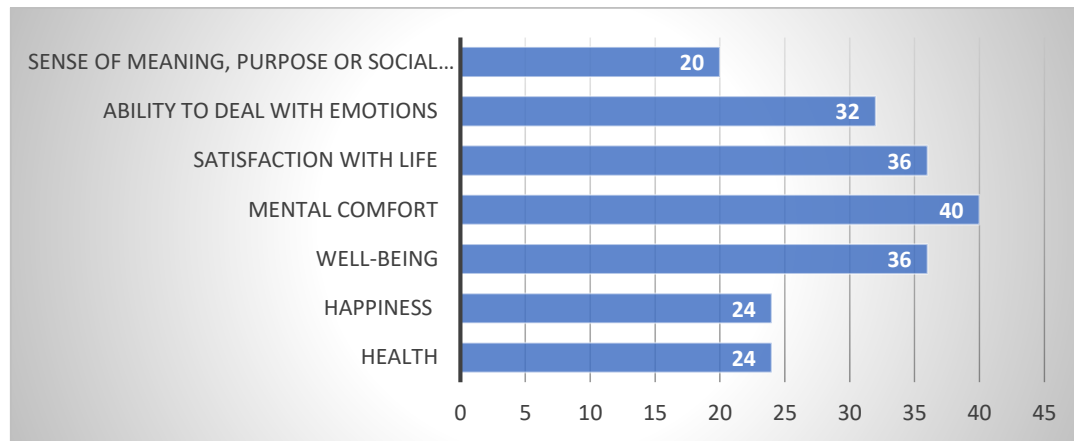


Figure 6. Respondents' well-being assessment – elements they have felt improved recently.

Source: own research based on conducted surveys.

The most important feeling observed by respondents in recent times has been mental comfort, followed by prosperity and life satisfaction. Thus, in the research conducted, it was discovered that the respondents – employees in the SME sector – rate their well-being at a low to medium level, which indicates that employers are not yet applying a wide enough range of WLB measures. In comparison, in a survey of Poles' well-being conducted in 2024 by the Infuture Institute for Benefit System, almost half of Polish women and men rate their well-being as average (Dobrostan Polek i Polaków, 2024, p. 7).

4. Conclusion

Well-being and work-life balance as elements of corporate social responsibility relating to employees became more interesting for researchers during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. It was recognized that at that time the staff (both management and rank-and-file employees) faced a very heavy workload, almost blurring the line between work and private life. Managers showed tremendous mobilization to survive in the market, between applying for government support and being creative in supporting employees and finding new solutions and markets. At the same time, it can be observed that issues related to employees' and managers' pursuit of well-being and work-life balance in the SME sector are not often described in the Polish literature. It is assumed that advanced personnel management strategies using work-life balance and well-being apply only to large companies. Observation of the market, however, shows that small and medium-sized companies are meeting the expectations of employees and are increasingly using at least some of the work-life balance and well-being tools. What's more, these activities are an important part of the personnel management strategy and are an essential element of the social responsibility of these companies. This approach is completely justified.

One of the reasons for addressing CSR, WLB and well-being was to draw attention to the need for work-life balance strategies in small and medium-sized companies. To point out that corporate social responsibility, attention to staff balance and well-being, are not only the domain of large and very large companies. Employee well-being, satisfaction and quality of life can affect the growth and competitiveness of any business. This study can be a prelude to further research, but based on the survey, it is possible to identify activities to build organizational climate or employee loyalty.

To sum up, taking into account the expectations and perspective of staff, small and medium-sized enterprises can base their work-life balance programs on the following activities:

1. Flexible working time, working hours, remote or hybrid work – the selection and applicability depends on the industry in which the company operates.
2. Lifelong learning. Employees expect opportunities for further training, learning new skills, foreign language courses.
3. Upskilling (acquiring new skills) and reskilling – employees, especially representatives of generations Y and Z, want to constantly develop, while quality of life is more important than financial status for representatives of generation Y, and generation Z are creative people who value self-development and independence.
4. Health support, physical activity and preventive health care – creating healthy habits for employees. For example, the MultiSport Program¹ is aimed at companies with at least 10 employees (Benefit System).
5. Work on changes in the understanding of roles in the family (in the survey, respondents did not indicate any activities to support parents in returning to work after a prolonged absence, including young fathers).
6. Measures in the form of incentives for fathers to increase their participation in family life in order to relieve women of the burden of parental responsibilities, creating new models for fulfilling social roles.
7. Integration of the team of employees. Small and medium-sized enterprises are characterized by frequent interactions among employees, managers and customers. These interactions affect well-being, fitness, loyalty and creativity.
8. Well-being assistant with modern technology – also small and medium-sized enterprises can use the available tools, such as well-being platforms. An example of such a platform is MultiLife which provides support for companies that want to take care of the well-being of their employees in 6 areas: consultation with a psychologist, nutritionist, trainer, language learning, development coach and financial education (MultiLife).

¹ The MultiSport Program offers sports cards (for Students, for Seniors, for adults and for children) that allow users to enjoy activities at various sports and recreational facilities. Employers can offer this to their employees as a benefit. An individual customer cannot purchase participation in the MultiSport program without going through their employer.

There is also criticism of the idea of work-life balance, saying that these areas cannot be rigidly separated. Suggestions are being made to use work-life blending, i.e. a gentle intermingling of these spheres. However, it is important to pay attention to the relationship between work and personal and family life. "In this context, new proposals have begun to emerge to define the essence of the balance, such as:

- work-life integrity emphasizing the maintenance of harmony based on the values that are most important to individuals,
- work-life quality,
- work-life rhythm - taking care of the rhythm of your own day and managing your own productivity,
- or the aforementioned work-life blending capturing the essence of the interpenetration of work and private life" (Mroczkowska, Kubacka, 2020, p. 38). SME companies do not have the same resources as large companies. However, they can take ideas and inspiration from the programs of the biggest players in the market.

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