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BUILDING THE INVOLVEMENT OF EMPLOYEES THROUGH DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

Summary. At the core of Human Resource Management (HRM) is the belief that employees are the company's most valuable asset. Skillful management of this resource can affect the efficiency of the organization and its competitive position. The effectiveness of the tools used by HRM can be largely determined by the degree of their adaptation to the individual needs of employees while taking into account the expectations of the organization. This approach requires a more flexible system of HRM. However, creating solutions dedicated to each employee individually is almost impossible. That is why organizations try to address its offer not to individuals but to various groups of employees.

The purpose of this article is to present the conclusions of desk research and empirical research on the practices used by Polish companies in the building of the involvement of employees through diversity management.

Keywords: building the involvement, diversity management, Human Resource Management

BUDOWANIE ZAANGAŻOWANIA PRACOWNIKÓW Z UWZGLĘDNIENIEM ZARZĄDZANIA RÓŻNORODNOŚCIĄ

Streszczenie. U podstaw zarządzania kapitałem ludzkim (HRM) leży przekonanie, iż pracownicy stanowią najcenniejszy zasób przedsiębiorstwa. Umiejętne nim zarządzanie może wpływać na efektywność organizacji i jej pozycję konkurencyjną. O skuteczności stosowanych narzędzi HRM może decydować stopień ich dostosowania do indywidualnych potrzeb zatrudnionych przy jednoczesnym braniu pod uwagę oczekiwań organizacji. Podejście takie wymaga podjęcia działań służących zwiększeniu elastyczności systemu HRM. Stworzenie rozwiązań dedykowanych każdemu pracownikowi z osobna jest niemal niemożliwe. Z tego

powodu organizacje starają się kierować swą ofertę nie do poszczególnych osób, a do ich różnych grup.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest prezentacja wniosków płynących z analizy danych zastanych oraz badań empirycznych dotyczących praktyk stosowanych przez polskie przedsiębiorstwa w zakresie budowania zaangażowania pracowników z uwzględnieniem zarządzania różnorodnością.

Słowa kluczowe: budowanie zaangażowania, zarządzanie różnorodnością, zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi

At the core of Human Resource Management (HRM) is the belief that employees are the company's most valuable asset. Skilful management of this resource can significantly affect the efficiency of the organisation and its competitive position. In recent years it has become clear that the effectiveness of the tools used by HRM can be largely determined by the degree of their adaptation to the individual needs of employees while taking into account the expectations of the organisation. This approach requires the HRM specialists to take action to increase the flexibility of the HRM system. However, creating solutions dedicated to each employee individually is almost impossible. That is why organisations try to address their offer not to individuals but to various groups of employees. Such an approach usually takes into account groups of job positions or individuals who have competencies crucial for the organisation ('key workers'), and it is less frequently paying attention to the age and sex of the workers. One of the key objectives of the HRM departments is to motivate employees to achieve better results and – particularly important in view of the continuous changes taking place in the business environment – to increase their innovation. The results of international and Polish research suggest that the creativity of employees and the results of their work are significantly influenced by the degree of their involvement (Guthie, 2001; Benson, Lawler & Young, 2006; Borkowska, 2010b). This attitude can be shaped by selecting appropriate management methods which take into account the needs of workers, in accordance with the current organisational culture, organisational structure and corporate strategy. As European societies are aging and the working activity of women is increasing, the importance of studies on the implementation of practices to build employee engagement taking into account the expectations of people of different ages and different sexes is rising, too.

According to the results of both global and Polish research, only about 30% of employees present a high level of commitment (Rashid, Sambasivan & Johari, 2003, p. 702; Colan, 2009, p. 3; Juchnowicz, 2012, p. 84). This may show mistakes in the management process resulting from, among other things, not taking into account the needs of different groups of employees (Rodgers, Hunter, 2003, p. 223). The benefits of the skilful use of the potential of

all employees has been emphasized in the concept of diversity management¹ which takes into account many characteristics which can vary among employed persons (i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, family status, economic background and status).

The analyses carried out by the Responsible Business Forum (Forum Odpowiedzialnego Biznesu) indicate that only about 20% of the researched companies in Poland use diversity management (Gryszko, 2009, p. 5). Meanwhile, other studies suggest that the level of involvement of employees varies depending on age, but grows consistently in time as the person gets older (Juchnowicz, 2012, p. 89-90). In addition, women and men representing different age groups assess differently the impact of the selected tools for building engagement (Wziątek-Staśko, 2012, p. 104-145).

The above findings of desk research were the starting point for qualitative research (focus group interview – FGI) that constitutes the first stage of a project conducted by a team of researchers headed by professor Stanisława Borkowska from the Institute of Labour and Social Studies in Warsaw (Instytut Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych)².

The purpose of this article is to present the results and conclusions of the abovementioned research on practices used by Polish companies to establish the involvement of employees through diversity management.

Two focus group interviews were conducted at the end of March and beginning of April 2014 with a group of employees of medium and large enterprises operating in Poland³. The second stage of the project (scheduled for autumn this year) of the Institute of Labour and Social Studies in Warsaw (ILSS) will involve quantitative research on a group of 100 enterprises and 2000 employees. For the purpose of this research project the team adopted the following hypotheses:

- H 1: The solutions for building employee engagement used by medium and large enterprises differ in their degree of formalization, complexity and comprehensiveness.
- H 2: Women, men, persons holding similar posts, with varying degrees of education, or representing one age group, prefer similar methods and tools to increase engagement.

¹ In this article the terms diversity and diversity management will be understood in line with definitions coined by E.E. Hubbard: Diversity – a collective mixture characterized by differences and similarities that are applied in pursuit of organizational objective. Diversity management – the process of planning for, organizing, directing, and supporting these collective mixtures in a way that adds a measurable difference to organizational performance (Hubbard, 2004, p. 27).

² The project 'Creating engagement in the context of diversity management' is funded by National Science Center. On account of the small popularity of diversity management in Poland the ILSS researchers have limited their analysis to discriminating between employees according to their gender, age and type of post (operative employees, experts, managers).

³ Medium companies employ between 50 and 249 people, while large firms have a staff of over 250.

H 3: Firms differentiating methods and tools for building engagement by employee gender, age group, job positions and forms of employment, achieve better economic results than companies not engaged in such distinctions.

H 4: Companies with a proven high level of HRM differentiate methods and tools for building employee engagement based on gender, age groups, positions and forms of employment more often than other enterprises.

The main purpose of the qualitative research, the result of which will be discussed later on in this paper, was the preliminary verification of the first two hypotheses H1 and H2. However, the planned quantitative research will be used to verify all of the hypotheses assumed in this study.

Group interviews carried out with the participation of different groups of workers (both sexes, employed on different posts, of different age groups) allowed to identify how employees understand the term engagement and to compare the solutions usually expected in terms of building engagement⁴ with the instruments most commonly used by employers in practice. The interviews conducted for this study enabled the creation of a list of the most effective motivators for various people according to their gender, age and the posts they hold.

1. How do we understand the phrase "engagement"?

Respondents were asked to define the term engagement and they usually dwelled on the emotional aspect, they also noticed that a person who is engaged in work is also committed to company matters. At the same time they underscored that in order to prevent the engagement of employees from wearing down, such commitment should be appreciated and awarded by superiors and co-workers.

According to the respondents engagement is indicated by:

- creativity and showing initiative,
- loyalty and a feeling of responsibility for the fate of one's company,
- reliability,

 availability and willingness to work also out of the designated working hours, if need be,

excellent work quality and results.

⁴ In the discussed research the term engagement has been defined as: a) implementing tasks entrusted to an employee and identifying with those tasks, b) participation, involvement in company life as a result of identifying with company values and goals (*commitment*), c) commitment to the practiced profession,

d) identification with the social environment of the organisation (Borkowska, 2010a, p. 45).

The participants of the focus group interview opined that the force of engagement of employees can be influenced, although much depends on the personality traits and the attitude of the employee him/herself.

All respondents agree irrespective of their age, gender or posts held by them, that payment dependent on work performance (the variable part of remuneration, bonuses) and ensuring the workers' employment security are of particular significance for the reinforcement of employee engagement. According to employees, the attitude of a direct superior may also contribute to the engagement building process. The motivation of subordinates is down to whether or not their superior recognises and appreciates their commitment.

When asked about reasons for choosing the current place of employment, focus group interviewees usually quoted, irrespective of the size of the represented company, the fact that the enterprise was in search of staff. On account of the difficult situation on the Polish labour market, finding work was in itself the strongest motivator attracting respondents to their firms. People who have been involved with the same organisation for many years stressed that even though they noticed various shortcomings of their current place of employment they would not search for a new employer, simply because that would be considered too risky. Such an attitude was manifested in particular by older employees (aged over 55), who emphasized that at their age finding a job and keeping it was very difficult at the moment. Employees of large firms quoted real-life examples of discrimination and mobbing of older people at work. They were picked on by superiors, were treated badly and overloaded with work. Adding new tasks was supposed to induce the older employee to leave the company.

Irrespective of the size of the represented firm respondents thought that the most recently employed workers were also the best motivated ones.

Moreover, people representing generation X (born 1965-1976) and older generations found the youngest employees of their firm (aged under 35) displayed a low level of engagement in work and the company.

2. Methods and tools of building engagement applied in firms

Statements of respondents indicate differences between middle-sized and large enterprises with regard to the number, type and degree of advancement of motivational tools used by the company, which would confirm hypothesis H1. Firms employing 250 people or more have access to more intricate sets of tools which help to increase the engagement of employees. They offer bonuses, additional benefits, rewards and provide possibilities for continuous professional development more often than medium companies do. What is more, they adopt such measures as competitions for best employee and bonding events. Medium enterprises

less frequently take up actions aimed at raising the involvement of employees, and the range of those measures is modest in comparison to what bigger organisations offer. Irrespective of the scale of the firm they represented, most respondents noticed that as the economic situation deteriorated in past years, their companies, in particular the medium ones, forfeited numerous motivational tools, such as the end-of-year bonus salary, or additional benefits, e.g. the possibility to choose among the preferential offers of company-owned leisure centres.

Respondents named the following solutions as those most frequently applied by medium companies to motivate staff:

- individual, performance-based bonuses (including commission) and seasonal bonuses,
- vouchers and gift coupons handed out before Christmas.

Firms of this group would less frequently offer additional benefits, such as additional healthcare or sport and leisure activity packages. Company phones were handed out to employees only for the implementation of tasks strictly connected with the activity of the firm and it was not possible to use the devices for private purposes. The same rule applied to company notebooks or cars which were offered only to selected groups of employees, e.g. sales representatives. Furthermore in firms employing less than 250 people, one will notice the division into employees more strongly motivated by the employer and those that are offered relatively little to increase their engagement. Particularly numerous motivational tools, especially in the form of financial incentives, are used in the case of sales staff. The next group of employees whose engagement all firms are vying for, irrespective of the company size, is of course managerial staff.

Contrary to what is happening in large firms, in medium companies the practices used to increase the engagement of employees are not overly transparent and standardised. It often happens that a decision about awarding a bonus to an employee and the extent thereof are discretionary. The range and level of measures offered by the firm depend largely on the current economic situation of the firm.

Respondents named the following as major methods and tools adopted by large companies to boost engagement:

- bonuses (both individual and group bonuses) dependent on results (including commissions) and seasonal bonuses,
- financing and subsidising studies and trainings advancing the competencies of an employee,
- anniversary awards,
- awards for best employee,
- additional benefits: sport trainings, culture-related courses, healthcare benefits (often financed by way of employee benefit funds),

- training and incentive trips,
- flexible work time and employment forms (forms of employment).

Large companies carry out systematic periodic assessments the results which are tied to the remuneration system. Managers of enterprises that saw a deterioration of the financial situation over the past years, which resulted in limiting the number of motivational tools, turn towards non-financial incentives such as commendations and words of appreciation.

Direct superiors play an important role in building the engagement of employees. They have an essential impact on the mood in a company. Bosses who allow their subordinates some leeway in carrying out their tasks, who treat subordinates as partners and trust them, were given a positive evaluation by respondents. Such managers were understanding and flexible when it came to managing the team, in particular in atypical situations.

Flexible work time and flexible employment forms are rarely adopted by medium-sized companies. The management will use a non-standard solution of this type only in exceptional cases, for instance when it cares about keeping a particularly valuable employee in the company.

While analysing the tools for raising employee engagement in firms, respondents – both in medium companies and in large ones – found that the financial incentives were the most effective tools. They stressed especially the significance of employers caring for annual pay rises. In some of the middle-sized and large firms salaries have not been changed over the past years though.

The respondents reasoned also that work motivation was often boosted by additional benefits – a tool which is not applied that often (especially in medium enterprises) – for example when the employer funds theatre or cinema tickets or recreational or sport activities packages.

Irrespective of the size of the firm represented by the respondents, they accentuated that they had not noticed a different treatment of employees according to gender or age in their organisation. Their firms did not undertake any measures aimed at fine-tuning motivational tools to the requirements of various employee groups either. On the other hand, in the group interview participants noticed that the situation of workers employed under civil-law contracts was markedly worse than that of permanent, full-time staff. The former would not be offered bonuses or gift coupons adopted in most enterprises and they also had difficulties getting paid leave. However, both in medium and in large companies, parents of small children enjoy various privileges, as they receive special subsidies and Christmas or Easter gift parcels. They also benefit from bonding events catering for their needs in particular, e.g. the celebration of Children's Day.

3. Expectations of employees with regard to methods and tools of building employee engagement

An analysis of statements concerning the expectations of respondents with regard to motivational tools indicates that there is a difference between representatives of medium firms and large enterprises and between people from various age groups. Research has shown that there are certain similarities with regard to preferences of women and men and of people of the same generation group, which complies with hypothesis H2.

Employees working in medium firms who boast quite a vast professional experience (generation X and those born between 1946 and 1964) expect superiors to show more appreciation for their work and an improvement of relations at work, for example by way of holding bonding events. Such opinions were expressed by both operative employees, as well as middle level managerial staff. Respondents stressed that they had mostly non-financial incentives in mind, such as words of appreciation and the recognition of efforts expended by an employee for a particular task.

Employees aged over 35, and women in particular, would gladly use additional benefits such as healthcare extending to other family members, cosmetics and recreational services or the refund of commuting costs. Respondents pointed out the usefulness of subsidies for employees with children and the possibility for employees to apply for interest-free loans from the firm.

Also younger employees (aged under 35) of medium companies point out how important non-financial motivational tools are. They list among these being appreciated, ensuring appropriate work conditions and caring about ergonomics. However, remuneration and a clear career path seem to be the chief incentives for people of this generation group. The salary should be high enough to ensure a comfortable life and the pursuit of plans not connected with professional work. The last purpose may be also accomplished by means of additional benefits desired by younger employees, such as sports and recreation activities packages or subsidized tickets for cultural event.

On the other hand, irrespective of their age, gender or the post held by them, all employees of large firms expect from their employer motivation in the form of job security, resulting from employment security, and decent pay (regular pay rises, annual bonus salary). These respondents underscored that they wished for an improvement of work conditions for their post and a better division of tasks, which would allow to prevent the overworking of employees. Excessive workload and the subsequent overexertion results in considerable workforce fluctuations, which in turn causes a dampening of moods in large companies. The respondents expressed their interest in a broader range of additional benefits, e.g. those

related to cultural events or sports activities (such benefits were indicated mostly by younger workers, irrespective of their gender). Some of the older employees of big companies would like to see the reinstatement of old privileges, such as being able use leisure centres or resorts owned by the company on referential terms.

4. The effectiveness of methods and tools for building engagement from the point of view of various employee groups

Irrespective of the size of their company all respondents acknowledged that remuneration and employment stability were the most effective factors which contribute to building employee engagement.

Respondents representing the segment of large enterprises reckoned that individual bonuses dependent on work performance were a particularly efficient tool, but they considered group bonuses not overly effective.

Young women (aged under 35) employed in big organisations and holding various types of posts considered employment stability, good communication and the mood in a company, a good rapport with superiors and the possibility to determine by oneself how to carry out tasks as the most effective incentives. They also indicated that flexibility in a company was an important matter – in terms of the possibility to use flexible working time and employment forms which take into account the needs of employees. Next to the above-mentioned aspect of relations (especially partner-like relations with superiors), young men, both in large and in medium companies, regarded the availability of employee development facilities as important for building engagement in a firm. Men aged under 35 employed in medium companies stressed moreover the importance of additional benefits, such as financing the participation in cultural events or funding seasonal tickets for sports and leisure activities, independence with regard to implementing tasks and a clearly outlined career path.

In the opinion of people of Generation X representing medium firms, the most effective incentives include practices which contribute to creating a good atmosphere and relations at work, and the establishment of continuous development opportunities.

Highly experienced staff holding operative and expert posts (both men and women aged over 45) in organisations employing over 249 people listed good relations, both with superiors and with co-workers, among the most effectual methods of building engagement. These relations should be based on partnership, mutual respect and collaboration. People of this age group both in large an in medium enterprises highlighted the fact that equal treatment of all employees, a far-reaching responsibility and the possibility to decide about how one carries out entrusted tasks were important motivators. Experienced workers of middle-sized

firms called attention to flexible work time and forms as factors considerably affecting employee engagement. Irrespective of age, gender and posts held, interviewees from big firms described additional healthcare benefits for employees as a valuable motivational tool.

Most of the respondents from large firms listed organising competitions for best employee as the least effective motivational instrument. They found that such initiatives led to unnecessary rivalry, mutual distrust and the disintegration of a team.

Irrespective of the size of their company, the interviewed employees reckoned that from the point of view of women, measures ensuring work-life balance (WLB) are the most effectual motivators, i.e.:

- flexible working time and employment forms,
- the operation of company crèches,
- subsidies for care of children or dependants,
- other WLB measures.

The most effective motivators with regard to male employees of large firms are an attractive remuneration, the availability of shares and share options, the possibility to suggest improvements and the awarding of best ideas, as well as the ability to decide about how one carries out entrusted tasks. People employed in medium companies found that men would more likely be motivated by the availability of seasonal tickets for sports or leisure activities than women would, whereas ensuring additional healthcare for themselves and family members would be a more effective motivator for women than for men.

According to the staff of large firms, the successful building of engagement among the youngest workers requires guaranteeing them continuous development and skill-improving opportunities, such as subsidising or financing study courses and trainings. Moreover, granting performance-based bonuses to young employees is also of great importance. Representatives of medium firms, on the other hand, pointed out that additional benefits – seasonal tickets for sports and leisure activities, a company car, laptop or telephone – motivated young workers very strongly. They also stressed how important easy access to development programmes and flexibility (in terms of working hours and employment form) were, especially with regards to young women.

Respondents thought people aged 35-45 were best motivated to work by an extensive offer of additional benefits, such as life insurance or healthcare services. Nonetheless, all measures addressed to parents, such as subsidized summer camps for children and holidays, are rated highly, too. Irrespective of the size of their firms, the interviewees underscored that on account of the relatively vast professional experience of people of Generation X, their commitment may be boosted by initiatives related to delegating responsibility, e.g. giving them autonomy on how they implement duties. The FGI interviewees mentioned also

securing ample opportunity for professional development as the best motivation for people of Generation X.

In the case of the oldest group of employees, aged over 55, respondents (both from large and from medium firms) named ensuring employment stability as the most effective tool to building the engagement of those staff members. However, employees of big enterprises deemed also additional benefits, especially those connected to healthcare, and flexible working hours and employment forms, to be important motivators. The interviewees emphasised the significance of good relations at work (with superiors and co-workers) for evoking the commitment of older people, and mentioned also how important it was for these employees to be able to decide on how to carry out entrusted tasks. The latter was interpreted by respondents as an indication of trust and appreciation by superiors for the immense experience of older staffers.

While analysing statements on building engagement of employees holding different positions, it can be noted that respondents opined that operative employees would be most effectively motivated by equal treatment of all people in the firm, appreciation of their work, stability of employment and securing access to trainings. The commitment of experts will be best secured by providing them with opportunities to foster development and improve skills, by granting them more responsibility and allowing them a lot of leeway with regard to the implementation of their tasks. The motivation of experts may be further affected by superiors showing trust and appreciation for the work of experts.

According to the FGI participants, managers are a group of employees whose engagement will be motivated by a proper (performance-related) remuneration, by difficult challenges and by the opportunity to achieve personal fulfilment at work in their company.

5. Conclusions

The presented research results indicate that there is a series of similarities between chosen groups of employees of medium and large companies with regard to the methods and tools of building employee engagement. However, the study has also highlighted certain differences. The range and degree of complexity of motivational tools adopted in medium firms is smaller than in companies employing over 249 people. What is more, in the case of the former group, building the commitment of staff is not founded on standardised procedures, and bonus or prize-awarding criteria are usually not that transparent.

All respondents, irrespective of the company size, have noticed that their enterprises are cutting down on additional spending on staff as a result of the economic crisis. In terms of motivational tools this means that firms abandon some of the practices adopted by them up

until now. The economic situation has resulted in the curbing of employee expectations with regard to motivation measures. A remuneration ensuring decent livelihood and employment stability are incentives which decidedly contribute the most to increasing employee commitment to work and implementing tasks. The respondents, in particular those of the older generation, find that having a job is in itself a highly motivating factor. Their accounts show that the situation of older people in firms is not easy. Some of the interviewees have observed practices aimed at forcing people who have not yet reached retirement age out of the company. People employed on the basis of civil-law contracts constitute another disadvantaged group, as they are deprived of most of the privileges enjoyed by full-time employees.

Respondents named incentives related to work flexibility as some of the most significant motivators for older people and parents of small children. Interviewees pointed out that the best motivator for Generation X representatives was ensuring continuous development opportunities and allowing such employees to decide about how to carry out tasks. In the case of the oldest employees, granting employment stability and additional benefits, especially those relating to healthcare, will play a crucial role in boosting commitment. For the group of the youngest staff members, the key motivational tools can be additional benefits (company car, telephone, laptop), professional development opportunities and a transparent career path, as well as having limited freedom as to how to carry out tasks.

Irrespective of the age, gender or posts held by employees, non-financial instruments, such as superiors showing appreciation for a worker's contribution by way of praise or other expressions of approval, a good working atmosphere and relations in a firm, may play a significant role in building employee engagement, as indicated by the respondents. Treating employees as partners by their superiors, favouring collaboration and limiting rivalry, as well as promoting good communication are all factors that strongly motivate the labour force to remain in a company and work intensively for its benefit.

The analysis of research results on factors motivating employees based on gender and based on positions held leads to the following conclusions:

- The commitment of women can be strongly affected by measures supporting work-life balance;
- In the case of men key motivators will include salary and performance-related bonuses;
- Operative employees will be motivated best if they are given a sense of safety resulting from employment security, for example by replacing a civil-law contract with a standard employment contract;

- The degree of commitment of experts depends on how much skill development opportunities are provided to them and how much freedom they are granted when carrying out tasks;
- The motivation of managerial staff is affected significantly by opportunities to reach self-fulfilment and by such a definition of their responsibilities as to ensure that they feel their work is a challenge.

The opinions expressed by the FGI interviewees confirm at the same time the lack of popularity of diversity management in companies operating in Poland. Respondents emphasised that their firms did not apply an individualised approach to motivating staff – an approach that would cater for the needs of people according to their gender or according to what generation they belong to. There are, however, differences with regard to increasing commitment of employees holding different posts. Experts and managers may expect a broader range of benefits. What is more, employers care decidedly more for the involvement of permanent employees, with a standard employment contract, than for the engagement of those whose employment relationship is based on civil-law contracts.

The results of the research presented in the article enable gaps in the knowledge about practices related to strengthening engagement among different groups of workers in Poland to be filled, as well as enabling the formulation of a list of solutions based on what employees of different ages and sexes believe have the greatest impact on their commitment.

The conclusions of the presented analysis may be interesting both for HRM researchers and entrepreneurs. They may inspire employers to modify current strategies and methods to build employee engagement towards fuller inclusion of diversity management. The effectiveness of the mentioned strategies is crucial for innovation growth and business efficiency which are key to the economic development of a country.

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