

Human Capital Management in the Wandering Context of Events – Challenges for the Managerial Staff

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Chapter 8

MANAGING STAFF DEVELOPMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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8.1. Introduction

This chapter continues with the issues related to employee development, which here is interchangeably called staff development. In previous parts of the monograph, the authors addressed this in the context of various geographical regions, different types of organizations, virtualization and digitalization of the work environment, although some pandemic conditions were also considered. In this chapter, however, the basic context is the COVID-19 pandemic.

As mentioned, earlier, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the reality of functioning of all organizations around the globe. Uncertainty, closed borders, and fear of being infected made businesses introduce new activities. Providing employees with the necessary safety precautions, keeping the staff together, and the reorganization of work became a problem. The crisis caused by COVID-19 and the changes it triggered, led to the evolvement of the forms of development. Referring to Chapters 5 and 6, one can repeat that part of business activity was moved online, changing the configuration of the organization systems and distant working (McGuire, Germain, and Reynolds, 2021, p. 27). This meant a change of both communication and distant control. Leaders started searching for integrated solutions making distant work easier and serving to build the teams' identity. Thanks to this, it was possible to understand the targets the employees had to meet as well as efficient communication and knowledge sharing.

It was also essential to take care of the employees' well psychophysical and psychosocial condition. Working from home for extended periods of time not

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only resulted in longer working days but also disrupted family relationships, leading to numerous tensions. This was particularly true for employees who had previously been mobile, but whose situation forced them to stay at home, hence the boundaries between work and family needed to be renegotiated and reorganized (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, and Zimmermann, 2020, p. 701).

It is also worth noting that the pandemic exposed gaps in competencies at both individual and team levels. Sus and Sylwestrzak (2021, p. 501) underline such problems as inability to adapt to change, innovation and creativity, lack of courage to act in a new situation, mental strength and resilience, self-organization of work, proactivity, lack of competency to manage a team remotely, the ability to learn quickly and IT skills. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore created an urgent need to implement new or activate proven employee development solutions. Knowledge of new technologies and the ability to use Internet tools proved to be indispensable. Competencies such as creativity, adaptation to change, and emotional intelligence have also gained in importance. In order to meet the expectations of their employees, and thus maintain their position on the market in this difficult environment, companies focused on adapting appropriate development practices.

In light of the above, the goal of this chapter was twofold. Firstly, the authors' intention was to juxtapose the practices within the scope of employee development in businesses in Poland in two periods of time, i.e. before and during the pandemic. Secondly, the authors wanted to identify the competencies which are particularly desirable in the work environment strongly affected by the pandemic.

For this reason, the theoretical foundations for the contextual influence of the pandemic on employee development and required competencies is the subject of interest in the next section. In the further part, the methodical assumptions of their own empirical research are discussed and the results presented. Finally, a concise summary was made and the most important conclusions formulated.

8.2. Theoretical foundations for the contextual influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee development and requirements regarding competencies

Talented workers are vital assets in any modern society. They underpin the transition from an economy based on land, labor and capital, to that based on information and knowledge. They are crucial in determining the answers to today's great challenges, such as climate change, food and energy security (Boulton, 2011). Only companies that base their strategy on the talents of their employees are able to build a competitive advantage without the need for a time-consuming and relatively expensive process of bridging competency gaps, which is why it is so important to diagnose the strengths of the employee and use them in action (Wachowiak, 2007, pp. 147-148).

Therefore, gaining and maintaining a position in the market depends on the ability to attract and keep the best employees and to benefit from their potential, and this forces the companies to apply development activities. The role of the organization has long ceased to be limited only to providing employees with job security. In order to ensure the loyalty, trust and commitment of employees, the companies need to take into account the needs of their staff and meet their expectations. By implementing various workforce competency improvement solutions, organizations can ensure that they have a skilled workforce that understands its key strategic issues. Among the activities that improve employee competencies, Ulrich and Lake (1990) indicated: helping to solve business problems in task forces, participating in the implementation of new systems, inclusion in key decision making and conflict resolution.

Employee development as a process involves learning on the part of all individuals in the organization, including line managers, professionals, and executives, and can be delivered through a variety of approaches, including on- and off-the-job training programs, seminars, job rotations, self-study materials, and mentoring (Jacobs and Washington, 2003, p. 344). To be beneficial, employee development research should seek to better understand the conditions under which employee development programs function in organizations (Jacobs and Washington, 2003, p. 351). The need for continuous professional development is emphasized in both individual and organizational dimensions. The former is important in terms of the interests of the individual and the role he or she plays or wants to play in the chosen social arrangements. In a broader context, the professional development of the individual is interpreted from the perspective of the development of the whole organization, whose interests may determine the career path of the individual (Wach-Kąkolewicz, 2008, p. 57). To ensure that it has competent employees in key positions, an organization must understand the basis on which employees make career decisions. It should take into account the personal interests of the individual, family considerations, preferred lifestyle, be aware of the career problems of its employees. Thus, an optimal model of career management in an enterprise should take into account actions on the part of the organization, the individual, and their mutual alignment (Jarosik-Michalak, 2018, p. 126).

The transition from inefficient and bureaucratic enterprises to profitable and market-competitive organizations forces the consistent implementation of many important changes, including the treatment of training and improvement as an investment that brings tangible benefits (Belina, 2017, p. 128). The process of knowledge development as a result of training requires the organization to use this knowledge and create conditions for sharing it (Olkowicz, 2013, p. 412). This is because knowledge can constitute the development of the organization and be the basis for the implementation of innovative solutions. Enterprises trying to create a unique product offer must demonstrate better recognition and satisfaction of market needs than their competitors, and this requires higher level competencies

in various spheres of the enterprise and at various levels (Penc-Pietrzak, 2011, p. 33). Particular attention should be paid to those that will be required in the future in connection with the development of smart technologies and the creation of virtual and culturally diverse teams.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the role of competencies in business operations. Akkermans, Richardson and Kraimer (2020, p. 1) perceive the pandemic as a “career shock”. There was a risk that it would have a disruptive effect on employees, as many linked it to job loss, job insecurity, as well as reduced pay. However, many employees saw in this difficult situation for themselves opportunities to develop their own potential, to reveal their talents. This was not a surprise, as it is known that one of the basic conditions affecting the quality of the professional development of an employee is his or her own activity and awareness of constant pursuit of their own development potential (Plewka, 2016, p. 29).

The solution, often the only possible one, implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic was to go into remote mode. This activity during the pandemic was and is necessary because it limits contact with other people, and thus the transmission of the virus. This form of work became not so much a benefit as a necessity or an opportunity to reduce the risk of infection. At the same time, the conditions of remote work have changed significantly (Dolot, 2020, p. 36). It is worth noting that the idea of remote work appeared much earlier, but it was in the lockdown period that its advantages and importance were recognized. The advantages of this solution include the possibility of adapting the work to the personal needs of the employee and saving time, even if it is associated with travel to and from work. Remote working can also contribute to generating savings for the employer and reducing environmental degradation (Dolot, 2020, p. 42).

Although social isolation protects the worker it is important to be aware that it can pose mental health risks. Research has shown that difficulties in home relationships, lack of privacy and being overwhelmed by daily responsibilities were among the most important predictors of depressive and anxiety symptoms among employees during the separation caused by COVID-19 (Gambin et al., 2021, p. 8). Therefore, it has become essential to implement practices that help eliminate stress, such as webinars on coping with mental stress and tutorials that provide all the information needed to complete work activities (De Cieri, Shea, Cooper, and Oldenburg, 2019).

Another challenge that arose with the pandemic was ensuring good quality of information to perform the tasks, and that IT was supported in obtaining the right tools and information. The transition to remote working has significantly reduced verbal communication between employees and managers. Asynchronous virtual communication is most effective for gathering information during regular face-to-face meetings. Meetings (or video conferencing if the situation arises) are reserved for problem-solving and complex decision-making tasks that require synchronous

interactions (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000). Among the benefits of networked communication are the blurring of cultural differences in behavior, the absence of linguistic misunderstandings, electronic traces of decisions made, and time savings in face-to-face meetings (Caligiuri et al., 2020, p. 703).

It should be emphasized that the pandemic itself, despite the difficult conditions, can become an opportunity to develop competencies and develop new ways to motivate employees in crisis situations. Managers and HRM practitioners must go beyond traditional training methods and develop programs tailored not only to the new realities that include physical distance, but also to employees who will be able to act to keep the organization at a high level (Hamouche, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, COVID-19 has given employers the opportunity to develop the autonomy of their employees, enhance their digital skills and broaden their perspectives to develop their competencies (Hamouche, 2021, p. 10). Building their own resources to ensure competitiveness should enable to focus on expanding and improving employees' personal skill sets (Hite and McDonald, 2020, p. 9).

Managing an enterprise in times of the COVID-19 pandemic is a process aimed not only at preventing an impending crisis, but mainly at reducing the impact of the crisis on the organization's resources and value, taking control of its course, minimizing losses and restoring a state of stability (Dereń and Skonieczny, 2021, p. 364). The crisis caused by the pandemic should be a catalyst for changes that enable the organization to grow, and prepare it for future unexpected events. Companies now have new tools and processes in place to develop personnel in ways that were not possible or acceptable prior to the pandemic. While it is still ongoing, and it is unclear when it will be safe to meet again at work, it is reasonable to use the ground gained from the current acceptance of new online technologies to develop staff and provide employees with the highest quality job offers (Zuo and Juvé, 2020, p. 106).

8.3. The empirical research methodics

Due to the insufficiency of empirical knowledge about employee development management during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a need to carry out cognitive research on a group of business entities in Poland, concerning the use of selected methods and tools to enable employees to improve their competencies.

The main goal of the empirical research was to determine whether the practices in the scope of employee development during the pandemic were significantly different from those in the pre-pandemic period and whether it was accompanied by any specific expectations as to the competencies of employees particularly important during the pandemic.

The following detailed goals were also formulated in the research process:

1. To assess the frequency of use of development activities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. To identify the competencies desired in the organizations under remote working conditions.

3. To analyze the changes necessitated by COVID-19 in the area of the human resources function.

The sample selection was intentional and included companies from different industries. For research purposes, the authors applied the technique of collecting information indirectly with the use of a measurement tool in the form of a questionnaire. The respondents were employees of human resources departments, responsible for developmental activities in the organization. The research was anonymous and participation was voluntary. Twenty-seven entities participated in the survey, which was conducted over a two-month period from February to March 2022.

In selecting the companies for the research, the authors referred to the available statistical data on the structure of business organizations in Poland, which show that small and medium-sized enterprises constitute 99.8% of all businesses in Poland. Large enterprises employing more than 249 people account for 0.2 of the total number. According to the Report on the State of the Sector of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Poland in 2021, medium-sized enterprises employed 1.58 million employees, while large enterprises employed 3.26 million employees, representing 15.8% and 32.6% of the total number of employees in the enterprise sector, respectively. The subject of the analysis presented in this chapter are medium-sized (29.6%) and large (70.4%) enterprises.

Table 8.1. The structure of the research sample

Branch of industry	Number of businesses	Percentage
Trade	6	22.2
Construction	4	14.9
Administration	3	11.1
Rail transport	3	11.1
Medicine	2	7.4
Pharmaceuticals	2	7.4
Electro-energy	2	7.4
Gastronomy	2	7.4
Ceramics	1	3.7
Imports	1	3.7
Forestry	1	3.7
Size of business	Number of businesses	Percentage
Large	19	70.4
Medium	8	29.6

Source: own research.

The purposive selection of respondents was made to ensure reaching the employees of HR departments working in medium and large enterprises, which allows to find and analyze the best and inspiring practices in the area of development activities of these enterprises. In the study, the largest number were those operating in trade (22.2%), construction (14.9%), administration (11.1%), and rail transport (11.1%). The structure of the surveyed enterprises is shown in Table 8.1.

To achieve the research goals, the literature analysis was conducted, a research tool was developed, and further empirical analyses were performed. Data were collected using an online survey questionnaire placed on a specialized web portal designed to conduct research. The questionnaire contained nine questions prepared on the basis of literature in the area of human resources development and was addressed to employees of HR departments of enterprises in Poland, and included questions using a 5-point Likert scale, open questions and multiple choice questions.

8.4. The empirical research findings

Based on the analysis of the research results obtained, it can be concluded that most of the developmental activities have moved to the Internet. In addition, it was found that activities implemented before the pandemic, to a lesser extent, and those after the outbreak of the pandemic, have gained in importance. These included on-the-job training, online training, video-conferencing coaching, blended-learning training, podcasts, online focus groups, and webinars. The different types of development activities are shown in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2. Types of developmental activities in the companies before and during the pandemic

Type of employee development activities	Results before the pandemic (in %)	Results in the pandemic (in %)
On-the-job training	85	89
Online training	71	86
Video-conferencing coaching	63	70
Blended learning	45	67
Podcasts	45	52
Focus groups	52	71
Webinars	49	71

Sources: own research.

It follows from the above that companies have been forced to suspend onsite training, hence the increased demand for online development activities. These form of training can take place in two ways: asynchronous, where the employee does not have a specific time of training, can adjust the time of the course to his or her needs, learn at his or her own pace, and repeat selected lessons of the training. This form allows a lot of freedom, because an employee decides how much time he

or she spends on learning, but requires discipline and commitment. Synchronous training can take place in real time, the participants connect with the trainer and are supervised by him or her, and they can share their knowledge and together solve emerging problems. This form is similar to traditional teaching, however, there is no need to be in the classroom, the training takes place on specific days and it is possible for the whole team to work together. On-the-job training was used before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, as evidenced by the high awareness of the companies participating in the study that the action plan created in this way of employee development should take into account the principle of three categories of activities and maintain the proportions between them: on-the-job 70% (i.e. solving real problems, learning through experience, participation in project teams), received feedback 20%, training 10%. Each of these forms, to varying degrees, helps in bridging the competency gaps.

Yet not all of the indicated actions after the outbreak of the pandemic contributed to the increase in activities in the area, because feedback, secondment of an employee, and financial support for employees in external education, according to the surveyed companies remained unchanged both before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. This is evidenced by the fact that companies coped well despite the crisis with the development of employees by supporting their learning in higher education, courses, training and conferences, as well as motivating employees to effective work through feedback. There may be many methods of receiving feedback for an employee, nevertheless it is important to focus on giving praise, pointing out elements to be improved and motivating to action by supporting and encouraging to improve badly functioning areas. Giving feedback in the right way increases the motivation of employees, and thus builds their commitment and allows for the greater identification of employees with the company. The study showed that employees are aware that feedback and information on career paths should be received from their immediate superiors. The companies participating in the study are aware of the impact of the existing development activities such as feedback, which is one of the most important areas affecting employee development.

As part of the study, the method of recruitment during the pandemic was also analyzed. The obtained results indicate that enterprises still use landline calls, have not abandoned the use of traditional forms of employee sourcing and want to continue to do so. Online interviews have remained popular among the companies and are also used today, as evidenced by a number of benefits such as time optimization for both candidates and recruiters, and the possibility to verify certain professional skills such as language. Naturally, there are also some disadvantages which include experiencing more stress in front of the camera than during a face-to-face meeting, as well as the lack of opportunity to check skills, for example technical. Before the final choice of form of recruitment is very important to take into account the type of position and the range of necessary competencies that a 'perfect' employee should

have and decide whether one is able to verify the required skills during online recruitment.

In connection with the pandemic, in addition to changes in the forms of recruitment and other development activities undertaken both before and after its outbreak, the range of desired competencies among employees was analyzed. Acquiring a specific profile of employees is related to the company's belief that gaining a competitive advantage and survival in today's turbulent market is rooted, in addition to the organization itself, in talented and competent employees.

The crisis caused by the pandemic has shown that companies need new competencies as new challenges have emerged. The highlighted competencies are presented in Table 8.3.

Table 8.3. The ranking of the competencies required from employees after the outbreak of the pandemic

Desirable competencies during the pandemic	Results (in %)
Responsibility	89
Ethical behavior	89
Creativity	88
Analytical thinking	86
Ability to critically assess the situation	85
Expertise	83
Adaptability	83
Sharing knowledge	85
Work culture	82
Dealing with stress	82
Computer skills	48
Ability to manage the staff on-line	41
Knowledge of new technologies	40
Ability to work in virtual teams	37

Source: own research.

The most important competencies included: responsibility, ethical conduct, creativity, analytical thinking, ability to critically assess the situation, expertise, adaptation to change, sharing knowledge, work culture, and dealing with stress; the following competencies were rated lower: communicator skills, ability to manage employees online, knowledge of new technologies and ability to work in virtual teams.

It can be concluded that not all the companies felt the need to move to remote management. Perhaps it was considered that remote working reduces job satisfaction and weakens the organization. It is possible to say that these companies managed the change effectively. The pandemic introduced turbulence into the existing and applied HR tools, including management, motivation and communication. The companies participating in the study worked on a rotational basis, which is

confirmed by the results as almost half of the companies increased their work on such a system after the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition, in order to improve communication processes, additional communicators were implemented to transfer information between employees; there was also a change in the process of work organization thus increasing autonomy among employees and the changes in the process of adaptation of employees. In order to increase employee commitment, companies have implemented numerous changes in the existing safety procedures and increased non-wage material motivation tools.

Further analysis of the company survey indicates that the least important factor introduced after the outbreak of the pandemic was the lack of interest in the well-being, the psychological support tools for employees and the lack of increased training. This may indicate the lack of resources for the further training of employees, or perhaps another reason being that it is not easy to keep employees who are busy, tired, stressed and uncertain of tomorrow in front of the screens of e-learning courses.

Another aspect addressed in the research was the question of how companies collect information about the needs and expectations in the development of their employees during the pandemic. The results show that companies collected information during performance appraisal interviews, conversations with direct supervisors, during informal meetings, giving feedback or during interviews with HR staff. In connection with the fact that most information about needs and expectations was received by direct superiors (82%), it can be concluded that despite numerous changes in the organization of work, such as the introduced job rotation, managers took care to provide the space for open conversations with their employees. This required more attention, openness, trust, and energy, thanks to which the employees were provided with psychological comfort. Thus they could also better understand the new tasks and their roles in this difficult period, and the companies did not have to create new units offering psychological support to their employees.

Considering the last issue of what safety measures were introduced during the pandemic, the respondents rated highest the provision of disinfectants, the organization of vaccinations, and the establishment of a unit responsible for the observance of procedures in connection with the pandemic, as well as the transfer of some activities online and rotational work.

8.5. Final conclusions and research summary

To sum up the discussion conducted in this chapter, it can be said that the activities taken by organizations in the area of staff development were aimed at acquiring, using and maintaining human capital as a major source of competitive advantage and is one of the greatest challenges for managers in this century. The pandemic and the accompanying period of lockdown have forced the adaptation of possible solutions to the needs of organizations and the creation of opportunities for the

competency development of employees. That is why the main goal of the authors' empirical research was to determine whether the practices in the scope of employee development during the pandemic were significantly different from those in the pre-pandemic period, and whether it was accompanied by any specific expectations as to the competencies of employees, particularly important during the pandemic. In the authors' opinion, this goal was achieved, namely the most important activities were identified within the framework of employee development, which included: on-the-job training, on-line training, coaching, coaching in the form of video conversation, webinars, podcasts, online thematic groups, blended learning training, e-books, mentoring, internal recruitment, job rotation, managerial consulting, employee secondment, promotion, employee adaptation, psychological contract, financial support for employees as part of external education, application of the work life balance concept, flexible working hours, appraisal interviews, psychological support, equipment for the workplace, and feedback.

The conducted research clearly shows that the new reality forced a significant number of companies to modify their existing activities related to staff development. For some companies, the development area was a great challenge, for others an excellent opportunity, and for yet others a great threat, as companies were forced to liquidate budgets, reduce staff or terminate contracts with companies which provided existing training services. A key element of the new strategy was for employees to quickly adapt to the change and leverage its potential to increase revenue. In connection with the new situation on the market, it became necessary to develop new competencies in employees, which would facilitate adaptation to the new reality, and for companies to implement new forms of development, as well as new tools, which have not been used in practice so far.

Hence, all these results confirm that the goal of the chapter has been achieved. On the one hand, the study juxtaposed the practices within the scope of employee development in businesses in Poland in two periods of time, i.e. before and during the pandemic, while the other identified the competencies which are particularly desirable in the work environment strongly affected by the pandemic.

Finally, one can also say that the pandemic has demonstrated that companies have adapted to the changes, and understood that in order to survive in such a turbulent market they must reform their processes, including in the area of employee development. Additionally, it is clear that the continuous development of new technologies and the resulting jump into a new virtual reality, together with artificial intelligence, will force companies to develop on an even larger scale. The approach to the development of employees will become even more important, so it is vital that modern technology permanently enters the area of employee development, and bringing full satisfaction to both employees and those supporting development processes in organizations.

The authors of this chapter believe that their diagnosis of the current situation will enable companies to pay special attention to issues concerning employee

development in the unstable environment of the organization. Moreover, thanks to the empirical research findings, the managers and practitioners of HR management can gain important and useful knowledge which will help them better understand the main challenges and opportunities arising from the pandemic and adjust their development plans to the needs of their employees and the organization.

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