

Level of HR proficiency in small and medium sized organization in the middle-Hungary region

SMEs are not simplified versions of big companies and this true for human resources management skills, staff and practices as well. Duties in human resource management of a small venture generally don't motivate to have an HR department or an expert. Most important duties are carried out mainly owners but usually with no knowledge in this field.

In Hungarian HR literature results of human resources management are widely adapted. As a contribution a research has been conducted in which HR activities of SMEs in the Region of Middle-Hungary have been analysed.

Keywords:

SMEs, human resource management, job analysis, recruitment

INTRODUCTION – CHARACTERISTICS OF HRM IN SMES

It is important to mention that SMEs are not the simplified versions of big companies and this fact is especially true for human resources management skills, staff and practices. The amount of the round of duties in human resource management of a small venture generally doesn't motivate to have an own HR department and not even an expert. The most important duties are carried out by managers, mainly by the owner – directors, who are doing their best but usually without having any special knowledge in this field. Usually their arrangements are hasty, reactive, and informal. Researches have shown that managers are aware of the practice of modern management. They believe these practices are more important to them than their colleagues working for large enterprises. But if we look at how often they are used in practice, the result is not favorable at all. Only the management methods that could prove their viability in everyday work are able to exist in the life of the ventures (Viszt 2001).

Generally but especially in case of human resources activities it is a fact that SMEs, due to the limited development resources, are realizing only those developments to a significant degree, which are necessary for keeping in step with the market. They are merely planning ahead for half a year or a year at best, with behavioural attitudes lead solely by survival instinct. As far as tasks are concerned, operative and strategic tasks are mixed with operative dominance.¹

In Hungarian HR-literature, the foreign results of human resources management are widely adapted. However, a determining amount of references are focusing on the Human Resources Management of large enterprises, and the presentation of HR-practices applicable by SMEs are attributed much less space and significance.

It is important to note that SMEs are not simplified versions of larger organizations, and this statement is especially true for human resources management issues. SMEs are lead by the personality of the owner/manager. If we are able to understand the personality and motivation of the decision

¹ The Complex Analysis of the Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Strategic Leadership in the Mirror of Globalization and Regionality (OTKA T034890 Tender, Project leader: Dr. István Szintay)

maker we will be able to understand their internal processes as well. In case of SMEs, Human Resources Management, similarly to Micro Enterprises, actually means the improvement of the owner's/manager's skills and talents and the strengthening of the internal connections (Poór, Karoliny 2001).

The amount of the human resources management tasks required by an SME usually does not justify the employment of a separate HR expert. The essential tasks are handled by the owners, according to their best ability, but usually without professional knowledge. Therefore, managers of smaller enterprises prefer to handle human resources tasks themselves, they do not delegate them, despite the fact that they often lack the necessary skills to handle them. Their measures are usually rash, reactive and informal. The leaders are usually knowledgeable in modern management techniques, and they consider them more important than their colleagues working at large enterprises. But if we consider to what degree these techniques are implemented, the results are far from optimal. In the life of enterprises those management practices are continuously present, which proved their worth during the course of day-to-day tasks (Kövesi 2007, Makin et al 1989, Kaye, Jordan & Evans 2002).

It is important to point out some fundamental differences between the organizations subject to our investigation and the large enterprise sector. The HR decisions made by large enterprises belong to the responsibilities of the top management but in the case of smaller organizations they are the tasks of the owner. In the case of small organizations professional specialist are not available and because they are always short on resources to acquire outside counselling services, the owner is forced to make decisions in extremely high number of areas.

Most experts consider the low degree of bureaucracy and the effective internal communication among the greatest advantages of SMEs. Communication is usually informal, not overregulated. Small enterprises are communicating with their employees, customers, contractors and even with their competitors on a more regular basis (Vecchio 1991, Gulyás 2006).

Whereas large enterprises are characterized by significantly higher „internal” instability (meaning that it cannot be foreseen whether the decisions made on top are going to be implemented the way they were meant to, through the organizational hierarchy), it is

not a problem in the case of small enterprises since the owner/manager is much closer to the level of implementation. In contrast, small enterprises are characterized by „external” instability because they have few resources to influence the market processes. The characteristic result of the external instability, noted by many experts, is that small enterprises function based on short range strategies, and the leadership is prone to spontaneous decisions.

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One of the fundamental aims of SMEs is to differentiate themselves from their larger rivals, therefore they often assume a leading role in innovation. It is also one of their characteristics that change is an integral part of their lives, much more so than in the case of large enterprises. Therefore they can be considered more flexible – for example in the field of employment (Gyökér 1999).

The question of work/life balance is also worth mentioning: For the leaders of small enterprises, business overlaps with private life more often than for managers of large enterprises, therefore it can prove more difficult to establish a kind of harmony between the two.

METHODOLOGY

In our research, on which this paper is based we analyzed the HR activities of SMEs in the Region of Middle-Hungary. In the research we used a questionnaire by a sample of 114 small and middle sized enterprises, asking them about several details of their of HR activities. The paper will present our findings regarding several functional areas and practices, like the use of job descriptions, incentive and personal development plan and corporate communication. In our research only a few areas will be mentioned because we are going to deal with the analysis of some HR functions – related to performance – (selection methods, training and development exercises, formal performance evaluation) in a following, more in depth research.

According to our starting hypothesis the HR activities of Hungarian small and middle enterprises do not work in a satisfying way and according to the expected standards. SMEs do not place enough emphasis on their Human Resources management activities. Most of the micro- and small enterprises do not have any employees with this kind of qualification, and there is no permanent employee dealing with personnel related activities. We formulated our research question focusing on this area, and with the help of relevant literature (Armstrong 1991, Bakacsi 1996, Salaman 1992, Ivanchevic 1986).

The Hungarian small and medium enterprise sector consists of 698 thousand enterprises, with the micro and small enterprises dominating. In the framework of the research – with random sampling – we acquired a sample of 114 people, which cannot be considered representative but it is sufficient to draw some conclusions. Most of the respondents arrived from the areas of management, HR, finance, and production and sales management. The respondents worked for the given company for 6.2 years on average.

37% of the organizations were microenterprises, 35% small enterprises and a quarter of them were middle enterprises. The companies were predominantly under exclusive Hungarian ownership (71%), the number of companies with a Hungarian majority in the ownership and those with foreign ownership is insignificant (5 and 4%). Most of the companies tak-

ing part in the research are operating in the service, commercial, construction and counselling sectors.

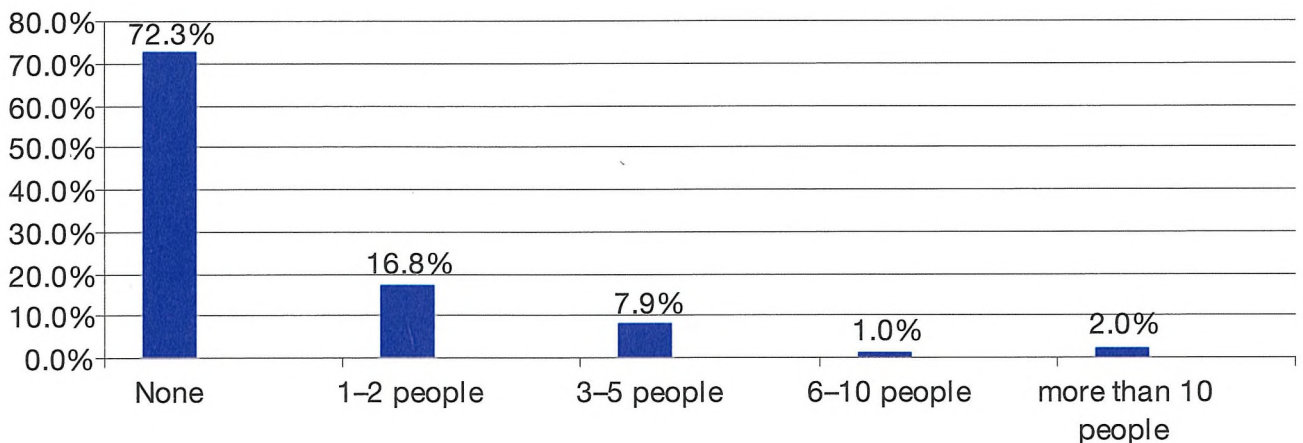
THE OPERATION OF THE HR FUNCTION

According to the base-hypothesis of the research, the HR activities of Hungarian small and medium sized enterprises do not work in a satisfying way, and they do not reach the desirable level of quality. Companies do not place enough emphasis on their human resources management activities (Adler, Viszt 2001). According to 72.3% of the respondents there is no HR organization within their company. If we consider the micro enterprises, which we included in our research, we cannot find any among them, which would have an employee or a position especially for HR activities. In case of 16.8% of these companies the personnel handling these kind of activities consist of only 1–2 people. The companies owning a larger HR team than that make up only 1/10 of the respondents (Figure 1).

According to the majority of the respondents (80%) the HR organization of the company – if present – can completely handle HR tasks, and only 20% of the respondents claimed that it is unable to do so, or only to a limited extent. The opinion of companies under exclusively Hungarian or exclusively foreign ownership has been clearly positive (the HR department of 4/5 of the companies handled HR activities completely). It turned out that the most problematic

Figure 1

Number of HR co-workers at examined enterprises



areas were the shortcomings of the system of regular performance evaluations and the system of incentives but inadequate formulation of contracts and limited HR function were also mentioned. HR departments with more people were much more frequent in case of companies under exclusively foreign ownership than at companies with other ownership structures.

The question of outsourcing applied in the area of HR is also strongly connected to this topic. 19.8% of the companies used outsourcing in this area, however, based on the ownership structure, we observed that whereas 12.7% of the companies under exclusively Hungarian ownership have used outsourcing in the area of HR, in case of companies exclusively or partly under foreign ownership this proportion was 36.7%. Those who use outsourcing in this area make only limited use of its services. These services include: providing workforce (recruiting – head-hunting), payroll calculation and training (coaching) tasks, which were indicated by approximately 20% of the companies.

JOB DESCRIPTION, JOB DESCRIPTION ANALYSIS

Job description analysis and evaluation provides a basis for many HR functions, and the regular and systematic use of these procedures, or at least their survey is essential in order to perform other personnel tasks in a professional way (recruiting, selection, payment, performance evaluation, training). It is regular practice that companies do not place enough emphasis on these activities, the update of the job descriptions is neglected, and therefore the activities concerning the employees and the fulfilment of organizational requirements are often not satisfactory. In many cases even requirements of the law and employment regulations are not met (Nemeskéri, Fruttus 2001, Dietmar, Somogyi 1999).

Approximately 14.5% of the companies which took part in the survey (5 companies did not respond) revise their job descriptions and specifications within a year (Table 1). This is an extremely important data because an enterprise – however small it may be – is faced with continuously changing tasks, therefore every day already existing functions may become obsolete and new functions may become necessary. Approximately one half (48%) of the respondents have chosen an annual revision, which means an average period of analysis. 37.7% of the sample consisted of those companies which revise their job descriptions every 2–3 years or even less often.

The analysis of this question together with the ownership structure has led to interesting results. A tendency has clearly become distinct: those enterprises exclusively under foreign ownership – according to the western model – consistently revise their job descriptions annually (57.1% of the companies). However in case of Hungarian companies, the results of these questions are much more varied: there were respondents who revise it even more frequently but there were many more companies neglecting job description analysis altogether. If we analyse the question based on the number of employees having a university degree, we can see that as their number increases, so does the period of job description analysis diminish from several years to one year.

PROVIDING WORKFORCE: THE PROCESS OF RECRUITING

In the field of recruiting, small enterprises are usually unable to compete with large companies, which can utilize many tempting means to get employees (continuous training, working abroad, carrier planning, etc.). According to the experience of several experts, in this ‘race’ small enterprises are forced to build on

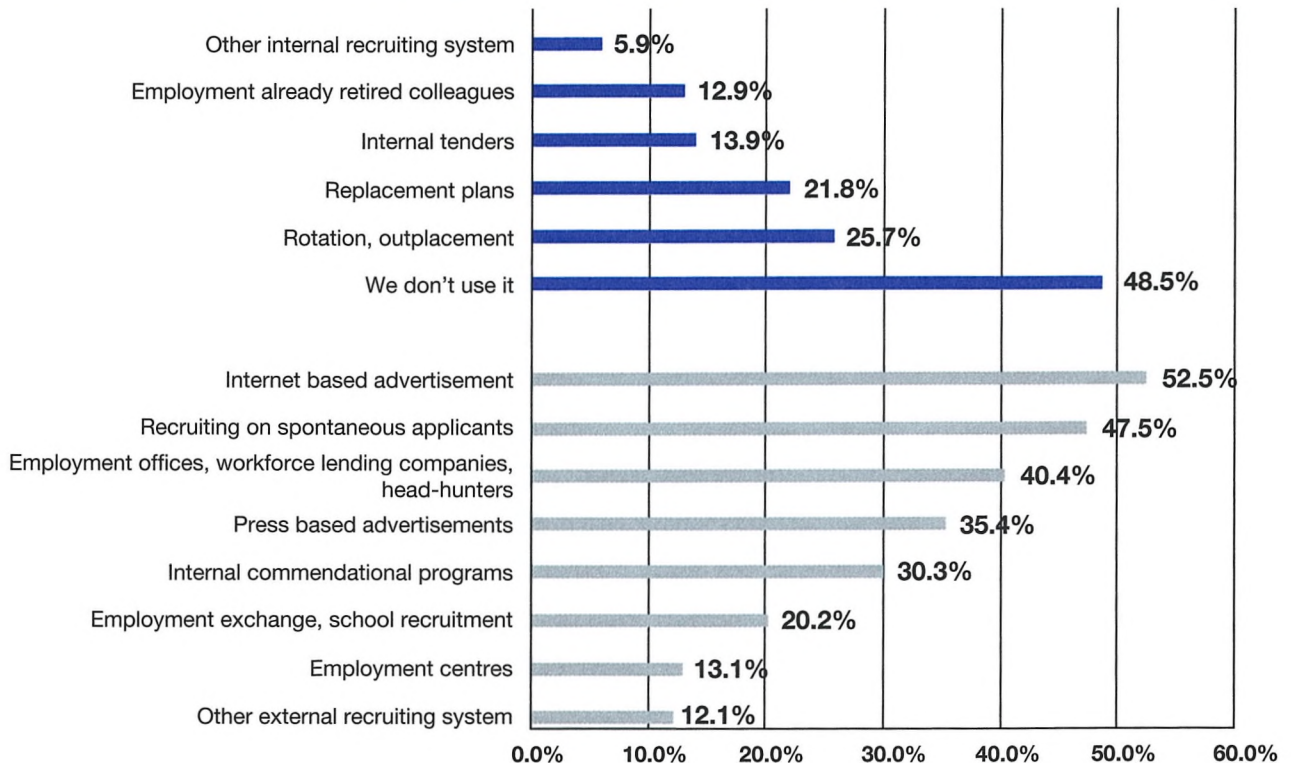
Table 1

Job description analysis by ownership structures monitoring

		Frequency of checking the job descriptions					Altogether
		More often than a half year	Twice a year	Yearly	2-3 years	More rarely than 3 years	
Ownership structure of enterprises	Exclusive Hungarian-owned	2	8	32	15	11	68
	Majority Hungarian-owned	-	-	2	3	-	5
	Exclusive foreign-owned	-	3	12	2	4	21
	Majority foreign-owned	1	-	1	1	1	4
Altogether		3	11	47	21	16	98

Figure 2

Using external and internal recruiting systems



less qualified young workforce or on older, more experienced workforce neglected by large companies.²

In our survey, we asked for information about the internal and external recruiting methods of companies, and got the expected results. In the following questions the companies could pick more than one answer, therefore the sum does not equal 100%.

The internal methods of recruiting are not really developed, less than one half of the companies (48.5%) use such methods (Figure 2). And when they use them, the most typically used ones are rotation, (transfer to another field of activity or location – 1/4 of the companies picked it) and composing replacement plans (21.8%), but the use of internal tenders (13.9%) and further employment of already retired colleagues occurred as well, for example in part-time (12.9%) or some other flexible employment setting.

Among the external recruiting systems – attributable to the present level of technology – the internet based advertisements acquired the first place (52.5% of the companies taking part in the survey indicated it, as their method of choice), an answer which was not hard to foretell, because of the cost consciousness of the companies. Another reason for this high proportion is that our survey was conducted in the Middle-Hungarian Region, where the technological background is the most developed in the country. Online advertisements, besides their obvious advantages, have some disadvantages as well (e.g. sometimes they do not reach their intended segment), therefore enterprises use old, tried and trusted methods as well: still many of them choose services provided by employment offices, workforce lending companies, head-hunters (40.4%)³, and advertisement op-

² Volksbank – Figyelő – MKIK (2007), SMEs cyclorama January 2007, http://www.gvi.hu/letoltes/ms/doc/kkv_korkep_sajtoanyag_070307_1.doc

³ A process began as a result of which sixteen personnel counseling companies have signed the founding certificate of the Hungarian Personnel Counseling Alliance at the end of 2003. According to them, their prime objective is to cleanse the profession and raise its prestige. They feel that the time has come, not only for foreign multinational companies but for Hungarian Small and Medium Enterprises as well to make use of head-hunter companies to choose their future employees.

portunities provided by the media (35.4%). A significant number of the companies have also indicated in which printed media (daily or weekly newspapers or magazine) they post their advertisements, the most frequent of which were: HVG, Expressz, Népszabadság, Metro, Figyelő and other local Hungarian newspapers. The percentage of those who do not use any special recruiting strategies, and base their recruiting on spontaneous applicants, is very high (47.5% of the companies picked this option). Additionally, almost one third of the companies make use of internal or external recommendation programs, which, besides their low costs, provide a high level of security for the given company: because the person giving the recommendation provides personal guarantee that the recommended employee is going to prove fit. International examples prove the effectiveness of this method, especially in situations where some reward accompanies the successful recommendation.

Researchers were not surprised to note, that only a small number of the micro, small and middle enterprises taking part in the survey rely on employees freshly entering the employment market (only 20.2% indicated this kind of recruitment option), and only a small number makes use of various job placement fairs, and school recruitment opportunities. Experience shows that it is a characteristic of small enterprises that tasks conform to the employees, whereas in case of large companies employees have to conform to work tasks. The managers of small English enterprises for example felt that higher education and society prefers large companies and they pay less attention to the special needs of small enterprises.

The use of employment centres got the smallest percentage (13.1%), which was also expected. Irrespectively of the size of the enterprise, the companies are suspicious of the employees, picked from the masses of unemployed, and recommended by job centres. This is especially the case with small organizations, where the employment costs play a highly critical role among company expenses.

The leaders of companies are already more or less aware of the parts of government restrictions which apply to them however, according to the data

of employment centres, it seems that the companies are biding their time to start staff reductions, so the number of unemployed has not risen yet.

We do not know the effect of restricting (reform) policies yet but it is to be expected that especially micro and small enterprises – because of the increased cost of labour – will limit their interest in recruiting new colleagues, meaning, that these are the companies which will terminate the highest number of jobs.

FINANCIAL AND OTHER INCENTIVES

Experience shows that employees working for small companies can attain higher wages since it is a characteristic of smaller enterprises to pay wages based on the value of the given job (even despite their limited resources). When determining the starting wage they take into consideration what value a given job has for the company. In case of large enterprises, the wage the applicant received in their previous job, the employee doing the job before them, and the internal wage ratio of the company are the factors influencing the starting wage.

In the analysis of the salary system we did not take into consideration the method of determining the basic wage, we were more interested in the role of complementing benefits and the way they are paid.

Table 2

Average rates within wages of paid allowances in cafeteria system

		Frequencies (bit)	Rates
Percent of rental	1–4%	6	17.6%
	5%	10	29.4%
	6–9%	8	23.5%
	10%	6	17.6%
	15%	3	8.8%
	20%	1	2.9%
Altogether		39	100%

Therefore we asked questions regarding the presence of the cafeteria system⁴, which was used by 39.6% of the respondents, and 16.8% of them plan to implement it in the future (2 companies did not answer). Based on the data, it is clear that this system is not used or not preferred by micro, small and medium sized enterprises. The fact that it is not used

⁴ By cafeteria system we mean the incentive form, which makes it possible for the employee to choose the best combination among usually non-cash benefits (meal contribution, holiday or fuel cheque, health insurance, etc.) within a certain cost limit.

can be the result of the lack of information concerning the favourable tax treatment of various benefits and the legal background of the whole system, so the enterprises fail to recognize the huge advantages of those benefits when compared to regular wages. The fact that it is not preferred arises from a need for extensive administration and the difficulties of traceability. If we analyse it, also taking its relation to the ownership structure into consideration, it becomes clear, that whereas $\frac{2}{3}$ of the companies under exclusively foreign ownership implement this method, only $\frac{1}{4}$ of the companies under Hungarian ownership make use of it.

„This form of training-development is generally the attribute of large enterprises under foreign ownership, where one of the basic tasks of the managers is to provide this kind of daily counselling for their employees.”

If we look at Table 2, it is easy to see that in 90% of the cases, companies pay only a maximum of 10% of the wage bill in the form of cafeteria benefits, and even within that percentage, most often 5 or 10% is

the dominant percentage. We have no information about the type of these benefits or about the extent to which the choices are consciously established by the managers of the companies, but we assume that the companies do not use the system the way it was meant to be used (or they do not use the appropriate term for their existing system). According to experts, it is a general tendency, that this system offers optimal solutions for large multinational companies, whereas SME's cannot enjoy its advantages because they usually cannot afford these resources.

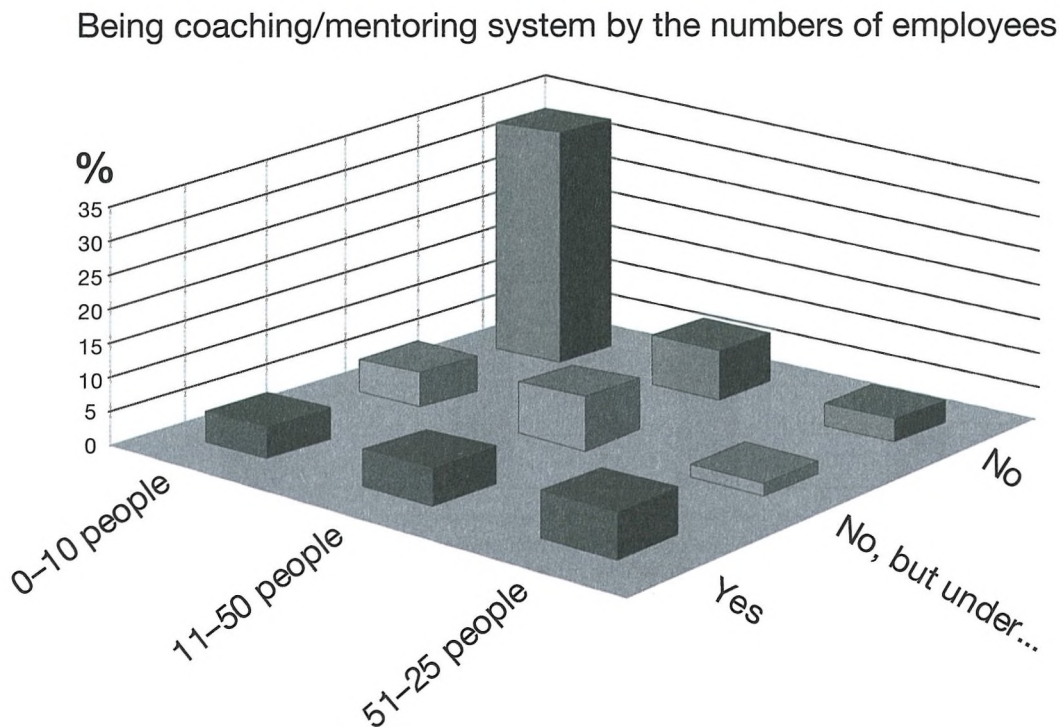
More than half of the companies (57.3% of the respondents picked this choice) have some form of a non-financial incentive system. Whereas 51% of the companies under exclusively Hungarian ownership have some form of this system, in case of foreign companies this figure is 62% (all the companies under mixed ownership have one).

The respondents also indicated the types of these incentives, which, among others, were the following:

- verbal praise, public acknowledgement;
- written praise e.g. in the company newspaper;

Figure 3

Analysis of coaching/mentoring system by the number of employees



- prizes (employee of the month, employee of the year);
- company-trip;
- gift package, bonus lunch/dinner;
- bonus journey;
- awards;
- other verbal incentive methods.

We have to mention that 'non-financial incentive' as such, is a notion which seems far from the practice of market economy, however, companies often use acknowledgements with various cost consequences and propagating some kind of correct behaviour in a ceremonious, theatrical manner.

PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND COACHING/MENTORING

We examined the frequency of performance evaluation within the companies as well. The results are almost identical with those concerning large enterprises: among those companies where a perform-

ance evaluation system (PES) was present the annual evaluation was most frequently used (32.7% of the companies picked this choice), and a quarterly evaluation was present among almost the same percentage of companies (26.7%). Far behind that is the number of those enterprises where the performance of the employees is compared to the expected level every six months (14.9%). An evaluation occurs less often than annually in less than 2% of the companies. However it is even more striking that in 23.8% of the cases no form of PES was present at all.

77% of the respondents (3 companies did not answer) indicated that they do not use a coaching or mentoring system, and ¼ of them do not even plan to implement a system of that kind at all. By 23% of the respondents a development activity of that kind was present but a detailed analysis of its method was not part of the research. The dominance of foreign companies was again striking: almost one half of the foreign companies taking part in the research had a working coaching or mentoring sys-

Figure 4 Possibilities for promotion in vertical and horizontal ways at examined enterprises

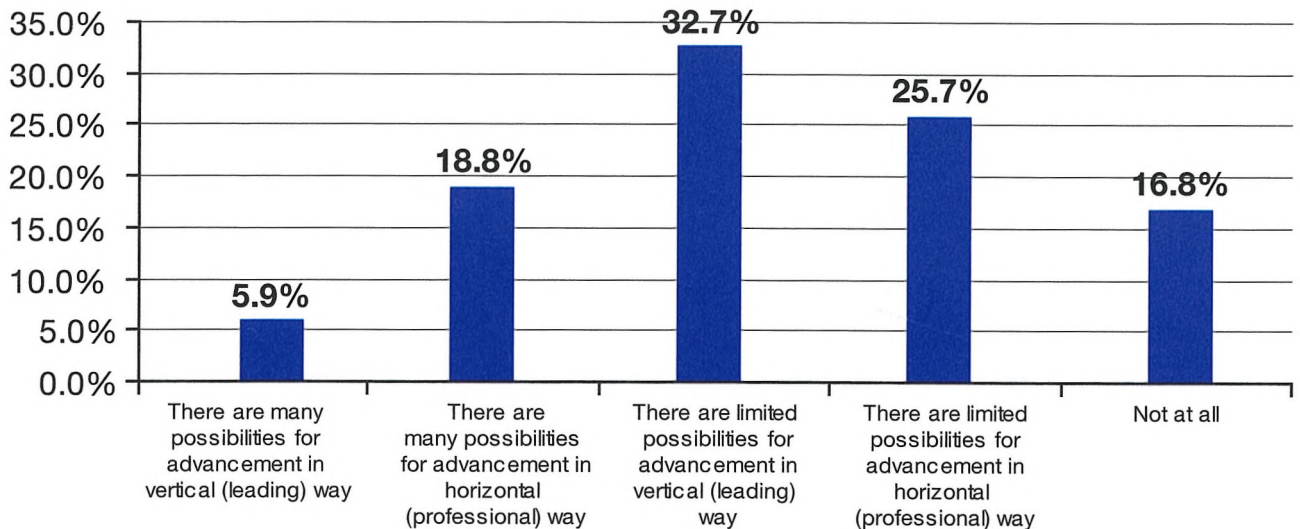


Table 3

Rates of filling a position by internal sources at examined enterprises

		Frequencies (bit)	Rates
Percent of filling a position	0%	19	22.4%
	1–9%	16	18.8%
	10%	11	12.9%
	11–49%	13	15.3%
	50%	9	10.6%
	51–99%	7	8.2%
	100%	10	11.8%
Altogether		85	100%

tem, whereas in case of Hungarian companies this percentage was around 12%. They show a strong resistance against the implementation of such a system. This form of training-development is generally the attribute of large enterprises under foreign ownership, where one of the basic tasks of the managers is to provide this kind of daily counselling for their employees. External counselling companies provide similar services but their costs prevent small enterprises from making use of it.

(Figure 3)

POSSIBILITIES FOR PROMOTION

Throughout our research we attributed great importance to the analysis of different ways of promotion. The idea that promotion is possible only in a vertical way, by achieving a leading position is deeply rooted in common knowledge. However, the horizontal way (promotion to other professional areas) can also prove to be an ideal solution, for example when due to the size of the organization there is no room for various hierarchical levels. This is especially true in case of those companies taking part in the research where – according to the results, based on different satisfaction analyses – the most important source of employee dissatisfaction is the lack of opportunities for promotion. The answers received during our survey underline this statement, and show the followings (Figure 4):

It is clear, that the respondents do not see many carrier-opportunities for attaining professional or leadership positions within their companies. In case of 16.8% there is no opportunity of advancement at all. Where the opportunities exist, the horizontal way is dominant, which confirms the hypothesis that in case

of smaller enterprises – due to the low number of personnel – one man has to handle more than one range of duties. This way they can try their skills in different areas, becoming an expert in more than one area. In contrast, employees working for multinational companies usually handle only one range of duties, and they can only deepen their knowledge within that area.

In connection with the foregoing we also examined the percentage of position fulfilment from internal sources as well, and from the results we can clearly estimate the influencing effect of company size.

Small size is clearly the cause of results such as 0% (in 1/5 of the cases) and 100% (in 1/10 of the cases) regarding internal position fulfilment: these companies rarely change the composition of their employees, they divide different tasks and change positions among themselves.

The companies under exclusively Hungarian ownership with personnel consisting of 1–10 people constituted 92.8% of the 0% internal position fulfilment results and 72.7% of the 100% results. There are two other significant data: the 10% and 50% internal position fulfilment is also fairly common, both are typical for enterprises with personnel consisting of 11–50 people (they provided 63.6% and 55.5% of the answers respectively). Enterprises which are bigger than that prefer a maximum percentage of 10% for internal appointments.

It emerged as an interesting question whether there are any rules for appointment, and if not, how does the system function. 24.3% of the respondents indicated that their companies have written rules concerning the different promotions. They indicated several instances (mainly based on the principle of seniority and on accomplishments) which could result in promotion:

- professional experience, the required way of service;
- consistently outstanding professional performance;
- years spent at the company;
- professional and personal fitness determined by the HR manager and manager;
- trustworthiness and quality of work;
- systematic over-fulfilment of results, and indicators.

However a majority of the companies (63.7%) did not indicate such rules or instances. According to them,

such decisions are the results of different conditions, which are based on subjective elements. Such elements are the individual opinions of the owner or managing director (leadership tyranny), the amount of professional experience, compulsory need, the requirement of the given situation, acceptance, the professional competence of the employee and their personal references, loyalty and vocation, aptitude or diligence.

„These enterprises do not have separate HR departments, these decisions are made by the owners, who have problems with the lack of professional knowledge in this area. It is clearly visible from the results that HR activities of Hungarian small and medium enterprises do not function satisfactorily and fall short of the required quality, and that companies do not place enough emphasis on human resources management functions.”

SUMMARY

A questionnaire survey served as the basis of our research, during which we asked 114 micro- small and medium enterprises for their opinions concerning their HR activities. It is a general characteristic of these enterprises that they do not have separate HR departments, these kind of decisions are made by the owners, who are having problems with the lack of professional knowledge in this area. It is clearly visible from the results that HR activities of Hungarian small and medium enterprises do not function in a satisfying manner and fall short of the required quality, and that companies do not place enough emphasis on Human resources management functions. It is important to mention that some results, although negative (such as there is no person exclusively in charge of HRM in 72.3% of SMEs), are typical of SMEs and not the evidence of their lack of awareness of the importance of HRM or their insufficient investments in that field. A majority of micro and small enterprises do not have professionals qualified in this area, and no permanent employees for handling personnel tasks. Therefore, besides financial knowledge, it is also an imperative for colleges and universities to provide and spread knowledge about personnel related methods and tasks, which lays another heavy burden on these institutes, as they try to establish the new organizational structure and content of higher education.

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