

KEY COMPETENCIES IN THE MODERN BUSINESS SERVICES SECTOR

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Abstract: Along with the dynamic development of the business services sector in Poland, both in terms of quantity (increase in the number of employees) and quality (increase in handling complex processes), the competence of employees and candidates to work becomes an important determinant of this process. The article analyzes reports on the sector of modern services and the labour market in the scope of desirable competencies of employees in the context of upcoming technological changes (Industry 4.0). As a result of the analysis, a catalogue of meta-competencies was identified, which are key from the point of view of the development of the business services sector and other branches of the modern economy.

Keywords: modern business services sector Poland, metacompetencies, soft skills, competencies, labour market needs.

1. Introduction

The sector of modern services for business (*Business Service Sector*, BSS) has been developing for over ten years very dynamically in Poland. This sector includes the activity of outsourcing centres of business processes (*Business Process Outsourcing*, BPO), Shared Service Centres (SSC), IT centres (*Information Technology*, IT) and research and development centres (*Research and Development*, R&D).

It is estimated that by 2020 there will be over 340 000 people working in this sector (ABSL, 2018). Whereas until now it was believed that the main locations for this sector in Poland were only the largest cities, such as Kraków, Warsaw, Wrocław, Trójmiasto, Katowice Agglomeration or Łódź, the process of the growing importance of smaller regional centres is now noticeable (Bydgoszcz, Lublin, Szczecin, Lublin, Olsztyn, Białystok, Opole, Kielce, as well as smaller cities) (ABSL, 2018). In other words, this sector is becoming more and more part of the economic image of Poland (ABSL, 2019).

Resources of cheap labour are no longer the main factor determining the attractiveness of Poland for investments in this sector. Over recent years business processes served by service centres in Poland have become more and more advanced (ABSL, 2018). The cost factor is slowly becoming secondary in comparison to the factor related to the quality of human capital in Poland's investment attractiveness for this sector. This is evidenced by high salaries for specialists working in centres implementing modern business services (ABSL, 2018). Undoubtedly, the structure of processes supported in this sector is changing towards knowledge intensive (ABSL, 2019), and thus generates added value for the Polish economy.

A characteristic feature of this sector is its high level of internationalization, understood both as foreign capital links and by the geographical structure of recipients of services provided. The effect of this phenomenon is access to and use of the most advanced technologies to support business processes, which in turn forces the sector (service centres) to have a high level of flexibility and adaptability.

Along with the development of the economic reality described as Industry 4.0, questions about the role and function of Society 4.0 appear more and more often in the public debate, and, connected with it, the competencies expected by the present and future labour market. The business services sector uses the latest technologies. Starting from the widespread implementation of the technology of automation of repetitive business processes, using computer programs – robots simulating human work, or Robotic Process Automation (RPA), through learning systems (Machine Learning – ML), to the implementation of solutions. Of course, at the present moment (end of 2018) it is difficult to imagine, in the short term, the replacement of man by technology in this sector. Nevertheless, technological progress is inscribed in the development of the modern services sector, and that is why it is important to track trends in this area.

The purpose of this article is to present key competencies for the business services sector. This work analyzes the available reports on the modern services sector in Poland, and the trends of the Polish labour market, as well as selected literature on the subject.

2. Metacompetencies for the modern services sector

For many years, key competencies of candidates for work in this sector, in addition to language competencies (vide internationalization), indicate metacompetencies such as: flexibility, openness, adaptability, ability to work in a group, independence or developed analytical skills. Table 1 presents a list of common metacompetencies expected from candidates for work in the BPO/ITO sector in primary positions defined on the basis of surveys commissioned by the City Hall of Krakow in 2012 (Bilans..., 2012).

Table 1.

List of basic metacompetencies expected from candidates for work in the modern services sector (common for the BPO and ITO sectors)

No.	Name of competence/expectation	Definition
1	Initiative	Starting new activities and accepting related responsibilities
2	Innovation	Generating ideas, creating and implementing new solutions that improve work
3	Written communication	Preparation and presentation of written communications, preparation of clear written reports
4	Oral communication	Presentation and communication of information in verbal form, fluent use of speech
5	Orientation towards goals	Activities aimed at achieving short- and long-term goals set for the workplace
6	Orientation towards client	Satisfying the client's needs and expectations, taking into account the client's perspective in offering solutions
7	Organizing one's own work	Behaviours aimed at optimizing one's own work, and timely execution of tasks.
8	Care about quality	Acting in accordance with the rules, regulations and procedures of the organization. Accuracy and meticulousness in the implementation of tasks
9	Impact on others	Impact on others, persuasion through objective argumentation and other means of influence, self-confidence in passing on their point of view
10	Cooperation	Effective group work, focus on achieving group goals
11	Involvement	Enthusiasm and passion for work, "can do" attitude, taking care of the company's image
12	Intercultural 'sensitivity'	Putting into practice the knowledge of intercultural differences, adapting its activities to different cultural patterns
13	Support for MS Office, OpenOffice or Google Docs	Using the basic capabilities of office software packages in an effective way
14	Mathematical skills	Conducting various mathematical operations
15	Learning	Ease and speed of acquiring new knowledge
16	Adaptation	Ease and speed of action in changing conditions
17	Coping with stress	Ease and effectiveness of action in difficult situations
18	Analytical skills	Ease, speed and reliability of information retrieval and processing
19	Honesty	Observance of recognized moral norms
20	General knowledge on outsourcing	Possessing basic knowledge about the outsourcing industry and the context of the operation of such companies
21	Availability of time	Flexibility in the field of working hours, overtime and the possibility of picking them up later
22	Mobility	Accepting travel offers related to the performance of official duties or learning (conferences, training) outside the workplace
23	Computational thinking	The ability to process a large amount of data-based reasoning information (especially drawing conclusions from so-called Big Data)
24	Interdisciplinarity	Ability understood as the ability to read and understand concepts in many disciplines
25	Managing cognitive load	Ability to maximize cognitive functioning and assimilate many stimuli using various tools and techniques
26	IT sector literacy	Knowledge of broadly understood IT solutions used to work in the sector

Source: authors' own elaboration on the basis of: Bilans kompetencji branż BPO i ITO w Krakowie, Raport końcowy z przeprowadzonych badań, Kraków 2012, s. 28 and Future Work Skills 2020, Institute for the Future for the University of Phoenix Research Institute, 2011.

At this point, it is worth paying attention to the fact that despite the widespread knowledge of this set, repeatedly articulated by the sector as desirable competencies, universities in Poland have not yet included them in education programmes dedicated to the modern services sector.

This can be confirmed by the analysis of three study programmes created with a view to educating staff for this sector. At the University of Szczecin, majoring in Finance and Accounting, a specialization was created for the first degree of study: Accounting and finance in BPO/SSC business services. At the Czestochowa University of Technology, the following specialization was created in the same field: New business services in Finance and Accounting (full-time studies, 2nd grade). Meanwhile, the Warsaw School of Economics offers modern business services – BPO/SSC – manager of modern business services as part of post-graduate studies. While in Szczecin, the programme of study provided 30 teaching hours for learning metacompetencies within such subjects as: Customer relations, Work in a group. In Warsaw only 10 hours have been allocated for Business communications, and in Czestochowa general subjects concerning the education of those competencies were not included.

3. Universal metacompetencies

The set of metacompetencies listed above is to a large extent convergent with management competence grids constructed in the 1980s. For example, in the network of universal competencies for senior management staff by Thornton and Byham (1982) there are listed: verbal presentation, verbal communication, written communication, analysis of organizational problems, detection of organizational problems, analysis of external problems, detection of problems outside the organization, planning and organization, delegation (tasks, powers, responsibilities), control, development of subordinates, sensitivity, influence on the individual, influence on the group, perseverance, negotiation skills, sense of analysis, assessment skills, creativity, risk taking, decision-making skills, technical and professional knowledge, energy, openness to business, initiative, resistance to stress, adaptability, independence, motivation (Lévy-Leboyer, 1997). V. Dulewicz, in his set of "super-competencies" (1989), also distinguishes interpersonal competencies, among them managing co-workers, persuasion skills, ability to make decisions, sensitivity to matters concerning interpersonal relations, and verbal communication (Lévy-Leboyer, 1997). The managerial competencies are very precisely and in detail defined by McCauley and others (1989). This list contains a number of skills necessary for the manager's job, but also those close to previously distinguished metacompetencies required in the business services industry. The authors point out above all that having many abilities is an advantage, which determines the ability to adapt to changing situations and conditions, flexibility, manage complex work systems, make decisions, learn new things quickly, and focus on teamwork (Lévy-Leboyer, 1997). The Lafarge-Coppée analytical grid

(1995) contains, among others competencies such as the ability to analyze and synthesize complex problems, the ability to make decisions, emotional balance, stress resistance, the ability to draw conclusions, availability, and an inspiring way of influencing others (Lévy-Leboyer, 1997). The Bouygues management personnel identification card shows, among others, respect for goals, adaptability, independence, resilience, balancing in stressful situations, openness, availability, creativity, integrity and honesty (Lévy-Leboyer, 1997).

It is not hard to notice that the specified competencies of senior management staff overlap to a large extent the above metacompetencies of employees of the modern business services sector. Does this mean that the level of requirements from an employee in the industry is at managerial level? Does this sector require managerial competencies? Or perhaps a contemporary manager is required to have other metacompetencies that are needed in management in conditions of uncertainty and risk, in an intercultural environment, in a dynamically developing business reality. Probably it is that way, but the basic, universal competencies have not ceased to be important. The relocation of a group of managerial competencies to employee positions in the modern business services industry illustrates current trends in the demand for so-called soft skills, which are also very important in management.

It should also be added that the demand for a set of soft (social, psychosocial) competencies does not only apply to the modern business services industry. The deficit of these competencies is observed in many industries. Employers often emphasize that university graduates are equipped with professional competencies, but they lack skills in soft competencies, including interpersonal competencies and social communication, or the ability to work in a group. This is confirmed by, among others, such research as: “Diagnoza zapotrzebowania na kwalifikacje i kompetencje absolwentów szkół wyższych Mazowsza wchodzących na rynek pracy. Raport z badania” (Diagnosis..., 2012), “Kompetencje Polaków a potrzeby polskiej gospodarki. Raport podsumowujący IV edycję badań BKL z 2013 r.” (Competencies...), “Analiza kwalifikacji i kompetencji kluczowych dla zwiększenia szans absolwentów na rynku pracy. Raport końcowy” (Analysis..., 2014), in which we read that employers seek employees with the minimum "hard" competencies, such as: knowledge of foreign languages, the ability to create websites, and the ability to operate specialized programmes, but the final employment is primarily determined by "soft" competencies, i.e.:

- a number of cognitive competencies (analytical, heuristic abilities, ingenuity, critical thinking),
- interpersonal competencies (including: communication and media, as well as related to the skill of team creation, teamwork, and above all interdisciplinary),
- self-organizing competencies (work using the project method, on-time implementation of tasks, independence in decisions, resistance to stress, self-organization of work, flexible response to changes) (Analiza..., 2014).

The ManpowerGroup report “Niedobór talentów 2014” (“Talent shortage 2014”) also indicates that the shortage of soft skills is one of the reasons for the problem of recruiting candidates for work. In the 2018 report, ManpowerGroup states that an appropriate combination of soft competencies and processes and technologies is the only way to implement a business strategy, create values and improve people's quality of life (Badanie..., 2018). Also, from the World Bank's report “Skills, not Just Diplomas” (Sondergaard, Murthi, et al., 2012) it results that the demand for communication and cognitive skills is increasing, among others: the use of knowledge in practice, problem solving, ability to work in a group, time management, communication. Similar conclusions can be found in the report “Bilans Kapitału Ludzkiego” (“Balance of Human Capital”) (PARP, 2015), where it is indicated that the greatest shortage occurs within self-organization (time management, independence, decision making, initiative manifestation, resistance to stress and self-motivation) and interpersonal competencies (Polski..., 2015). The majority of employers assessing graduates think that they are well educated in theory, but they lack soft skills, which extends the process of adaptation to the workplace and limits their independence (Oczekiwania..., 2016).

However, the self-assessment of soft competencies, according to the report “Bilans Kapitału Ludzkiego 2017. Raport z badania ludności w wieku 18-70 lat” (Balance...) looks optimistic: “Poles assess the following competencies/predispositions the best: easy contact with people, independent work organization, communicative communication and clear transmission of thoughts, willingness to take on responsibility for performing tasks, group work and making simple mathematical calculations” (Bilans..., 2017).

The demand for social competencies, while possessing both hard, professional competencies, is currently very large. This is confirmed by numerous reports and analyses regarding the labour market in Poland. According to the reports of a global HR company (Hays, Salary Report 2019. Trends in the labour market), entrepreneurs are increasingly pointing to the growing demand for soft skills. According to this report, regardless of specialization, key competencies include teamwork, creativity, and communication skills (Hays, 2019). According to the Manpower report, the *Rewolucja umiejętności 2.0* (Skills Revolution 2.0) of 2018, soft and digital competencies are the most sought after and appreciated by employers (Manpower, 2018). Also, according to the pracuj.pl portal, among the competencies that in the coming years will be the most sought after in the labour market, the competencies from the group of “soft” competencies, such as: innovation, creativity and creativity are indicated ([https://porady.pracuj.pl/...](https://porady.pracuj.pl/)). Debates about the competencies of the future were also held at the World Economic Forum in Davos. In 2018, Jack Ma referred to, among others, such ‘soft’ traits as creativity and the ability to cooperate and inspire each other. He pointed out that these are features that differentiate us from robots, so they should be cultivated so as to survive and maintain control over automation (Bettman, 2018). In 2017, participants of the Forum distinguished such competencies as: comprehensive problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, cooperation with others, emotional intelligence, inference

and decision making, service orientation, negotiation, and cognitive flexibility (<https://porady.pracuj.pl/...>). Again, it can be said that these are managerial competencies. Again, the question arises whether a modern worker, who is not involved in management processes, who is only an employee of a hierarchical organizational structure, should have such competencies as a certain minimum competence? In a hierarchical structure, not necessarily, but taking into account new management trends and a strong flattening of the organizational structure, this question could be answered in the affirmative. Turquoise organizations, defined by Frederic Laloux (Laloux, 2016), and in Poland, strongly promoted by Andrzej Blikle, are organizations without managers, in which an employee can act "in the conditions of freedom, trust, partnership and cooperation" (Blikle, 2014). These are the conditions necessary to release the layers of creativity and innovation. A prerequisite for the creation of such organizations in the industry of modern business services is that they are metacompetencies required from employees. However, this is not synonymous with the fact that all organizations from the modern services industry are turquoise organizations. We cannot derive such dependence logically.

4. Metacompetence catalogue for the business services sector

A number of the metacompetencies indicated at the beginning of these considerations fall within the general competencies specified by the co-author of the article, understood "as efficient, effective and satisfying (personally and for the environment) functioning, both in the space of the global society and the local community (space is understood here not only geographically and physically, but also socially, interactively and communicatively), which should be mastered by everyone at least to a basic degree" (Kuzior, 2014). In the set of general competencies so understood, we can find:

1. Information and communication competencies – skillful searching for and using information, selective use of Internet resources and other available sources of information, efficient and correct language in terms of the transmission and reception of messages using written and oral statements, using elements of non-verbal communication (including facial expressions, kinesiosics, proxemics).
2. Psychosocial competencies resulting from the combination of personality traits and the ability to function in a social environment, which include: self-awareness, self-control, assertiveness, resistance to stress, empathy, planning and organization of one's own time and that of others (whether time management and self-management in time), creativity, entrepreneurship, self-motivation and the ability to motivate others, interpersonal competencies (the ability to quickly establish interpersonal contacts, cooperation and communication skills), and others.

3. Ecological and sozological competencies are environmental attitudes based on ecological awareness, manifested in predispositions for protective, preventive and corrective actions, consisting in the ability to see mutual influences of the anthroposphere and biosphere, and the ability to counteract the negative effects of anthropopressure.
4. Economic competencies in the individual dimension are knowledge and the ability to see economic dependencies in order to cope in the economic market and the labour market, perceiving the need for applying generational and intergenerational justice rules, and following the principles of sustainable development.
5. Ethical competencies – honesty and responsibility in all aspects of human activity, following the principles of good (both in individual and social dimensions) focus on subsidiarity, solidarity, respect for one's own dignity and that of others, respect for basic human rights, and tolerance and respect for people and the environment.
6. Intercultural competencies expressed in positive tolerance, understood as openness to otherness, the desire to learn and understand "the other" and perception of cultural diversity not as a threat, but as an opportunity for more comprehensive development of people and societies, while defining the limits of tolerance towards people and cultures that violate basic human rights. These competencies must be connected with competencies related to at least communicative knowledge of foreign languages.
7. Gender competencies, understood as the ability to perceive problems related to sex discrimination, knowledge of the causes and negative effects of discriminatory practices, a permanent disposition and willingness to undertake activities promoting equal rights and equal opportunities policy, and the ability to use anti-discrimination tools and practices (Kuzior, 2014). The fact that this is still a problem was clearly and expressively articulated by the Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2018, exposing the necessity of eliminating the free work of women, and the fight against sexual abuse against women. Malala Yousafzai, a laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, at the Forum in Davos, argued for the need for universal girls' education, combined with the education of boys so that they would know how to respect women's rights (Kroczevska, 2018). Gender competencies refer to respect for all disadvantaged groups, including, for example, the disabled.

The author of the above classification recognizes that the basis of all the above-mentioned general competencies is ethical competence. They are fundamental for individual development and for making a specific contribution to the development of society and multiplying the common good. Their possession determines the right human position in the socio-cultural and economic space (Kuzior, 2014). Formed ethical competencies also fulfill other functions, such as: shaping a reflective, critical attitude, strengthening the ability to think logically, using reason as a tool for dialogue, stimulating independent thinking and articulating one's own position on various issues (Martinkovičová, 2018). The above list of general competencies can be

considered as a catalogue of basic metacompetencies for the business services sector. In turn, specific maturity competencies for the industry in question must first of all take into account the understanding of IT processes (digicomp), and in the framework of the already categorized general communication and information competencies, e.g. process mapping. For the BSS industry there are also important competencies in the field of entrepreneurship.

The following conclusions emerge from the above considerations: the industry of modern business services requires from ordinary employees competencies belonging to the managerial competence set; enterprises belonging to this industry can be based on the turquoise management model. They are predisposed to it by a high level of employee competencies; employees who take over a part of the responsibility for the functioning and success of the company and can develop their own creativity for their own benefit and the company's own benefit. Having employees with such competencies is a necessary condition, but not enough to implement a turquoise management model in the organization.

5. Summary

The issues raised in the article are particularly important due to the dynamically developing services sector, including business services. As shown in the research reports quoted above, despite the large number of graduates leaving the walls of universities, employers find it difficult to find employees possessing the required competencies. This paradoxical situation is mainly due to the fact that the competencies acquired during the studies do not reflect the needs of the labour market. There are significant deficits of the so-called transferable competencies (transferable skills), that is, those that are useful in various work positions. The OECD defines them as universal, over-subject competencies. This includes, inter alia, the abilities of self-organization and the still deficient interpersonal and communication skills. As mentioned, these competencies belong to the so-called soft skills, which are necessary mainly in the services sector. And the rapidly growing business services sector in the coming years will need more and more staff equipped with these competencies. According to the estimates of the ABSL association in the first quarter of 2018, in this sector there were 1236 BPO, SSC, IT, R & D service centres in Poland, while there were 279 thousand employees, of which over 50% were women (ABSL, 2018). The above ABSL data should, however, be treated as the lower threshold of the estimate due to underestimation of smaller entities. According to GUS (Central Statistical Office) data, over 450,000 employees were employed in enterprises representing PKD (Polish Classification of Activities) sections covering this sector (GUS, 2018). It is worth paying attention to one feature of this sector: the advantage of large, organizational structures that have been developed. Data collected by ABSL confirm that, in contrast to the highly fragmented enterprise sector in Poland, the BSS sector is dominated by medium and large entities: shared

service centres employ on average 332 people, BPO centres – 278 people, and R&D centres – 200 people. The consequence of this phenomenon should be the ease of establishing cooperation between stakeholders in this sector, which are on the one hand enterprises, and on the other, educational institutions, in order to undertake joint actions to adapt educational programmes to the competence needs of the sector. While currently the initiatives of such cooperation have a rather incidental character – mainly due to the ease of companies finding employees from this sector – it is necessary to have systemic cooperation at the moment of depletion of easily available job candidates (university graduates). A certain confirmation of this phenomenon may be the results of cyclic tests carried out by ABSL regarding the sector in question. One of the questions of the annual survey among managers of service centres concerns business plans. Thus, in the study of 2018, 74% of the surveyed companies intended to expand the scope of their operations, which was a result 10% worse than the results of the analogous study from 2017. The authors of the study interpreted this phenomenon as a progressive process of "maturing" the modern business services sector in Poland (Potencjał..., 2019). Nonetheless, another reason for a certain slowdown in the dynamics of the sector's development may be the lack of access to job candidates with appropriate competencies. Therefore, it seems that one of the key factors determining the development of the BSS sector in Poland (measured, for example, by the estimate of the number of employees referred to at the outset) will be the cooperation between the sector and universities aimed at incorporating the competencies identified in this article into educational programmes.

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