

ANALYSIS OF SOFT SKILLS OF PRODUCTION WORKERS IN THE CONTEXT OF PRODUCT QUALITY WITH AN EXAMPLE OF ORGANIC MILLS

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Abstract: Responsibility for the credibility and quality of an organic product lies with the entrepreneur. It is therefore in the entrepreneur's interest to recruit competent employees who stimulate the desired behaviours and activities conducive to the achievement of strategic goals connected with production of products with the quality expected by consumers of organic foods. Therefore, it was considered purposeful to analyse the issues of competencies of production workers' in relation to the Robles' set of soft skills. The topics discussed in the study include knowledge, skills, and internal motivation of the employees. A closer examination of the discussed problems was conducted with the example of a corporation X for its branches located in Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania which produce organic flour. The five-point Likert scale was used in the empirical examinations.

Keywords: ecology, food quality, competencies, milling

1. INTRODUCTION

Diets based on organic food, produced according to strictly defined international standards and regulations, is currently a very popular trend in the health and nutrition, while organic production has a low environmental impact of the organic agricultural production model (Gomiero, Pimentel and Paoletti, 2011). Organic farming manages natural resources more efficiently and exposes the ecosystem less to pollution, which is an important argument for many consumers (Tyburski and Żakowska-Biemans, 2007). Furthermore, consumers tend to perceive organic products to be healthier and tastier than their conventional counterparts (Bradbury et al., 2014; Torjuen et al., 2014). Very often, they also think that these products are richer in nutrients, such as vitamin C and B, mineral elements including Fe, Mg and P, and proteins of better quality (Żelezik, 2009; Nowogródzka, 2012).

Organic food production has become one of the priorities for the EU. The high quality of the products is ensured by independent certification organizations which control the

processes of organic food production and decide on awarding specific products with marks confirming their value. The implemented quality policy ensures safety for consumers and guarantees that the products they choose are manufactured using specific methods and in accordance with appropriate standards. Food producers are obliged to provide consumers with comprehensive information on the quality and origin of the products, which improves the competitiveness of organic food (Łukasiński, 2008). The world sees organic farming as an alternative to conventional agriculture, whereas its continuous development contributes to the increase in the demand for organic products (Runowski, 2009; Komorowska, 2014).

In Poland in 2016, the percentage of organic products in total food sales was 3.7%, in Romania - only 1.7% and in the Czech Republic - 11.5%. The greatest amount of money spent on organic products was found for the residents of Switzerland (EUR 274 per capita), Sweden (EUR 179 per capita) and Denmark (EUR 227 per capita). A statistical EU citizen spent 60.5 euros on organic foods, Polish and Romanian citizens - only around 4 euros, while the average in the Czech Republic was around 7 euros (FIBL, IFOAM 2018). In recent years, there has been a significant growth in the organic food production sector. This is mainly reflected in the growing number of entities involved in this type of activities. In 2015, there were 562 such companies operating in Poland, which, compared to 2011, translates into more than a double figure (IJHARS 2017). Nevertheless, compared to Western European countries (Germany: 14,501 organic companies, France: 12,826, Italy: 16,578), this number continues to be very low in Poland (IFOAM, 2018).

Organic food processing in the European Union functions based on a number of legal regulations that are binding for all EU member states. The most important legal acts regulating the activity in this area at the Community and national level are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Legal framework for functioning of organic processing

1.	Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 of 28 June 2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products and repealing Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 (OJ L 189 of 20/07/2007 p.1), as amended.
2.	Commission Regulation (EC) No 889/2008 of 5 September 2008 laying down detailed rules for the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products with regard to organic production, labelling and control (OJ L 250 of 18 September 2008 p.1), as amended.
3.	Commission Regulation (EC) No 1235/2008 of 8 December 2008 laying down detailed rules for implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 as regards the arrangements for imports of organic products from third countries.
4.	Commission Regulation (EC) No 1254/2008 of 15 December 2008 amending Commission Regulation (EC) No 889/2008 laying down detailed rules for the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products with regard to organic production, labelling and control. amending Commission Regulation (EC) No 889/2008 laying down detailed rules for the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 on organic production and labelling of organic products with regard to organic production, labelling and control.
Council Regulations and Commission Regulations implemented by national legal acts	
10.	Act of 25 June 2009 on organic farming (Journal of Laws 2017, Pos. 1054).

11.	Act of 25 August 2006 on the food and nutrition safety (Journal of Laws 2017, item 149).
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Source: author's own study based on IJHARS

The above mentioned legal regulations (Table 1) stipulate that both organic and conventional processing companies should meet all sanitary and technical requirements included in the relevant regulations concerning the production of food products. This also implies an obligation to employ suitably qualified staffs.

2. QUALITY OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS IN LIGHT OF COMPETENCIES OF PRODUCTION EMPLOYEES

Recently, quality has become a field for competition in the industry. Nowadays, each enterprise uses a set of standards and requirements that should be followed and which should be met in all areas of business activity. High quality and reliability of manufactured products open up opportunities for the enterprise to maximize profits, reduce production costs, and consequently increase customer satisfaction and loyalty (Suchecka, Dziuba and Sygut, 2017). Quality is a holistic concept, which occurs on many levels of human activity. The common denominator that can be found in the various explanations of this term is the identification of quality with the ability to satisfy the needs and expectations of the recipient. The requirements that the customers have for the products they are interested lead to the division of quality into several levels: technical (objective), which consists of quality of type (design), performance and marketing (perceived) (Kolman, 2009). Based on the literature review, four directions of interpretation can be distinguished, defining quality as a set of product characteristics, a set of product parameters that guarantee compliance with technical specifications, a set of features that determine the degree of meeting customer expectations and a set of properties ensuring a specific value for the customer (consumer value) (Suchecka, Dziuba and Sygut, 2017). The perception of quality is definitely different for the customer and the manufacturer. The former expects that the products purchased will meet not only the requirements of functionality, but will also guarantee them a sense of aesthetics, prestige and provide the appropriate level of comfort. The latter, however, hopes that the high quality of the products delivered will ensure higher sales, and consequently, guarantee a favourable position of the enterprise in the market. It should be noted that meeting customer requirements is a common objective of the representatives of both groups (Hamrol, 2007).

The position of an enterprise operating in a market economy is increasingly dependent on the quality of the products they launch on the market. Quality has a direct effect on the opportunities for acquiring new customers, which in turn translates into the financial result of the enterprise. The enterprise, regardless of its size, number of employees and type of production, will fail to achieve long-term success unless its managers take care of the continuous development of the entire organization, in particular the expansion of production processes in the context of the quality of the goods offered (Łunarski, 2011). The final value of the product depends on the entire enterprise, its organizational structure, documented procedures, and production methods. The source of competitive advantage of the enterprise is also intangible resources, i.e. human capital. It is the knowledge of employees, their skills and gradually developed competencies that make it possible for the enterprise to positively function in the market. Therefore, the management team should be particularly interested in searching for and improving tools

enabling the development of employees (Dziuba et al., 2013). It is important to remember that it is the employee who is the most important and inherent part of the entire organisation. The experience of the staff, their qualifications and professional approach to work are of great importance and are one of the most important factors in building the competitive advantage of the company. If an employer invests in employee development, they also invest in the success of the enterprise. On the other hand, managers who do not know how to use the potential of their staff have little chance of ensuring the enterprise's survival in the present business environment. This situation also has the other side of the coin, because the success of the project depends on the commitment, willingness to develop skills and awareness of the employees. The employer who wants his or her employees to contribute to activities aimed to improve the quality of products should provide them with the necessary resources, e.g. various types of training and courses, and adequate remuneration and incentive system. It should also be emphasized that managers' responsibility is to define and specify the quality objectives in a clear and transparent manner. This helps raise employees awareness that taking care of quality is a priority for the entire enterprise (Haffer, 2011). The first attempts to explain and characterize the competence-based approach can be dated back to 1970s, when this topic was discussed in publications by D. McClelland (McClelland, 1973; Juchnowicz and Sienkiewicz, 2006). According to this researcher, an employee's competence consists of the knowledge, skills, abilities and personality traits needed to perform a specific job properly (Ferris, Rowland, Buckley 1990). Competences cover all human qualities and directly impact on the measurable effects of human work (Pocztowski, 2007). G. Filipowicz understood individual aptitudes as knowledge, attitudes and skills, which enable a person to perform actions leading to the realization of professional tasks at a specific level (Filipowicz, 2004). Furthermore, D.D Duboi and W.J. Rothwell claimed that competences should be identified with features necessary for the proper performance of one's own activities (Lewicka, 2010). The term "competence" alone is very complex and has been interpreted in many ways. Analysis of this concept reveals that most definitions have presented it in relation to the expected effects of the actions taken or explained it in the form of a behavioural description (Whiddett and Hollyforde, 2003). Competences can be divided into professional (identified with hard skills) and soft (personal skills). The former are related to knowledge in a given field, professional experience and specific skills linked to a specific profession. They also include the willingness to continue lifelong learning. The latter means self-awareness, motivation, self-control, empathy and social skills (teamwork, interpersonal communication, conflict management) (Szaban, 2012). It is emphasized increasingly often in the management literature that soft competences are key for the employee and significantly affect the development of the enterprise (Kwiecińska-Zdrenka, 2013; Dobosz, 2015).

The literature on organic food processing does not pay particular attention to soft skills, which have a positive effect on the enterprise. With this in mind, M. Robles' research was used, in which the author identified a group of soft skills which may be of significant importance in the process of the personnel function of companies dealing with organic food processing. These included flexibility, teamwork, communication skills, politeness, integrity, responsibility, professionalism, positive attitude, work ethic and interpersonal skills (Robles, 2012). The indicated competences were subjected to an in-depth analysis, referring to the related literature, current legislation, statistical data of the Central Statistical Office, IJHARS reports and author's own empirical studies based on

a case study in the form of industrial mills located in Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania. The enterprises surveyed are part of a holding company dealing with cereal processing. After successful certification, the companies also produce organic flour, which is made from high-quality organic raw material using modern production equipment. It should be assumed that in the enterprises surveyed, increasing satisfaction of wholesale clients and individual customers involves increasing care for human potential, including soft competences. With this in mind, the authors developed structured interview questionnaires, which were distributed among the managers of the Production Department. Their results became the basis for the assessment of the competences studied. The five-point Likert scale was used for the assessment. The study surveyed 48 people in total. The survey was conducted in November 2018.

3. ANALYSIS OF SOFT COMPETENCIES OF PRODUCTION EMPLOYEES: RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The structure of the employees was as follows:

- In Poland - 14 people;
- In the Czech Republic - 18 people;
- In Romania - 16 people.

The respondents, i.e. direct superiors, had the task of assessing the level of indicated soft competences on a scale from 1 to 5. The set of competencies was analysed in relation to production workers in Poland, the Czech Republic and Romania.

Fig. 1 shows the assessment of soft skills of Polish production workers. In most categories, the assessment was at a low or average level. Positive attitude, integrity and interpersonal competences were rated very low. Work ethic and flexibility were at the average level. Competencies related to professionalism, communicativeness and responsibility were assessed as relatively good.

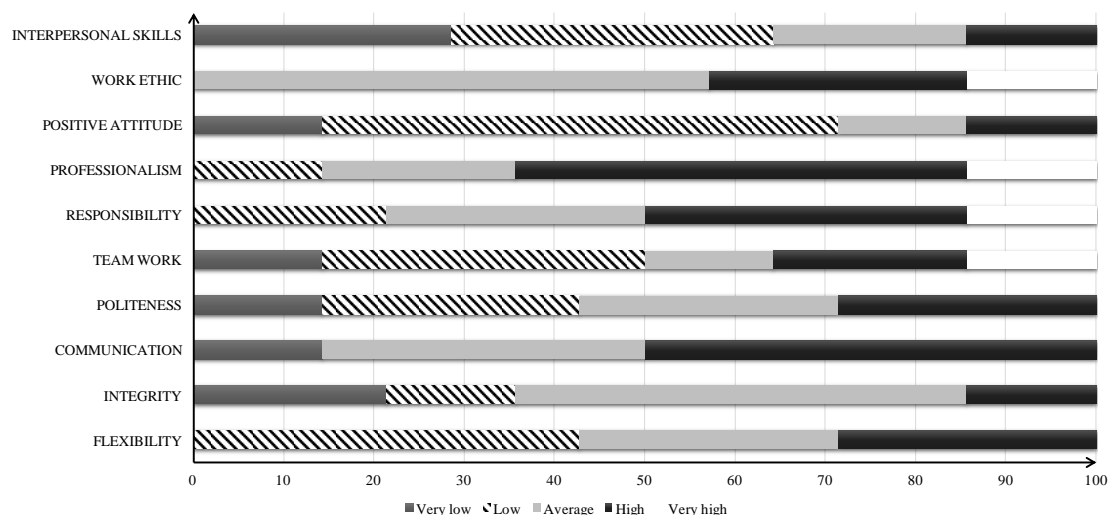


Fig. 1. Assessment of soft competencies of production employees in Poland by superiors (own study)

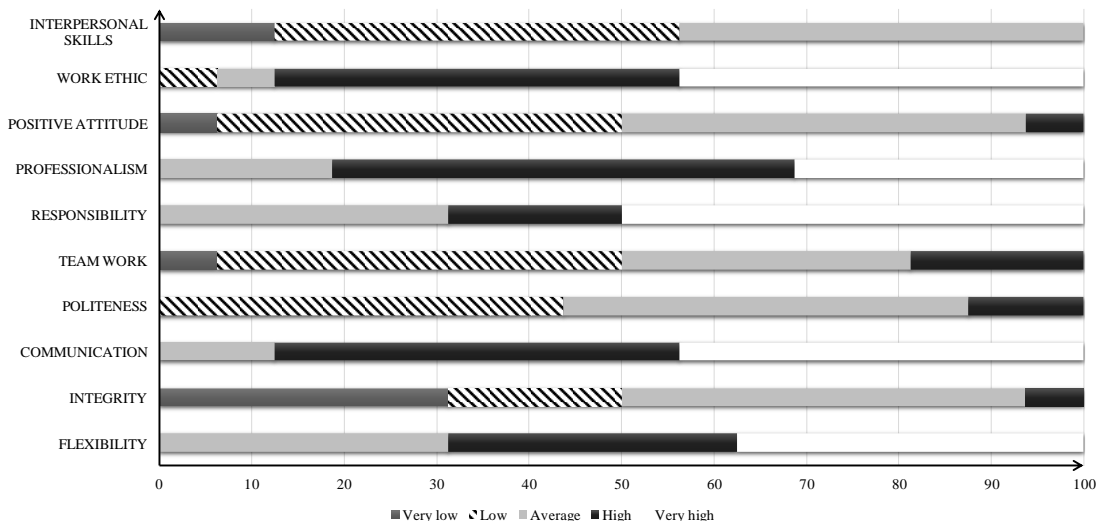


Fig. 2. Assessment of soft competencies of production employees in Czech Republic by superiors (own study)

Figure 2 concerns the assessment of production workers by the Czech superior. Analysis of the chart leads to the conclusion that such competences as flexibility, integrity and interpersonal skills are at a low level. The following competencies were qualified to the average level: communicativeness, politeness, teamwork and positive attitude. In this context, attention should be drawn to the insufficient level of teamwork skills, which is very important in the group of production employees. Cooperation in a group, by opportunities for discussing things and consulting during solving subsequent problems allows for the achievement of better results compared to acting alone. The survey showed that the cause of this problem is the lack of communication skills. On the other hand, responsibility, work ethic and professionalism were rated at a very good level.

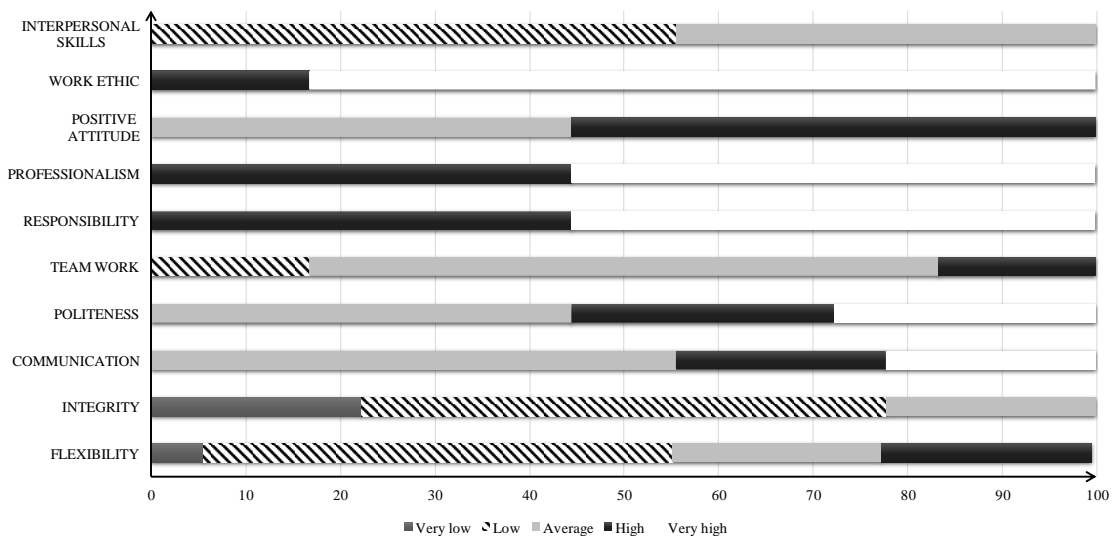


Fig. 3. Assessment of soft competencies of production employees in Romania by superiors (own study)

The data on Romanian production workers presented in Figure 3 show unequivocally that their soft skills such as positive attitude, teamwork, politeness or integrity were at a low level. Interpersonal skills were not very good in this group. However, such competences as communicativeness, responsibility, professionalism, and work ethic seem to encourage optimism since they were rated at a good and very good level.

4. CONCLUSION

The primary objective of organic food processing is product quality and customer satisfaction. In order to meet these two objectives and gain a competitive advantage, competent, motivated and quality-conscious production employees with the appropriate competence level are needed. Professionalism, communicativeness and responsibility are desirable skills among production employees. The results of the survey conducted by the authors of this study show that the level of soft skills is highly diversified among the employees in the enterprises surveyed. It was found that measures should be taken to improve and supplement the soft skills of the employees. These may include training programmes, dedicated courses or instructional meetings which have a positive impact on the development of employees in this respect.

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