

EMPLOYEE COMPETENCIES AS A FACTOR CONDITIONING THE APPLICATION OF EMPOWERMENT

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Purpose: The aim of this article is to determine whether the level of employee competencies are a limiting factor for the success of empowerment in Polish conditions.

Design/methodology/approach: Firstly, we identified – based on the literature – the circumstances that indicate employees' maturity for empowerment. We examined the impact of these factors using a diagnostic survey method (an online questionnaire addressed to employees). In this article, we present the results concerning one of the factors, i.e. employee competencies. In the questionnaire, the respondents self-assessed their own competencies and evaluated the employer's activity in raising employee competencies.

Findings: Based on literature research we assumed that empowerment cannot succeed without an appropriate level of employee maturity. This maturity should be characterized by: the level of employees' competencies – in the sense of their preparedness to perform the assigned tasks; the level and nature of employee involvement in work and company life; the approach of employees to comply with norms and rules. In this article, we presented the results of a survey on competencies. Respondents rate their competencies highly; they feel prepared to perform the tasks currently assigned to them; they declare having competencies beyond the tasks assigned; they feel ready to take on new tasks beyond their responsibilities. On this basis, we concluded that the level of preparation of employees to perform assigned tasks is not an obstacle to empowerment.

Research limitations/implications: In the future, research will be continued on a larger research sample it is possible to examine how managers assess the maturity of employees and make comparisons between the opinions of employees and those of managers.

Practical implications: The methodology we have used can be useful for those in charge of managing people to examine (diagnose) what are the barriers to empowerment in their organisation.

Originality/value: The article addresses the problem of potential barriers to empowerment; it points to factors directly related to employees (their competencies and behaviours). We hope that our research will start a discussion on, e.g. cultural (social), historical, and educational barriers to empowerment in the Polish economic reality.

Keywords: determinants of empowerment, employee opinions, employee competencies survey, barriers to empowerment.

Category of the paper: viewpoint, research paper.

1. Introduction

Empowerment is a philosophy where employees have a certain degree of autonomy to take initiative and make decisions to solve problems related to their work. When employees are empowered, decisions previously made by the manager are transferred to the employee level, making employees also responsible for their work. The idea of empowerment is based on the assumption that a company is more than a collective of people ready to work, it is a community looking for opportunities to co-create value (Gobillot, 2008).

We divided the content presented in this paper into three parts:

- In the first, we wanted to establish the state of knowledge about the determinants of empowerment (theoretical nature).
- In the second, we showed our point of view on what employee maturity for empowerment manifests itself (theoretical nature).
- In the third part of the article we showed the results of our own empirical research in which we wanted to determine whether the level of employees' competences is a limiting factor for the use of empowerment in Polish conditions.

2. Circumstances conducive to the realization of the philosophy of empowerment

Empowerment is defined as giving someone "strength", "power", making someone "strong", and "able to do something". It is also sometimes meant as authorization (Koźmiński, 2004). According to Alvi et al. (2020), "the basic meaning of empowerment is to give authority or power. Empowerment is the delegation of authority to another person in an organization to perform a specific work activity. Using the term empowerment emphasizes the positive aspect of power, opportunity, and ability of employees to influence the functioning of the organization. In practice, empowerment is confused with the delegation of authority, which seems to be a considerable simplification, resulting in a flattening of the meaning of the issue. Delegation is a process in which the obligation to do something is given to an employee (usually with maintaining responsibility for his actions). Empowerment, on the other hand, is an extension of earlier theoretical trends in management science: participative management or work enrichment. It is associated with supporting risk-taking, personal development and cultural change (Quinn and Spreitzer, 1997); with the right approach to employees, i.e. encouraging them, stimulating them to use their imagination and take initiative. As a result, they become more engaged and perform their job better (Mohapatra and Mishra, 2018; Moczydłowska, 2014). S.H. Appelbaum and K. Honeggae (1998) indicate that empowerment occurs when employees know and accept that they are expected to take that initiative, even when it is beyond

their scope of responsibility. Empowerment can be understood both as a state – strengthening, growth, authorization, feeling of power, possibilities, exercising control, but also as a process – restoring power, control, dignity, strengthening competencies, developing skills, giving support or finally the goal of widely understood educational and social interactions (Rosalska, 2006).

As emphasized by the pioneers of empowerment research (Conger and Kangungo, 1988), the best way to fully understand the concept is to consider two interrelated fields, i.e. organizational and psychological. The organizational field is determined by a set of purposeful actions and managerial practices, which by recognizing the sense of empowerment of employees, increase their status and authority (Bratnicki, 2000), and at the same time the sense of being supported and strengthened. The psychological dimension concerns the integration of employees with the goals of the organization, which is supposed to increase their interest in the company, and care about its success. Empowerment also has a sociological dimension, associated with the creation of teams¹, and the development of organizational ties, through the formation of social relationships (Bugdol, 2006).

In theory, empowerment is good for everyone, i.e. for the organization and the employees (Kulig-Moskwa et al., 2017); at the same time, conditions conducive to empowerment are indicated (Grajewski and Czubasiewicz, 2018), among which a clear emphasis is placed on certain characteristics of the organization, the organizational culture (organizational values) also the conduct and behaviour of the management (competencies and personality traits of superiors). In this context, the issue of trust as a determinant of empowerment is relatively often discussed (Stankiewicz-Mróz, 2015). However, the issue of the readiness of the employees themselves as recipients of empowerment remains on the sidelines of the considerations.

3. Staff maturity as a condition for successful empowerment

Delegating authority to increase employee self-efficacy cannot succeed without an appropriate level of employee maturity. This maturity should be characterized by:

- The level of employees' competence - in the sense of their preparedness to perform the assigned tasks.
- The level and nature of employee involvement in work and company life.
- The approach of employees to comply with norms and rules.

How to understand employee competence in the context of empowerment? An employee does not avoid making decisions, taking responsibility for decisions, and above all, it is a professional in his field. Proficiency is nowadays a somewhat forgotten word, replaced by

¹ The success of these activities depends on many factors. These include, among others the style of leadership that M. Kraczkla (2019) writes about interestingly, which indicates the role of the manager's personality in shaping the relationship between him and employees and teams.

"talent" in HR literature. An expert is someone who "knows his job", and has knowledge and experience which determine his/her independence. When trying to define the competence area of an employee's maturity for empowerment, we could use a metaphor of a cocktail, in which the basic ingredients are professionalism and responsibility, "seasoned" with a dose of the initiative. Current research shows that more than half of all companies worldwide are unable to find qualified employees; 70% of companies in Poland report difficulty filling vacancies – the largest "talent gap" in a decade (ManpowerGroup, 2022) This raises the question of whether this will be an obstacle to empowerment.

As J.P. Meyer and A.C. Smith (2000), organizational members may work out of coercion (continuance commitment), a sense of obligation (normative commitment) and as a result of emotional attachment (affective commitment). J. Stankiewicz and M. Moczulska (2013) look at the last two types of commitment in an interesting way, describing them as effective commitment. According to these authors, normative commitment (of the "want" type) and affective commitment are undertaken voluntarily (as a manifestation of the employee's internal beliefs), which – associated with positive emotions – promotes the undertaking of above-standard effort, the creation of added value (Stankiewicz and Moczulska, 2013).

An employee's readiness for empowerment can be analyzed through his or her attitude towards the organization's norms and rules. For the purposes of this study, let's assume that if the employee respects them (for internal motives) then there is no need for advanced practices controlling (monitoring) the behaviour and conduct of staff.

Interesting views in this regard are represented by A. Stankiewicz-Mróz (2015), noting that the growth of bureaucracy, auditing, reporting, monitoring and control of employees – observed in many organizations as a consequence of increasing institutionalization and economization, as well as the development of technology – can be interpreted as a manifestation of low trust in employees. It is a phenomenon which threatens the realization of empowerment because in "response" employees stop trusting their superiors.

4. Methodology

We posed two research questions:

1. How do employees evaluate the level of their own competencies?
2. How do employees assess the employers' activity in preparing employees (by developing their competencies) to accept a wider range of tasks, powers, and responsibilities?

We have developed a survey form in the MS Forms application. The selection of persons for the survey was purposeful, i.e. we surveyed persons with work experience not longer than five years. We assumed that such seniority mapped the early stage of the respondent's career. In Poland, many researchers analyze the attitudes and behavior of the youngest generations of

workers. However, these studies lack characteristics regarding employees' readiness for empowerment.

In this article, we present the results of a preliminary (pilot) study, which aimed to verify the usefulness of the online survey questionnaire (construction of questions).

While assessing their own competencies, the respondents referred to the following statements (5-grade Likert scale, where 1 – means definitely no, 2 – rather no, 3 – hard to say, 4 – rather yes, 5 – definitely yes):

- I feel fully prepared to perform the tasks assigned to me.
- I am competent beyond the tasks assigned to me.
- I do not feel prepared to accept new tasks that go beyond my current responsibilities.

We posed two hypotheses:

1. The respondents' level of preparation for their assigned tasks is an obstacle to making empowerment a reality.
2. Companies do not prepare employees to accept a wider range of tasks, powers, and responsibilities.

5. Results

Characteristics of respondents:

- gender (69% females, 31% males),
- age (born in 1990-1999: 75%, born after 1999: 25%),
- position held (production workers: 47%, administrative employees: 41%, lower level managers: 12%),
- seniority (shorter than one year: 41%, 1-2 years: 38%, 3-5 years: 21%),
- educational profile (economic 53%, technical 47%).

Characteristics of enterprises (employers), employing respondents:

- the origin of the enterprises' capital (polish: 68%, foreign: 16%, mixed: 16%),
- level of technology (high technology enterprises: 56%, low technology enterprises: 44%),
- a number of employees (up to 9 employees: 9%, 10 to 50 employees: 13%, 51 employees to 100 employees: 22%, 101 to 250 employees: 6%, over 250 employees: 50%).

Survey was completed by 36 people; we rejected four questionnaires because the respondents did not answer all the required questions. The results we show in the article refer to 32 people.

In Figure 1, we have shown how women and men rate their own level of competence (question: "Determine how much you agree with the following statements"). Both women and men feel fully prepared to perform their current tasks (86% and 80% affirmative assessment responses, respectively).

The second issue examined (Figure 1) was the assessment of one's own competence in relation to current tasks. The respondents are not so decisive anymore. A significant percentage of men (40%) does not identify with the statement "I have competencies higher than the tasks I perform". It is worth noting that in this issue as many as 36% of women did not give a clear opinion and chose the option "difficult to say".

The third issue examined (Figure 1) was a readiness to undertake tasks exceeding current duties. Men were more decisive, most of them positively assessing their readiness to perform new tasks; only 10% of men said they rather doubted their readiness. Among women, the highest percentage (45%) are statements in which women strongly deny (disagree) the statement "I do not feel prepared to take on new tasks"; in this group, 14% of respondents could not make a self-assessment.

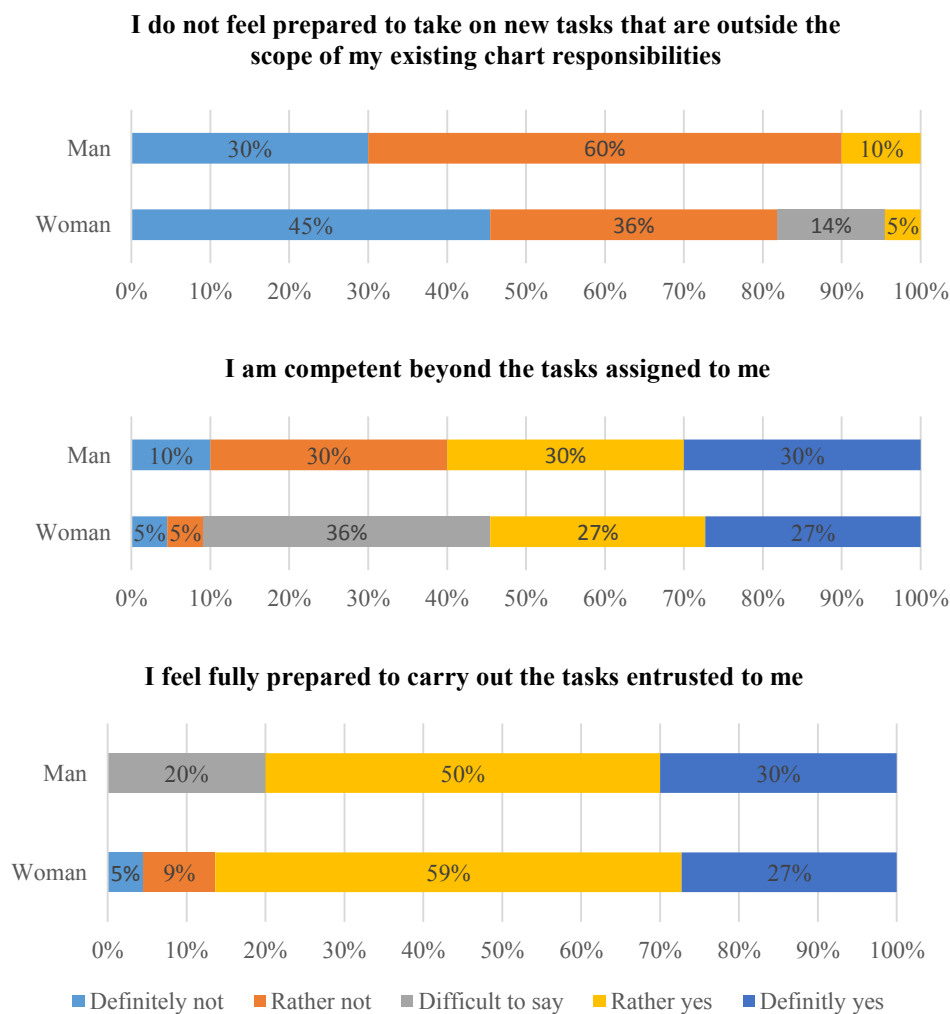


Figure 1. Gender of the respondent and their level of competence to perform their tasks. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

In Table 1 we show the distribution of respondents' answers according to their age. In both distinguished groups of respondents, we recorded similar opinions as to the statement "I feel fully prepared to perform the tasks entrusted to me" – more than 80% confirm such a feeling.

The youngest respondents in the surveyed group (born after 1999) definitely more often declare that they have competencies higher than those required for their current position (88% of affirmative answers). Older respondents are more critical, as evidenced by a significantly lower percentage of affirmative answers (46%).

Table 1 shows that 92% of respondents born in 1990-1999 did not agree with the statement "I do not feel prepared to accept tasks which go beyond my current duties" – they are characterised by greater readiness to undertake new tasks. The feelings of younger respondents were more varied on this issue - 37% chose affirmative answers ("definitely yes" and "rather yes").

Table 1.

Respondent's age and level of competence to perform tasks

	Definitely not	Rather not	Difficult to say	Rather yes	Definitely yes
I feel fully prepared to carry out the tasks entrusted to me					
born after 1999	0%	12%	0%	50%	38%
born 1990-1999	4%	4%	9%	58%	25%
I am competent beyond the tasks assigned to me					
born after 1999	0%	0%	12%	50%	38%
born 1990-1999	8%	17%	29%	21%	25%
I do not feel prepared to take on new tasks that are outside the scope of my existing chart responsibilities					
born after 1999	25%	38%	0%	25%	12%
born 1990-1999	46%	46%	0%	4%	4%

Source: results of empirical studies.

Figure 2 shows how the opinions of respondents holding specific positions were distributed. The least diverse are the feelings of administrative (office) workers. In this group only positive answers were given – with a dominant percentage of "rather yes" answers (77%). Positive feelings were also shown by most production workers (74%), in this group, 13% of people did not give a clear answer. Half of the managers' opinions were "definitely yes" answers; only in this group of respondents, we recorded people who do not feel prepared to perform their tasks (25%).

In the next question (Figure 2), the respondents were asked to assess whether they had competencies higher than those required for the position. In each group, the percentage of positive assessments was high (production workers 66%, managers 50%, administrative workers 46%); we also noted that respondents were unable to make such an assessment (the percentage of "hard to say" answers ranged from 20% to 31%).

Executive employees responded similarly to the question about feeling unready to take on new tasks. In the opinions of production employees, the answer "definitely not" prevailed (47%), and administration employees most often chose "rather not". (54%). The distribution of

the managers' answers was more diverse, here, in addition to the negative answers (a total of 50%), the respondents confirmed that they do not feel prepared to take on additional tasks (50% of "rather yes" statements).

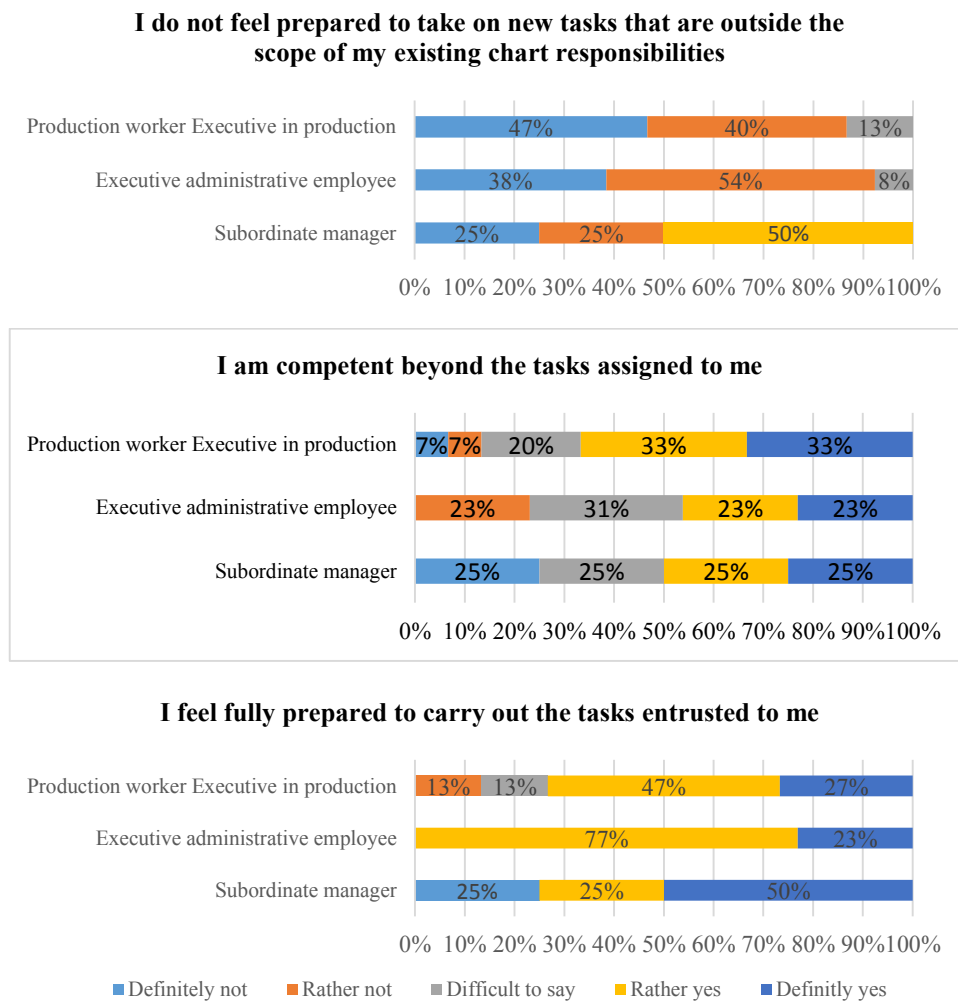


Figure 2. Position held by the respondent and his/her level of competence to perform the tasks. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents' answers depending on the length of their employment. The percentage of positive evaluations among respondents working the shortest time (up to a year) is 76%, among those working 1-2 years this percentage is 84%. We can see that all respondents who have worked the longest (3-5 years) positively evaluate their preparation (57% of statements "definitely yes", 43% "rather yes"). They also most strongly state that they are competent beyond their current responsibilities (57% of "definitely yes" responses).

Figure 3 also shows how respondents responded to the statement "I don't feel prepared to take on new tasks". The highest number of negative answers (92%) was obtained in the group of respondents working 1-2 years ("definitely no" and "rather no"), in the group of respondents working the longest time the percentage of negation is 86% and in the group of respondents working the shortest time 77%.

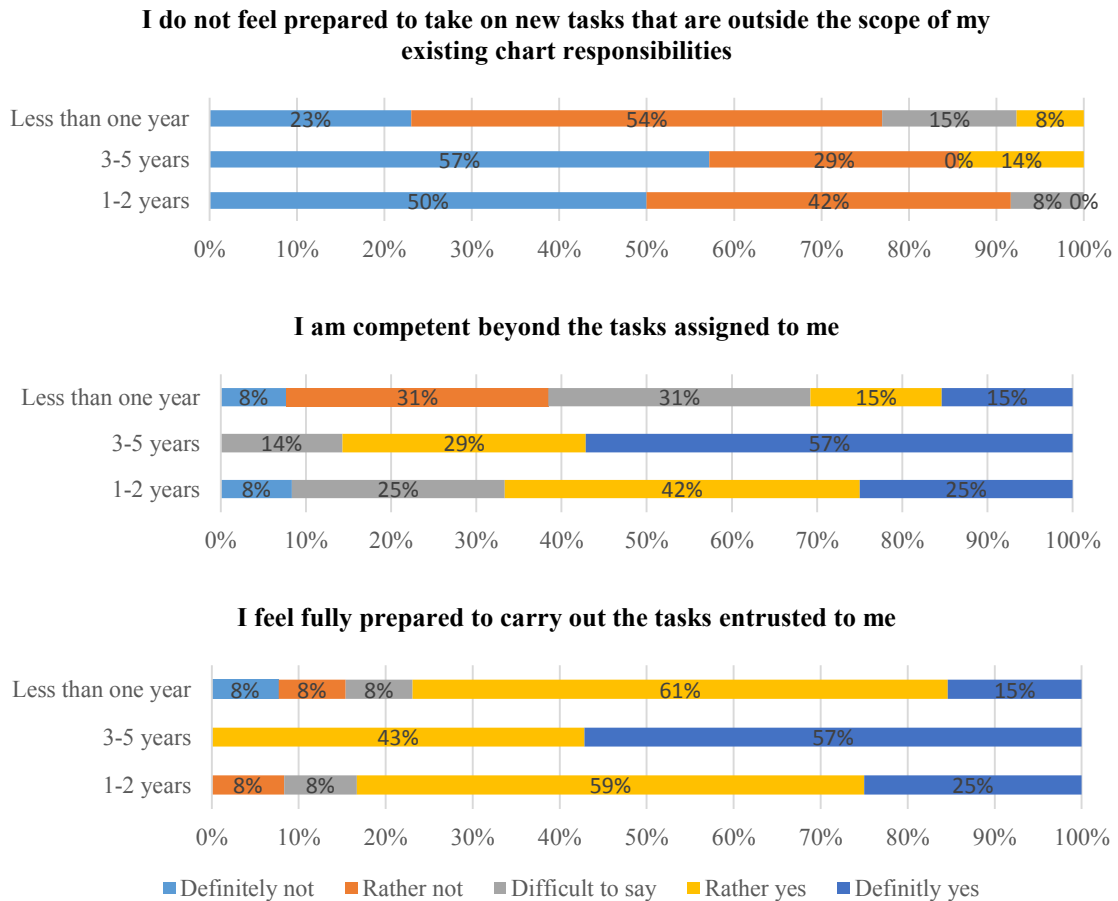


Figure 3. The seniority of a respondent vs. his/her level of competence to perform the given tasks. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of respondents' answers depending on the respondents' education profile. Both respondents with technical and economic education rate their preparation for the tasks assigned highly (82% of "rather yes" and "definitely yes" answers). "Economists" are more decisive in their assessments, as evidenced by a higher percentage of "definitely yes" answers (35%), such answer was given by 23% of persons with technical education.

Possession of competencies higher than currently required is declared by 58% of respondents with economic education and 50% with technical education. The distribution of answers to this question did not differ significantly - but we can see that "technicians" more often had problems with assessment, because they chose the answer "difficult to say" (32%); this answer was given by 24% of "economists".

Figure 4 shows that 86% of those with a technical degree and 76% of those with an economics degree denied the statement "I do not feel prepared for new tasks that go beyond my current responsibilities". 'Economists' are more resolute in this assessment (47% of answers strongly denying).

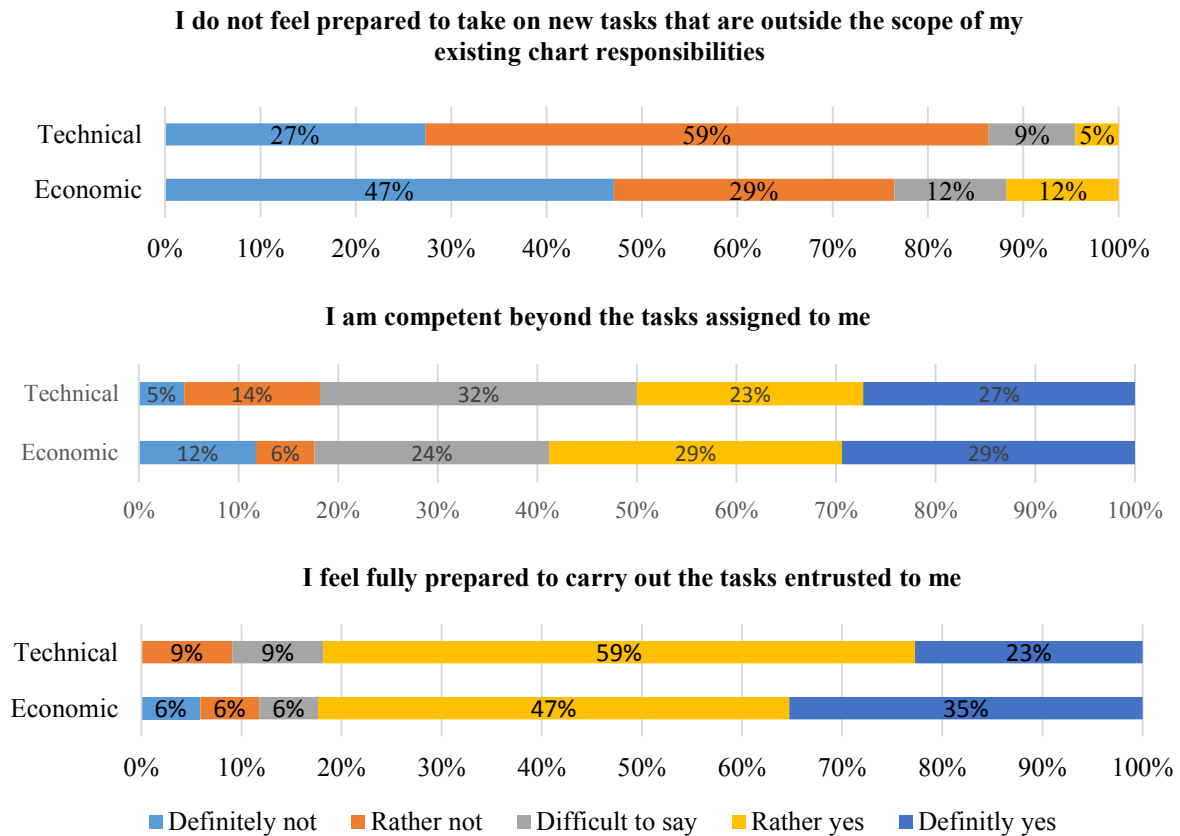


Figure 4. Educational profile of the respondent and his/her level of competence to perform the given tasks. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

Below we show respondents' answers to the question in which they evaluated their current employer. The majority of respondents say that the employer prepares employees to take on a wider range of tasks, powers and responsibilities. Figure 5Figure 6Figure 7 show that critical statements were more often characterised by employees:

- enterprises with fully foreign capital (40% of indications),
- low technology enterprises (36%),
- micro enterprises, i.e. employing less than 10 persons (33%).

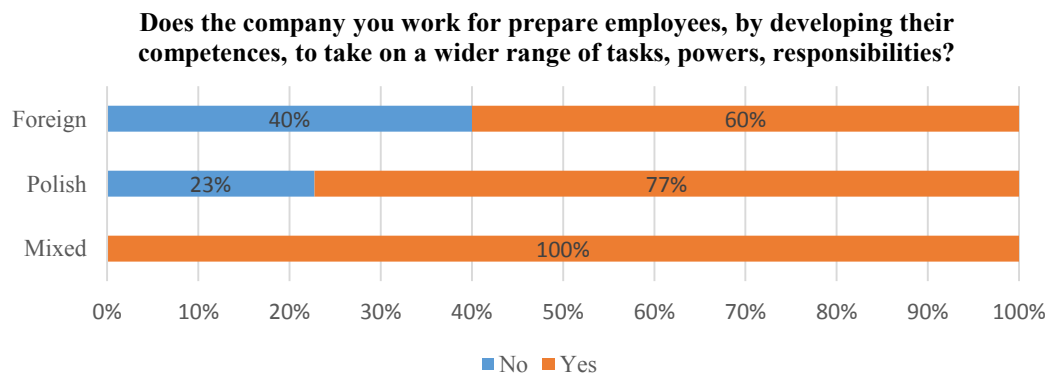


Figure 5. The origin of the company's capital and increasing the scope of tasks, authority and responsibility of employees. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

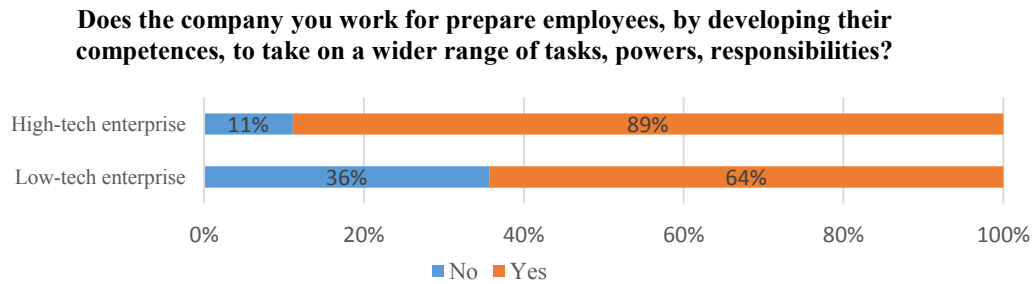


Figure 6. Technological advancement of a company and increasing the scope of tasks, authority and responsibility of employees. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

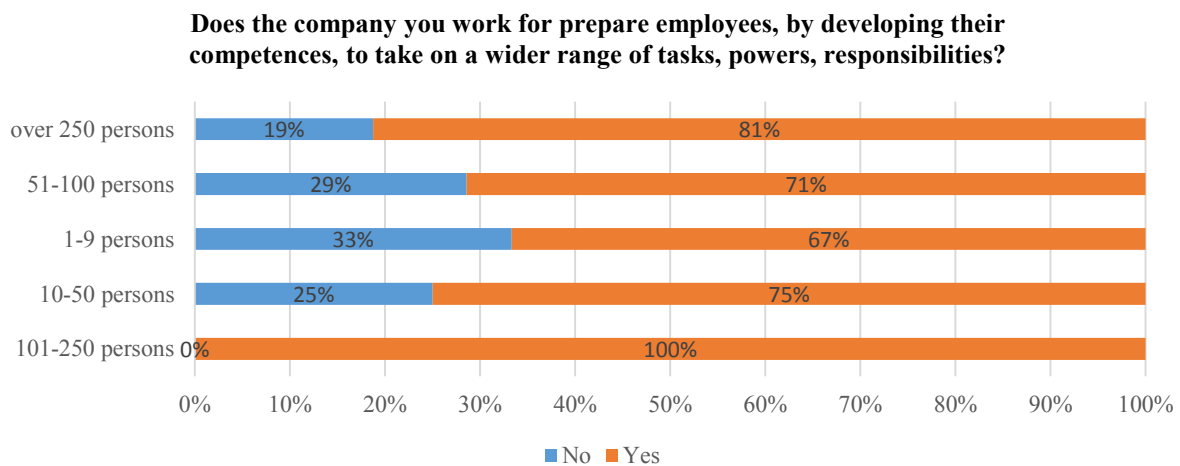


Figure 7. Size of the enterprise (employment) and increasing the scope of tasks, authority and responsibility of employees. Adapted from: results of empirical studies.

Respondents rate their readiness for new tasks better than their preparedness for current tasks. We suppose that they feel that it is appropriate to say that they want new tasks, but they are critical/cautious about the level of their competencies, their assessment here is not so unambiguous (definitely positive). In terms of gender, we have not noted any significant differences in opinions.

The age of respondents is a differentiating factor as regards the self-assessment of competencies, as this is where we observed the greatest difference in opinions on competencies exceeding the ones required for the position held. The youngest respondents definitely assess themselves better. This result is puzzling because at the same time younger respondents more often do not feel ready to undertake new tasks. So here we have a situation that someone claims that his/her competencies are higher than needed for his/her position, but at the same time does not feel prepared for new tasks. It seems to us that this dissonance requires an examination of what its causes (sources) are. It is worth looking for the answer to whether these are personal reasons (on the part of the employee) or organizational reasons (on the part of the employer).

We wonder what might be the reason that production workers indicated that they do not always feel fully prepared to perform assigned tasks; at the same time, they declared that they feel prepared for new tasks. Managers may be overloaded with work, as only they claimed that they were not ready for new tasks.

Respondents the longer they work, the more strongly they claim to be adequately prepared for their tasks. Respondents with the longest work experience were also more likely to claim that they are competent beyond their current duties; they too feel prepared for new tasks.

Respondents declaring economic education profile were more decisive in assessing their competencies - they more often chose the "strong answer option".

Most of the respondents claim that the employer prepares employees to accept a wider range of tasks, authority and responsibility. Perhaps in further research, the survey questions regarding this issue should be expanded. Maybe we should use detailed questions with an expanded rating scale. We suppose that "competence development" may be understood differently by the respondents. In the future, we intend to construct the survey in such a way, that the respondents could assess (on a Likert scale) the impact of e.g. training, coaching, position rotation on the readiness to accept a wider range of tasks, authority and responsibility.

6. Conclusions

The literature has established the view that the success of empowerment depends on the attitudes of managers. They have to show willingness to "share power". In our article we wanted to show the other side of this endeavor (process). We wondered in what circumstances it would be possible to say that employees are also ready for empowerment. At the basis of our considerations is the conviction that in business practice we should avoid implementing empowerment without deeper reflection.

On the basis of the analysis of the views presented in the literature on the subject of empowerment, we have come to the conclusion that the condition of its success is the appropriate maturity of employees. This maturity should be characterized by: the level of employees' competence – in the sense of their preparedness to perform the assigned tasks; the level and nature of employee involvement in work and company life; the approach of employees to compliance with norms and rules. We concluded that fulfillment of these three conditions gives grounds to state the maturity of employees.

The results of our empirical research presented in this article concern employees at an early stage of their careers, i.e. those whose length of service does not exceed five years. They show that employees highly assess the level of their competencies; they feel prepared to perform the tasks currently assigned to them; they declare having competencies exceeding the assigned tasks; they feel ready to undertake new tasks exceeding their duties. It is also worth to emphasize

the second conclusion of our research: the group of surveyed employees is characterized by a generally positive assessment of employers' activity in the issue of the development of competencies of the employees. Respondents declared that their companies prepare employees to accept a wider range of tasks, powers and responsibilities. In conclusion, we state that the level of employee competencies are not an obstacle to the realization of the empowerment idea.

The analysis presented in the article was based on the results of preliminary pilot studies. We are aware that they are not representative. We pose ourselves further research questions, e.g. how managers perceive empowerment in the context of staff maturity. We are interested in whether the potential age distance between managers and employees will prove to be a differentiating factor between opinions (assessments).

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