

TALENT MANAGEMENT DURING A PANDEMIC COVID-19

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Purpose: The main objective of the research presented in this article was to identify factors supporting sustainable talent management in times of COVID - 19 crisis in small and medium-sized companies in Lower Silesia province, as well as to conceptualise the notion of talent. In order to achieve this goal, the first part of the article explains the meaning of the term "talent management" in the scientific literature on management, and then, on the basis of the conducted research, an attempt was made to answer the question: which of the determinants of the "talent management" process are important in the ongoing COVID crisis-19 and guarantee their sustainable development.

Design/methodology/approach: For the research presented in this paper, a literature analysis in the area of resource sustainability, talent management and crisis was used. The studies in literature also included secondary sources, which were communications from research of similar scope.

The combination of different research methods allowed to obtain a broader context of the studied phenomenon and ensured a higher quality of the conducted research. The diversity of methods was aimed at achieving a consistency of the empirical basis for the inference. A diagnostic survey was adopted as the leading method. The remaining methods applied in the paper were auxiliary (complementary).

Findings: „Talent management" and having talented employees in a global economy is a strategically important resource affecting the market value of the organisation itself and providing a competitive advantage. Building a significant intellectual capital of the organisation requires the use of appropriate methods and tools to support the management, systematic measurement, constant comparison with competitors, elimination of barriers and use of opportunities for development (and such becomes the current crisis).

Research limitations/implications: In the future, research will be continued on a larger research sample.

Practical implications: The article presents results of research conducted among several dozen companies in Poland. The findings are very interesting and encourage research on a larger scale. They are a valuable source of information for managers responsible for creating the intellectual capital of the organisation in terms of acquiring and developing talented employees. On the other hand, for people responsible for recruiting employees, the results may be useful in terms of developing a candidate's profile, in particular when identifying the key competences of talented employees. The results also indicate the demand of the Polish market (especially medium-sized companies) for infrastructure that enables talent acquisition, improvement and development.

Originality/value Based on empirical research, the article proposes an original set of systemic solutions for talent management to improve organisational performance.

Keywords: talent management, talent, COVID-19.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Business cycles in the economy are obvious. From time to time, its successive phases (recovery, overheating, slowdown, recession) are repeated. Therefore, organisations should be prepared for various types of emergencies. COVID-19 is an example of this. Social and economic limitations have affected virtually all areas of our lives and have a negative impact on the global economy.

Organisations most often perceive crisis as a negative, undesirable phenomenon. However, it is important to note that the crisis may prove to be an opportunity for entrepreneurs. It forces managers to introduce fundamental changes, restructure and reorganise companies. Innovative solutions are being implemented to ensure better productivity and efficiency as a result. Employees themselves in times of crisis are more open to changes and more willing to accept them than usual.

Human capital decisions play an important role in times of crisis. Often, decisions are made to downsize, employees are sent into early retirement, awards are cut and various types of benefits are reduced. These actions show the strategic short-sightedness of managers. These activities do not support the sustainable development of human resources. The crisis caused by COVID-19 is different from those encountered so far (like all of them, anyway). Paradoxically, the actions taken by executives in the area of human capital partly meet the expectations of talented employees. They primarily have the ability to implement innovative solutions. The introduction of remote work, non-standard working time, task-based working time, working from home are solutions forced by the crisis that will stay with us forever. Such individual treatment, which would enable self-realisation, was expected by talented people.

All of these coronavirus-enforced activities may prove to be specific fulfillment of the needs of women who want to advance their careers. Women are the ones who bear most of the responsibilities in the household and in caring for children. The requirements for telework and flexible work make it possible for women to combine paid work with caregiving responsibilities. They will increasingly take up remote work, and its rules will have to be clarified by the law.

2. Talent management and crisis from a theoretical perspective

Rapid changes in technology, permanent migration, aging society and expansion of the knowledge-based economy are current challenges facing the labor market. The result of this situation is the shortage of talented employees. Some authors believe that a key reason for this situation is an ineffective talent search system among the company's employees. The role of a leader starts with getting to know the potential of your employees and exploring their talents (Balcerzyk, 2021).

In the works of M. Armstrong, the term talent management can be attributed to succession planning and employee development activities (Armstrong, 2011, p. 503). The author believes that this concept does not bring anything new to the known processes of human resource management, except a meaningful name. Talent management should be viewed as a universal set of activities. It is supposed to safeguard the flow of talent in the organisation, treating it as one of the key resources of the company.

In practical terms, "talent management includes finding talents in your own company or acquiring them from the outside, providing them with care more closely than other employees, consisting in enabling them to develop, train and plan their careers, and also ensuring adequate remuneration (not only in the form of pay), so that they are resistant to temptations from other employers and want to stay in the company" (Maliszewska, 2005).

According to R.E. Lewis and R.J. Hackman, talent management should be considered in three basic streams. In the first perspective, talent management is viewed as a set of standard practices, activities, and functions of human capital management. These include recruitment, selection and development. These functions are performed much faster than in the classical approach and should concern the entire organisation, not a single department. Proponents of the trend claim that the terms talent and HR management will be used interchangeably in the future. The second approach is to work within your talentpools. The inflow of employees is subject to analysis and control. Employees are assigned to their respective jobs. This approach is focused to the inside of the organisation. The third view, whose center is the talent itself, distinguishes two distinct tendencies (Lewis, and Hackman, 2006). The first, is based on the thesis that talents are individuals with high potential. They should be sought out, hired, and rewarded for performance. The second approach considers talent as an undifferentiated good. The reason for this approach are demographic and humanistic factors. The role of executives is to manage the overall talent to achieve the best results.

In addition to surviving in an unpredictable and changing environment, the aspiration of any organisation is to continually grow and adapt to change. The implementation of rational "talent management" programmes in the organisation may be a chance to achieve these goals. Therefore, the priority task of the organisation is to take particular care of employees who demonstrate above-average creativity, rich emotionality and strategic thinking skills.

The unique "thinking" of these individuals requires taking time, being well organised, and being open to new solutions and opportunities in the organisation's strategies.

Looking ahead, managers need to create the right strategy for talent development. Talented employees, without whom organisational success is impossible, become a scarce "commodity".

According to W.J. Rothwell, strategic development of talent (SDT) should be defined as a process of organisational, stakeholders and groups of employees' changes through planned and unplanned learning, in order for them to acquire competences that are key to achieving a competitive advantage by organisations (Rothwell, 2003).

D.G. Collings and K. Mellahim as definitions of strategic talent management (STM) give all activities and processes characterised by systematic identification, necessary to maintain permanent competitive advantage (Collings, and Mellahim, 2009, pp. 304-313). The units with the highest potential and performance and the overall HR architecture should be developed.

Consequently, „sustainable resource management (SRM) should be understood as activities of a strategic nature, the basis of which is the effective protection of resources necessary for, depending on the adopted strategy, the stability or growth of the organization” (Czaińska, 2020).

Employees with strategic talent are, in a sense, the ticket to further business development. Through their knowledge and unconventional methods of operation, they are able to ensure the company's market stability in the long term and keep it at an appropriate level, even when it is hit by a crisis. In the era of globalisation, organisations are unable to protect themselves from crisis situations. With talented employees in their organisational capital, however, they can significantly reduce their impact, minimise the cost of dealing with the crisis by implementing appropriate management strategies. Paradoxically, the crisis may contribute to their development and increase the pool of talents.

The term crisis comes from the Greek word *krisis* which has many different meanings. It means: dispute, preferences, separation, deciding, choice, struggle in which it is necessary to act under time pressure, and also – a turning point, breakthrough, decisive moment, qualitative change of the arrangement.

"A crisis is a turning point in the existence of an organisation, arising as a consequence of external or internal disturbances in the existence or realisation of one or more factors determining the existence and development of the enterprise" (Zełek, 2003, p. 34). The crisis is of a strategic nature, disregarding it may lead to huge financial losses and even bankruptcy of the company. A crisis is a moment that throws an organisation out of balance for a period of time. Crisis in business is „a low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization (Pearson, and Clair, 1998).

A crisis itself is not a positive phenomenon. Like any imbalance or currently existing order, it introduces a sense of anxiety, frustration, and threat. Crisis is sometimes necessary, it allows you to initiate change and it is sometimes the beginning of something positive. Thus, the focus should not be on the crisis per se, but rather on the positive effects of the crisis. So whether it

was a disaster or an opportunity can only be determined after the fact. If it initiates destruction, it will be a disaster; if it contributes to development, it will be defined as an opportunity. A better understanding of the term "crisis" can be gained from the way it is understood by the Japanese, who spell the word with two characters, the first meaning "danger," "imminent, inevitable ruin," and the second meaning "opportunity, possibility," a kind of perspective opening up in the face of the future. This interpretation of the term "crisis" unifies something that is simultaneously a danger and an opportunity, a threat and a new possibility for the future (Płużek, and Jacyniak, 2006, p. 12).

The current crisis caused by COVID-19 is global in scope. Its effects are being felt around the world. Given the etymology of the word crisis, we can assume that for some organisations an opportunity has arisen in the area of "sustainable talent management". As mentioned earlier, the strategic myopia of managers often equates the crisis with plans to cut staff, reduce spending on employee development and training. This approach generates an opportunity for competitors in acquiring talents. Therefore, appropriate crisis management covering many spheres of impact (psychological, financial, communication, and security) becomes essential (Czainska, 2021; Sus, 2013).

3. Methods and characteristics of the research sample

The study presented in this paper is based on the analysis of the literature on crisis management, talent management. The literature studies also included secondary sources, which were research communications of similar scope.

The diagnostic study and literature analysis, secondary sources allowed us to obtain a broader context of the phenomenon under study and ensured a higher quality of the research conducted. The variety of methods was intended to achieve consistency in the empirical basis of inference. A diagnostic survey was adopted as the guiding method. The other methods used in the paper were ancillary (complementary).

The questionnaire – survey – was prepared based on the analysis of the literature. The survey was designed for employees of Lower Silesia. The following variables were used as independent variables in the study: gender of the respondents, age of the respondents, size of the company (place of work), place of residence, and industry of the company.

The study was conducted in Q1 2021 on a random survey sample of people employed in Lower Silesian organisations. 268 people attended the survey. The study group was equally divided by gender. Women made up 47% of the study group and men 53%.

About 43.28% of the respondents are mature people aged 30-34 years. 23.88% of the respondents were between 35 and 40 years old, 15.67% of the respondents were between 25 and 29 years old and 13.81% workers between 19 and 24 years old. The least numerous

group were employees over 40 years of age (3.26% of respondents). Analyzing the structure of the study group in terms of age, it should be noted that the respondents are mature people at the stage of early career, during which crystallisation occurs, narrowing the field of exploration and finalisation of the choice of profession.

More than 50% of the respondents are employees of medium and large companies with 21 to 100 employees and 17.91% are employees of companies with more than 100 employees. Over 17.16% of the respondents were employed in small businesses (11 to 20 employees) and only 3.36 were employed in businesses with up to 10 employees.

About 61.94% of the respondents are residents of small municipalities up to 5,000 residents. A relatively large group of respondents are residents of communes of 6-10 thousand residents (19.4%). The remainder are mainly residents of towns of up to 50,000 people (approx. 12%).

The largest group of workers were those employed in manufacturing companies (33.58%). A large percentage of respondents are employed in the retail industry (28.36%) and transportation (11.19%). The others are those employed in the financial industry, construction, etc.

4. Talent acquisition and development in crisis

There are many definitions of "talent" in the management science literature. At the beginning of the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to define the term. The importance of the definition of talent as perceived by the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Meaning of "talent" in respondents' opinion

Respondents' opinion	Percentage
Specialist, difficult to replace	0,37%
A person who can significantly influence the current and future achievements of his organization	38,81%
Best performer	4,10%
A person with high development potential	30,60%
A person with exceptional talents, rarely found, e.g. an outstanding scientist	22,76%
A person with unusual talents but superfluous, not improving the lives of others or the functioning of the organization	3,36%

Source: own research.

For more than one-third of those surveyed (38%), the term talented person means someone who can make a significant impact on the current and future performance of their organisation. A similar study was conducted in 2018 and a person with high developmental potential was considered talented (45%). Only 13.75% of the respondents considered the talented person to be able to influence the fate of the company. The prevailing pandemic has redefined the concept of talent. Entrepreneurship and creativity as well as intuition and strategic thinking are desirable talents in this time of crisis.

Therefore, one can accept the thesis that the concept of talent is a time variable. It depends on the factors of the company's internal and external environment. Internal factors relate to ensuring the safety of employees, the supply and distribution of goods and services. External factors are further restrictions imposed by laws and regulations by the government related to limitations on the operation of specific industries. Intuition and strategic thinking become particularly important in operating in such a volatile environment. Through entrepreneurship and creativity, talented individuals are able to accomplish new tasks, take risks, and implement new ideas. By acting in this way, these employees add "value" to the company. In the labor market, managers are expected to take initiatives in search of new solutions to problems, flexibility and mobility.

About 31% of the respondents considered a talented employee, a person with high development potential. Approximately 23% of respondents believe that a gifted person is characterised by having exceptional talents, rare such as an outstanding scientist. If a talent is considered to be a person with high developmental, entrepreneurial and creative potential, it can be assumed that the development of talent is influenced by environmental factors. These primarily include supervisors and co-workers who "sculpt" the company culture. The talent is also developed through the implementation of tasks (more and more complicated) and completely random events.

About 4% of the respondents believe that a talented person is a top performing employee and only 3.36% believe that a person with unusual talents but superfluous, not improving the lives of others or the functioning of the organisation.

Only 0.37% of respondents considered a hard-to-replace professional as a talent. This is a significant change from the 2018 results. This definition of talent then was indicated by 12.5% of respondents.

In their research, respondents identified the characteristics and competencies of the talent components that distinguish talented employees (Table 2).

Table 2.
Components of talent

Respondents' opinion	Percentage
Strategic thinking skills	17,16%
Leadership abilities	0,37%
Emotional intelligence	14,18%
Entrepreneurship, creativity	54,10%
Ability to work in a group	7,46%
IT and technical skills that go beyond their specialty	6,72%

Source: own research.

Respondents identified entrepreneurship and creativity as the leading trait as a component of talent (54.1%). Transforming businesses in the era of the prevailing pandemic has become a necessity. The introduction of lockdown, limiting availability has forced many businesses to make immediate changes. This involved moving to online operations, launching a new product,

introducing remote working, changing the way of communicating with employees, changing the flow of documents, simplifying many procedures and a new way of acquiring customers. Digital transformation is not just about moving to a digital world. It's definitely more than that. It's all about changing the way we think about our own business and the world around us. The pandemic has significantly changed our perceptions of the corporate environment. Entrepreneurs and employees have developed their technological and digital competencies, built a new work model, and made numerous business-level changes. Thanks to the creativity of management, most companies did not close and there was little downsizing. Some companies changed their industry "overnight". Others have diversified the scope and reach of their services. One can see the calmness and flexibility in the actions of the management team.

Respondents identified the ability to think strategically as the second most important talent trait (17.16%). Most companies were forced to rethink their own growth strategies. According to the respondents, emotional intelligence plays an important role (14.18%). Less important are the ability to work in a team (7.46%) and having computer and technical skills beyond their specialty (6.72%). Leadership skills should be considered insignificant (0.37%). This is a kind of surprise.

According to the respondents, management should support the emergence of talent in crisis (Table 3).

Table 3.
Activities supporting talent identification

Respondents' opinion	Percentage
Maintaining high standards in all areas of the company's operations	7,09%
Promoting the best employees	7,09%
Promoting diversity	48,13%
Creating an atmosphere of openness and honesty	17,54%
Paying attention to the high level of expected efficiency	10,82%
Supporting innovation, research and development	9,33%

Source: own research.

The actions taken by management in this area are primarily to support diversity, eliminate discrimination and treat employees equally (48.13%). This includes the age, gender, religion, culture and background of the employees. Diversity, or rather supporting it, is a source of competitive advantage. Thanks to the practice of diversity management, it is possible to expand the groups in which talents are identified and to support "picking" talents at the recruitment stage. Such activities create a climate of openness and honesty, and this, according to respondents (17.54%), is conducive to developing talent in the COVID-19 crisis. Allowing employees to speak freely and share ideas promotes the fulfillment of their potential. In crisis situations, executives should be open to different and unexpected sources of ideas. Their author can be any employee of the company regardless of their position in the organisational structure. In crisis situations, the flow of information and freedom of communication within the organisation is important. In times of crisis, the culture of creativity fully accepts the "uncertain

tomorrow" and change. Therefore, it is important for a company to be able to deal with unexpected situations and focuses employees' attention on the benefits of change.

Only 10.82% of the respondents said that the talent emergence in crisis is facilitated by the organisation's management's attention to high levels of expected employee performance. Efficiency in times of crisis is secondary and it is not the main criterion for action. Lower efficiency is the result of the general market downturn, not caused by employee skill gaps.

Identifying talents in a crisis is not supported by innovation, research and development activities (9.33%), as well as promoting the best employees and maintaining high standards in all areas of the company (7.09%).

The progressive integration of economies, industries, enterprises leads to an interdependent economic system on a global scale (Table 4). There is a deepening and intensification of trade, investment and information links.

Table 4.

Glocal managers as organisational capital

Respondents' opinion	Percentage
Definitely yes	23,13%
Yes	48,88%
No	10,45%
Definitely no	7,09%
I do not know	10,45%

Source: own research.

"Glocal managers" are becoming particularly sought-after talent. This is the view of 72% of respondents. They appreciate managers who can meet the local and global demands of an organisation that can think globally while operating in a local market. Changes in the environment imply the need for managers to adapt to working in an international environment. Each country is characterised by a specific tradition and different customs, which is why modern managers have to adapt to the culture prevailing in a given country, and local managers have to gain experience how to develop in a culturally diverse society. For 17.5% of respondents, a person with this aptitude is not a talent.

Socio-cultural globalisation has led to increased migration of workers, managers. Selection of the best working conditions, free movement in search of better working conditions have significantly affected the mobility of human resources and led to a kind of competition for talent. Therefore, there is a need to balance global and local needs by applying global standards and adapting them to local circumstances (e.g. cultural).

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the vast majority of companies reduced funding for employee training and development – 63.43% (Table 5). In the face of uncertainty, pressure and crisis, managers are making savings in organisations in the wrong areas, which can include employee improvement and development. Some of the companies see an opportunity for workforce development in the era of the pandemic and have increased funding to improve

employee knowledge and skills (33.21%). Only 3.36% of companies were not affected by the crisis situation in terms of the process of professional development of employees.

Table 5.

Training and development of employees in the COVID-19 crisis

Respondents' opinion	Percentage
Increased funds for the improvement of employees' knowledge and skills	33,21%
Reduced funding for employee training and development	63,43%
The crisis situation does not affect the professional development process	3,36%

Source: own research.

The pandemic situation forced companies to deploy employees to other jobs, branches, subsidiaries (39.18%). Approximately 13.81% of the respondents stated an increase in temporary staffing (Table 6).

Table 6.

Actions taken by managers in the COVID-19 crisis

Respondents' opinion	Percentage
Hired more temporary workers	13,81%
Deployed employees to other jobs	39,18%
Developing the technical competences of employees	13,81%
Developing the business competences of employees	10,82%
She reduced employment	22,39%

Source: own research.

Managers of these companies look for a chance for development in a crisis situation and see its positive effects.

Almost a quarter of the companies (22.38%), in the opinion of the respondents, reduced employment and only 13.8% of the companies took steps to develop their employees' business competences. This confirms the thesis of strategic short-sightedness of Polish managers. In the short term such actions bring measurable effects but in the long term they may cause financial problems of the company or even its liquidation. They forget that a recession is a good time for managers to take action to invest in employee competencies (knowledge and skills), due primarily to: lower training costs during this period, less workload. It is therefore important to take risks in investing in human capital.

Losing staff is all about disappointing employees (not just those being dismissed) and losing know-how. Dismissal of employees has a negative impact on the company's image.

5. Discussions

The current situation of the global economy has influenced the essence of the perception of a talented employee. In research conducted in 2018, the respondents considered a talented employee to be a person with high development potential (45%). Only one in nine respondents

considered a person who could influence the fate of the company to be a talent. In the 2021 survey, for nearly 40% of respondents, the term talented person means someone who can make a significant impact on the current and future performance of their organisation. The prevailing pandemic has redefined the concept of talent.

In the times of crisis, the respondents considered entrepreneurship and creativity as a leading feature of talent. The changing environment in the ongoing crisis (introduction of lockdown) made business transformation a necessity (introduction of remote working, change of communication with employees, change of workflow, simplification of many procedures and new way of acquiring customers. These changes are accompanied by a digital transformation of how we think about our own business, economy or world.

At a time when knowledge and information are becoming the basis for development, the biggest problems of modern organisations will be „brain drain“, bad identification of talents or their shortage. The biggest gains in the economy are made by innovative companies, often created through the start-up formula.

6. Conclusions

Summarizing the issue of "talent management", it should be stated that a considerable challenge for companies during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis proved to be the maintenance of employee development programmes. Strategic short-sightedness of managers does not guarantee opportunities for talent development and ensuring high retention of employees, especially the talented ones. What can be seen in the actions taken by managers is a lack of appreciation for the unique value of employees and the formation of a belief that they are recognizable and important to the organisation.

In times of recession, there is a diminishing focus in organisations on talent development and new talent acquisition. organisations that decide to continue their development programmes despite the crisis situation prove to their employees that they are reliable employers and employees can trust them. This also has a positive impact on the image of these organisations and by their actions they attract other talented employees who have lost their jobs or are looking for new challenges.

In a crisis, it is important to keep employees in the organisation (especially those achieving excellent results) because they will ensure the implementation of a recovery programme that allows the company to develop after the crisis. It is therefore important to intensify employee retention.

In the era of globalisation, the economy and gaining competitive advantage therein are based on knowledge. Gone are the days when skyrocketing profits were made by owners of the means of production using cheap labor.

The organisation's task is to take care of employees who demonstrate above-average creativity, rich emotionality and strategic thinking skills. The sound thinking of these individuals requires taking time, being well organised, and being open to new solutions and opportunities in the organisation's strategies. It is important to create comfortable conditions for further intellectual development of such people in the company, for enriching knowledge and gaining experience, so that they can continually achieve excellent professional results, and thus significantly increase the key market value of the company.

But there is no doubt that the costs that crises create are too great to be left alone. The waste of scarce resources, manifested in the immobilisation of existing capital, mass unemployment, less production, as well as reduced consumption, growing poverty, individual dramas, etc., create costs that cannot find acceptance among economists and politicians.

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