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Human Resource Management in Knowledge-Intensive Services

The strategic potential of HRM in delivering value is especially demonstrated in the case of service sector companies. Due to the nature of value creation and transfer, such companies are largely human capital dependent. This is even more evident in knowledge-intensive services (KIS). There, human capital constitutes the key value transfer channel. However, the empirical evidence of the role of HRM practices in KIS is scarce, especially in the context of developing economies, as is the case of Poland. Thus, this article aims to fill this gap by analyzing the findings of a large-scale representative survey of medium and large companies operating in Poland. Research indicated a clear differentiation between manufacturing, KIS, and LKIS (less-knowledge-intensive service) companies in their approach to HRM practices. Knowledge-intensive service firms were characterized by a relatively higher common understanding of the influence of human capital (the skills and competences of employees) on the company's value and the more intensive use of professional development and knowledge sharing practices.

Keywords: human resource management, knowledge-intensive services, human capital development, knowledge sharing, competences.

Introduction

The strategic value of human resource management is primarily expressed in the ability to build an organization capable of delivering value to the customer. In general, one can observe a growing importance and responsibility of the HRM function in creating and delivering value to the organization. While human resources are one of the main costs in virtually every company (especially in the service sector), adaptation of the long-term perspective is crucial, while the costs incurred in the short term are accepted as a necessary means to deliver employee-related value in the future.

The development and proper utilization of the competence potential (KSAA – knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes) of employees in the service sector requires companies to use a specific set of human resource management practices that enable the proper functioning of employees in a given organizational setting. Especially **acquisition** (recruitment, selection, and proper adaptation of employees) and **development** (training and development, and career management) are crucial for the viability of service sector companies, particularly in areas characterized by high competition.

Theoretically, these areas of HRM should be characterized by a high degree of development of management practices aimed not only at acquiring human capital of the relevant qualitative characteristics (competences), but also at the internal development of staff within the organization. As important as the acquisition of the valuable human capital is, there is also the potential for creating the proper conditions for its effective use within the organization. For this reason, the motivation and commitment of employees in the service sector can be a key factor in the market success of these companies. This requires organizations to put the appropriate emphasis on the development of pro–efficiency and pro–development incentive systems that are characterized by high flexibility due to the internal differentiation of workers in the sector.

Service sector companies, due to the nature of value creation and value transfer to the customer, are largely human capital dependent. This is even more evident in **knowledge–intensive services (KIS)**, where the human capital constitutes the key value transfer channel. Knowledge–intensive services (also referred to as knowledge–based services or high–technology services) are defined as services provided by companies with high intellectual added value.

Knowledge–intensive firms stand out from other organizations because of the extreme significance they place on the quality and motivation of their personnel (Alvesson, 2009, p. 138). Thus, while the acquisition, retention, and development of competent employees pose a significant problem for most companies, it is even more serious in the case of KIS. The success of knowledge–intensive firms is thus directly dependent on their ability to manage human resources.

However, the empirical evidence of **the role of human resource management practices in KIS in creating and leveraging company–specific value is scarce**, especially in the context of developing economies, as is the case of Poland. This article aims to bridge this gap by providing empirical evidence based on the findings of a quantitative study (Assessment of Competency–Based Human Resources Management in the Context of Lifelong Learning) developed at the Educational Research Institute in Warsaw.

The main research question has been formulated as follows: **Are KIS firms distinct in their approach to HRM system configuration, especially in the areas of competence development and knowledge sharing?**

This issue has been analyzed in more detail in relation to some specific research problems and corresponding questions:

1. Analysis of the scope of competency–focused HRM practices:

■ Is human capital more commonly perceived as a key source of value in KIS than in other companies?

■ Are the elements of integrated competency–based HRM (HRM strategy, competency profiles/job descriptions, periodic appraisal based on competencies, and formal procedures of competency verification during recruitment and selection) more commonly used in KIS companies?

2. Analysis of approaches and tools for the development of employee competences through specific HRM processes:

■ Are there differences in the employee competence requirements of KIS companies as compared to other types of businesses?

■ What methods of competency development (e–learning, own development, learning from experienced workers/on–the–job, training courses, formal education, etc.) are more commonly used in KIS?

■ What elements of the broadly understood development system (budget for training, career paths, training effectiveness measurement, individual development plans, etc.) are used in KIS as compared to other categories of firms?

3. Analysis of the knowledge sharing process in organizations:

■ What methods of dissemination of competences are more commonly used in KIS?

This article also includes the theoretical background in which the key assumptions of the study have been presented, as has the description of research design and sampling and analysis of key findings in relation to the research on the above questions. For comparative purposes, the analyses of available study findings from Hungary and Slovakia have also been presented.

HRM in Knowledge–Intensive Services: Theoretical Background

According to the widely recognized assumptions of Bontis (1998), human capital interacts with structural capital in order to create, acquire, and use customer capital to enable the success of the organization. The value for the customer and the customer capital are generated by the interaction of human capital and structural capital. Thus, the idea of the employee as the most important asset in the organiza-

tion is currently very popular in both management literature and in practice. This is related to the general development of management sciences and the new role of human capital resulting from the transformation of the economy towards a knowledge based economy.

As the role of the service sector in the global economy is becoming more and more significant, knowledge and its creative application (especially through innovation and human capital) becomes the most important source of economic development. As noted by A. Miś (2005) in an article published almost a decade ago, knowledge becomes a key factor in socio-economic development as an element of assets influencing competences and innovativeness, and as such a major source of productivity increase. As underlined by this author (Miś, 2005), knowledge is usually downgraded to simplistic organizational activities in the human resource area, including adapting employee qualifications to the changing demands of positions. However, as noted by S. Borkowska (2010), the basis for differentiation of investments as well as other HR processes should not only be “the importance of the job position for the business processes, but also the rarity and development potential of employees.”

The major shift towards the rapid development of the service sector from industrial production can be seen in all the highly developed countries. As early as in 2004, A. Fazlagic pointed to a characteristic feature of the knowledge-based economy—the high share of the service sector in employment and GDP creation. What is even more significant, he underlined that the dynamics of knowledge-intensive services is greater than other knowledge-intensive sectors of economy (Fazlagic, 2004).

There are some distinct features of services that influence human resource management in such organizations. In relation to services in general, one can distinguish the following basic features (Makó, Csizmadia, Illéssy, Iwasaki, and Szanyi, 2010a):

- Intangibility of the product of service work,
- Perishability of the product of services, which is “temporary” and cannot be stored,
- Variability of the product of services, which is not homogeneous, as it can vary according to the persons involved (for instance through the perception of the services on the part of customer),
- Simultaneous production and consumption of the product of services, and
- Inseparability of the product of services, which is produced by the service provider and receiver together (coproduction).

These features of services themselves are behind the limited ability of companies to proceduralize the work performed. Thus, more flexibility in management

practices is needed, followed by the constant redevelopment and improvement of the processes (including HRM processes) in order to provide service on an excellent level. This perspective is backed by another feature of services, which is their considerable dependence on intangible factors and non-codified knowledge (Bontis and Fitz-enz, 2002). Bontis and Fitz-enz note that organizations need to:

1. Generate knowledge through innovation and improvisation on the part of employees,
2. Integrate knowledge in organizational systems and thus convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, and
3. Ensure that knowledge is shared through the creation of an appropriate climate and organizational culture.

P. Boxall and M. Steeneveld (1999) argue that the competitive advantage resulting from human capital is the result of the hiring employees with valuable knowledge and skills. Therefore, with regard to competence as a resource, the role of the organization is to stimulate the types of competencies that lead to behaviors that support the actual and sustained competitive advantage of the firm. Therefore, the resource-based view of the firm suggests that human resource management can influence the creation of sustainable competitive advantage through the development and use of specific competencies (Barney, 1992). However, this approach assumes that competence is a permanent asset of the company. In practice, employees are free to leave the organization and with them take their competences. One way, among others, to attract “exceptional” competences is to acquire them from the competition by “headhunting”—employees with exceptional competence (Carley, 1998).

Another distinct feature of services is the process of value creation and value transfer from the company to customers. Value creating processes in the value chain can be characterized as close to the client (local) or distant from the client (remote) (Namasiyavam and Denizci, 2006). In relation to services, most of the value is both created and transferred through local value creating processes. As noted by Namasiyavam and Denizci, even in the case of services where the value is created in distant processes (as in the hospitality sector), it is transferred to the customer by the first line employees, whose competences are crucial to final customer satisfaction. Thus, in services requiring high intensity of contacts, the intellectual capital is more egocentric (on an individual level) than socio-centric (on a society level) (Davenport and Snyder, 2004). From this perspective the services, and especially knowledge-intensive services, are highly employee-dependent.

Therefore, the development and proper utilization of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of employees in the service sector requires companies to use a specific set of human resource management practices.

HRM in KIS: Research Evidence from Poland

Research Design and Sampling

Human resource management practice dependency on the knowledge–intensity of services offered has been a major perspective of empirical research based on a representative sample of medium and large enterprises in Poland. This was an exploratory study focused on primary data collection. The survey was conducted using a CAPI (Computer Aided Personal Interview) method with a structured questionnaire containing open and closed questions. A total of $n=941$ responses were received, including 811 from medium–sized and 130 from large enterprises, within 282 KIS, 270 LKIS, and 389 manufacturing companies. In the majority of the companies, the respondents to the survey were managers/directors of HR departments and in case of some medium–sized companies, owners/top management representatives.

Analyzed companies have been layered by selected sectors of economic activity, categorized as knowledge–intensive services (KIS), less–knowledge–intensive services (LKIS), and production (manufacturing). For the purposes of the study, the NACE European classification codes were adapted in compliance with the classification of economic activities applicable in Poland (the PKD 2007). Stratified sampling was performed on the basis of the number of employees and PKD classification code, determining the values for each of the selected clusters (substrata).

Table No. 1. Research Sample and Population Size of the Analyzed Companies

| Type of company | Population (according to CSO) | | | Number of companies surveyed | | | Share of companies surveyed in the total population (in %) | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Medium | Large | TOTAL | Medium | Large | TOTAL | Medium | Large | TOTAL |
| KIS | 7929 | 1107 | 9036 | 248 | 34 | 282 | 3.13 | 3.07 | 3.12 |
| LKIS | 7121 | 1141 | 8262 | 235 | 35 | 270 | 3.30 | 3.07 | 3.27 |
| Production | 9867 | 1850 | 11717 | 328 | 61 | 389 | 3.32 | 3.30 | 3.32 |
| TOTAL | 24917 | 4098 | 29015 | 811 | 130 | 941 | 3.25 | 3.17 | 3.24 |

Source: Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), *Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi w oparciu o kompetencje. Perspektywa uczenia się przez całe życie* [Competency–based human resource management: Lifelong learning perspective], IBE, Warsaw, 2013.

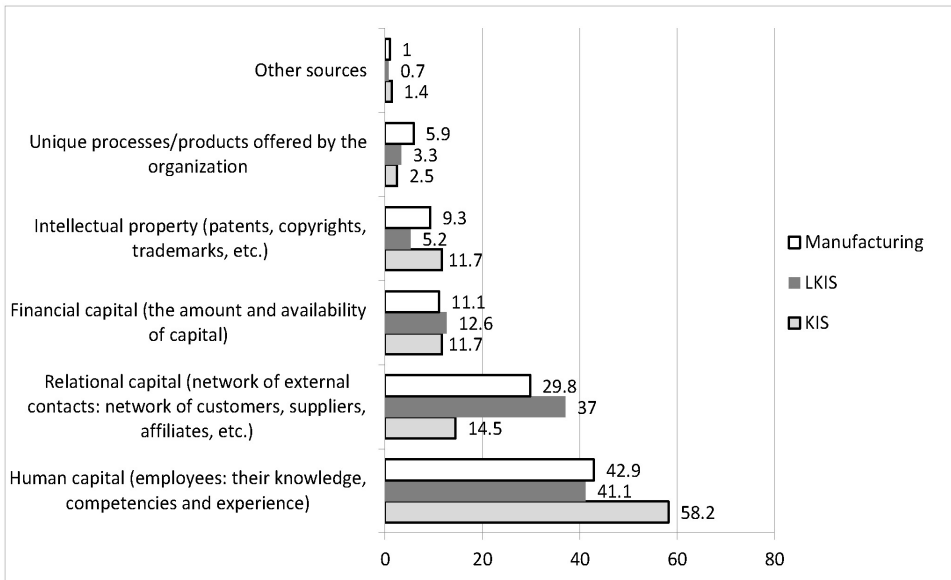
In total, the study was intended to cover 3.45% of the population of large– and medium–sized enterprises in Poland, with the actual sample accounting for 3.24% of the population (Table No. 1). In every studied subsample, the results were obtained

for more than 3% of the population of enterprises, which (while maintaining the sampling assumptions presented above) justifies extrapolation of the results to the entire population and generalization of the study results.

Research Findings

Research covered a broad range of topics involving HRM and factors differentiating the approach of firms to people management (including the size of the company, for example). However, this article focuses on the knowledge intensity of services as a key differentiating factor. It is for this reason that only certain selected issues will be analyzed in depth. In general, the research indicated a clear differentiation between manufacturing, KIS, and LKIS companies in their approach to human resource management practices.

Graph No. 1. The Most Important Source of Value for the Organization [in %]

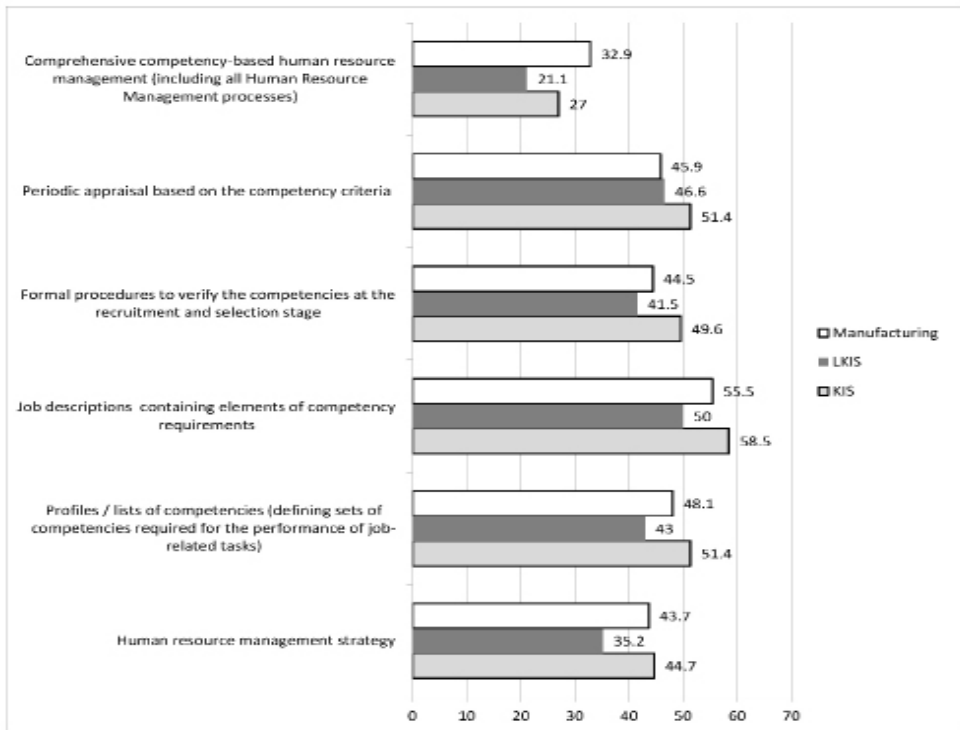


Source: Own development based on the research findings presented in Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), 2013, op. cit.

First of all, one may note a clear differentiation among the firms in relation to their approach to human capital as a source of company value due to company knowledge-intensity (Graph No. 1). It is clear that knowledge-intensive service

firms consider human capital (operationalized as employees—their knowledge, competencies, and experience) as a key source of value. They differ in this respect from both LKIS and manufacturing enterprises (for which HC also provides an important source of value). Such firms also strongly rely on relational capital (operationalized as a network of external contacts—network of customers, suppliers, affiliates, etc.). This source of value is most important for less–knowledge–intensive service firms. There are no clear differences between company categories in relation to other sources of value—financial capital, intellectual property, and unique processes.

Graph No. 2. Elements of the Human Resource Management System Used by the Companies [in%]



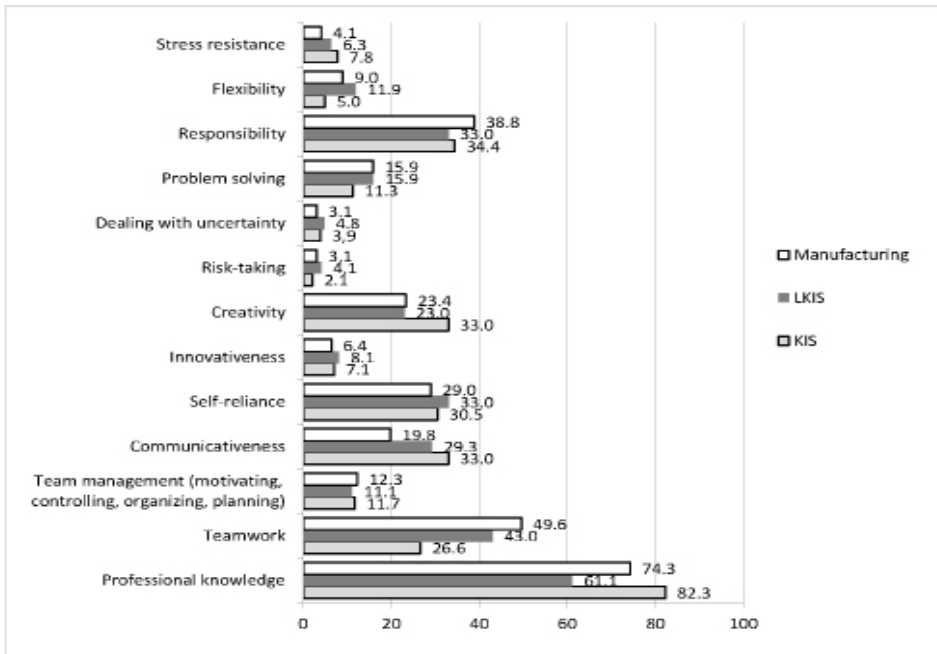
Source: Own development based on the research findings presented in Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), 2013, op. cit.

In terms of the elements of the human resource management system, one can clearly see a differentiation between knowledge–intensive and less–knowledge–intensive services (Graph No. 2), with the differences between KIS and manufacturing less distinctive or non–existent. Clearly, KIS companies employ all the elements of a HRM system focused on employee competences more often:

- Periodic appraisal based on competency criteria,
- Formal procedures to verify the competencies at the recruitment and selection stage,
- Job descriptions containing elements of competency requirements, and
- Profiles / lists of competencies.

One of the differentiating factors is the expectations of employers with respect to the key competencies of the job applicants (Graph No. 3). One can clearly see higher expectations from job applicants in relation to the three competencies—**professional knowledge, communication skills, and creativity**—in knowledge-intensive service firms. Moreover, knowledge-intensive firms often expect candidates to demonstrate responsibility and self-reliance. Manufacturing companies, in addition to professional knowledge and skills, usually expect teamwork, responsibility, and self-reliance. Interestingly, virtually the same set of core competencies is expected in less knowledge-intensive services, which also expect job applicants to be more communicative.

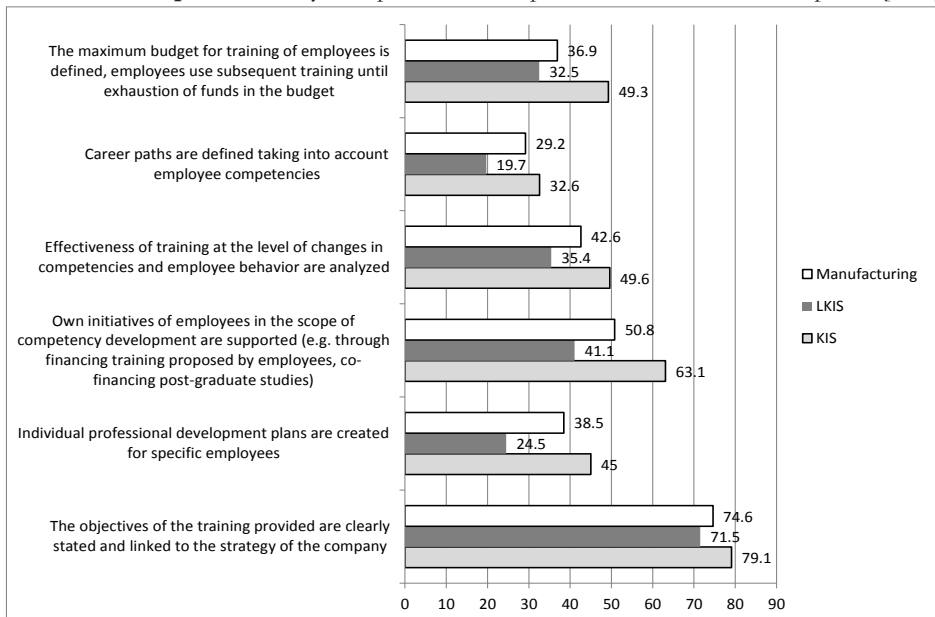
Graph No. 3. Key Competences Required by the Company from Job Applicants [in %]



Source: Own development based on the research findings presented in Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), 2013, op. cit.

Another differentiating factor of knowledge-intensive service firms is their approach to key competence development activities (Graph No. 4). Generally speaking, one can observe a clear differentiation between KIS and LKIS enterprises, although not as distinct as when compared to manufacturing companies. First of all, KIS firms designate certain amounts of money to developmental activities in the form of a predefined budget more often. Funds are then utilized up to the budgeted amount. This allows for a more systematic and planned approach to the knowledge and skill development of employed workers in relation to LKIS and manufacturing firms, which apply this perspective less often. Also, KIS firms support the developmental initiatives of employees themselves more often (by financing training proposed by employees or co-financing postgraduate studies). This indicates that a more proactive attitude towards development on the part of employees is encouraged and accepted in this category of companies. Moreover, the effectiveness of training at the level of changes in competencies and employee behaviors are analyzed in KIS firms more often. Interestingly, tools such as career paths and individual development plans are being used to a comparable extent in both KIS and manufacturing companies, which is clearly more often in the two than in LKIS companies.

Graph No. 4. Key Competence Development Activities of the Companies [in %]



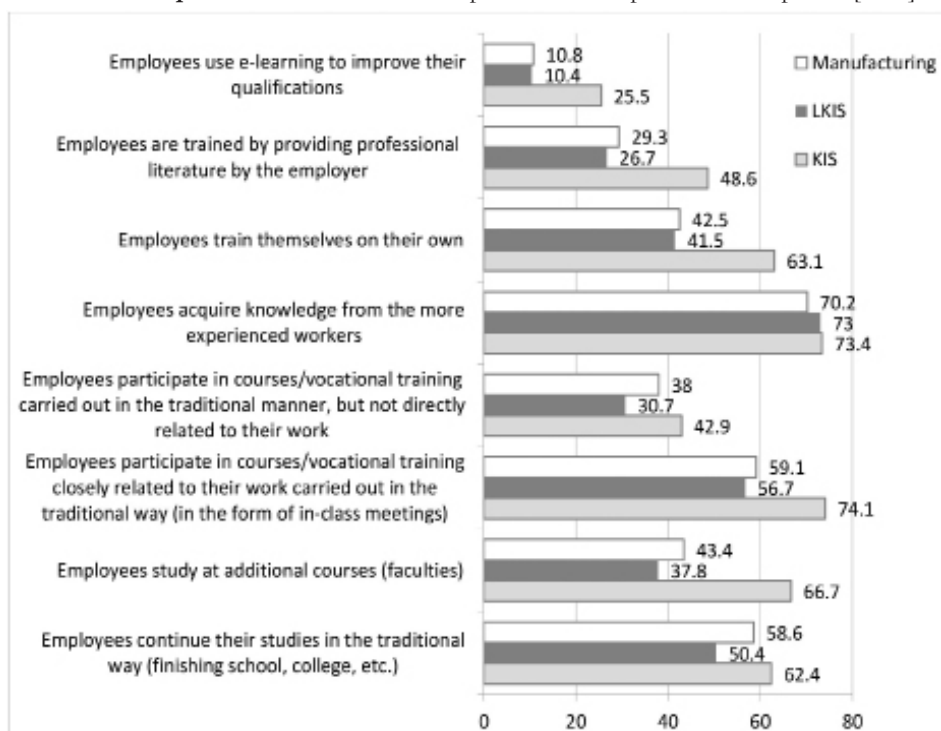
Source: Own development based on the research findings presented in: Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), 2013, op. cit.

Knowledge-intensive service firms also use some employee competence development methods distinctly more often (Graph No. 5). For example, when compared to both LKIS and manufacturing enterprises, they are more eager in their use of such forms of development as:

- e-learning,
- Supply of professional literature,
- Self-studying, and
- Participation in additional courses.

Interestingly, there is no difference between categories of firms in relation to knowledge sharing (acquisition of knowledge from more experienced workers) as well as continuing studies in the traditional way (by finishing school, college, etc.).

Graph No. 5. Methods of Competence Development in Companies [in %]



Source: Own development based on the research findings presented in: Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), 2013, op. cit.

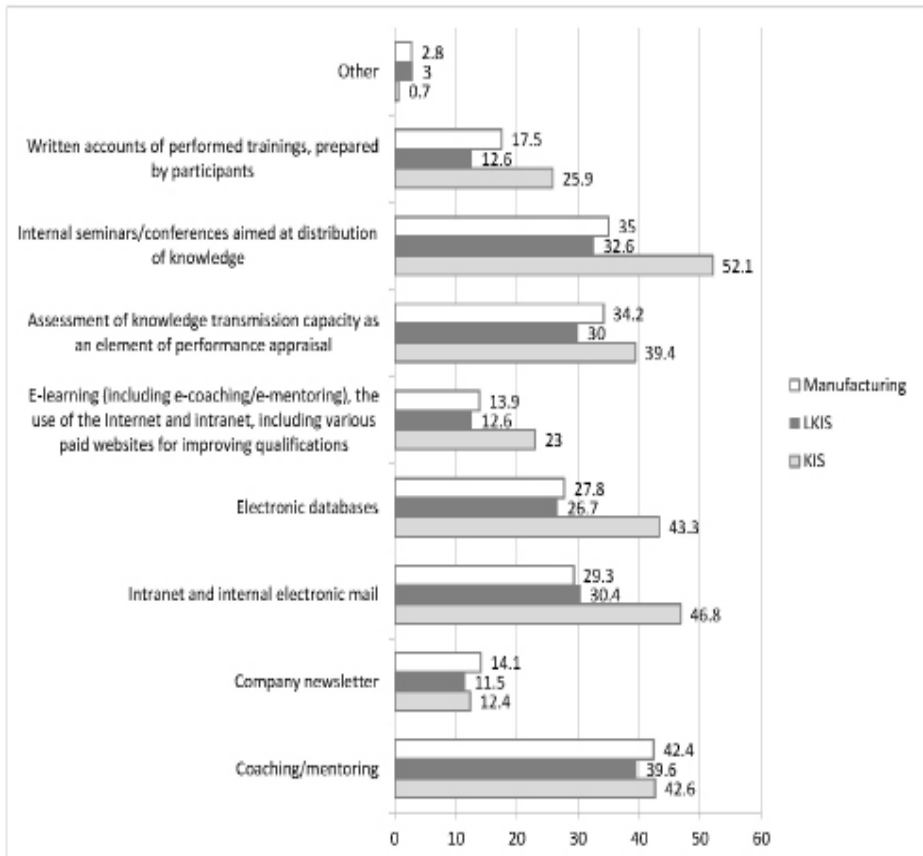
With virtually no difference in terms of on-the-job knowledge sharing, it is even more interesting to see the diversity of approaches in other (more organizationally-based) knowledge sharing methods. As can be seen (Graph No. 6), knowl-

edge-intensive services are characterized by a distinctively more common use of a majority of available knowledge sharing methods:

- Internal seminars/conferences aimed at the distribution of knowledge,
- Electronic databases,
- Intranet and internal electronic mail,
- Written accounts of completed training, prepared by participants, and
- Assessment of knowledge transmission capacity as an element of performance appraisal.

Interestingly, only the use of company newsletters can be pointed to as being more common in the other categories of the analyzed enterprises (LKIS and manufacturing).

Graph No. 6. Methods of Knowledge Sharing Used by Companies [in %]



Source: Own development based on the research findings presented in: Sienkiewicz Ł. (Editor), 2013, op. cit.

The empirical evidence of the role of HRM processes in KIS in creating and leveraging company-specific value is scarce, especially in the context of developing economies, as is the case of Poland. Thus, it is difficult to analyze the relevance of the research findings by comparison or to validate their practical usefulness. One recent study focuses on knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) in Hungary and Slovakia (Mako et al. 2010a, 2010b). The research findings of this study will be used to provide a basis for comparative analysis of HRM processes in knowledge-intensive services.

Research Evidence from Hungary and Slovakia

Results of a study undertaken by a team led by prof. C. Mako (Mako et al. 2010a, 2010b) refer to a slightly different group of knowledge-intensive service companies. They focus on knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS). The study, based on literature screening and with the intention of producing internationally comparable data, defines the knowledge-intensive professional services offered for other companies as “business services”—IT services (both software and hardware), administrative and legal services, financial services, and R&D (Mako et al., 2010a). Thus, full comparability between studies is absent due to sampling differences. However, some conclusions can be drawn on the basis of comparison.

The Hungarian-Slovakian study was performed on a sample of 197 KIBS companies in Hungary and 97 companies in Slovakia. It was based on the multi-stage stratified sampling method (Mako et al. 2010a). As in the Polish study, the basic economic activity of the firms as covered by the NACE code was used as the stratification variable (where in the Polish study micro and small companies were excluded from the sample). The fieldwork took place over the June-October period in Hungary and over a four-month period in Slovakia (between October 2008 and January 2009).

As to the analyzed sources of competitiveness, out of a total of eleven factors, the first five were rather similar for the companies of both countries—reliability, quality, customer orientation, flexibility and speed of respond to market requirements, and experience (Mako et al., 2010a). This approach is somewhat different than in the case of the Polish study. However, the majority of the factors may be treated as human capital related (egocentric factors) since they mostly rely on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of employees.

In terms of knowledge and skills required by employers, the most important aspects of knowledge as evaluated by the employers interviewed in both countries were as follows (Mako et al., 2010b):

- Professional–technical skills (Hungary 93.7% and Slovakia 98.1%),
- Reliability in work (Hungary 97.5% and Slovakia 89.1%), and
- Customer–centered attitude (Hungary 90.3% and Slovakia 86.5%).

These findings are in line with Polish study findings, where professional knowledge, responsibility, communicativeness, and self–reliance are deemed the most important competences.

With respect to methods of knowledge development in the KIBS sector in Hungary and Slovakia (Table No. 2), one should note the high importance of the informal consultation process with managers/other employees (which can be compared to “learning from more experienced” workers in the Polish study) as well as on–the–job training. However, the findings for Slovakia bear a greater resemblance to those of Poland than Hungary in relation to participation in standard courses and/or educational schemes.

Table No. 2. Methods of Knowledge Development in the KIBS Sector in Hungary and Slovakia [in %]

| Methods of knowledge development | Hungary n=196 | Slovakia n=97 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Standard courses/educational schemes | 45.5 | 60.4 |
| Ongoing training designed according to the needs of the firm | 64.3 | 69.6 |
| Consulting with management/other employees | 80.3 | 75.5 |
| On–the–job training (OJT) | 74.1 | 70.3 |
| Attending professional fairs and expositions | 67.5 | 44.3 |
| Job rotation | 31.1 | 40.1 |
| Supporting cooperation between organizational units | 62.6 | 63.3 |
| Teamwork | 57.1 | 74.0 |

Source: Mako et al., 2010a.

Moreover, in Slovakia, as in the case of the Polish study, there is more autonomy in the proactive approach of employees with respect to training. A total of 24.5% of the firms finance courses selected by an employee, as compared to 16.1% in Hungary, and 50.7% of the firms organize and finance courses for employees, as compared to 31.2% in Hungary.

Summing up, the KIBS sector in Slovakia and Hungary is characterized by relative similarity of approach towards HRM practices in relation to employee acquisition and development as compared to Poland.

Conclusions

Knowledge-intensive service companies have been found to be characterized by a relatively higher common understanding of the value of human capital (the skills and competences of employees) as well as of the impact of employee competence (or lack thereof) on the competitive position and performance of the company. The theoretical assumptions that KIS companies are highly employee-dependent seem to have found support in empirical study findings. However, this awareness is often not supported by coordinated efforts in the acquisition and development of firm-specific human capital. Especially non-evident are differences between KIS and manufacturing companies with respect to aspects of integrated competency-based HRM (HRM strategy, competency profiles/job descriptions, periodic appraisal based on competencies, and formal procedures of competencies verification during recruitment and selection). However, significant differentiation can be seen in comparison with less knowledge-intensive services.

Analysis of approaches and tools used in the development of employee competencies through specific HRM processes in KIS, LKIS, and manufacturing companies provided insight into the differences in key employee competence requirements. KIS firms are characterized by a strong emphasis on professional knowledge, communicativeness as well as creativity (with this last competence required significantly more often as compared to both LKIS and manufacturing firms). As to competency development, one can conclude that generally all methods and techniques are employed on a larger scale in KIS firms. The most significant differences are noted in relation to the planned approach to training and strong support of developmental initiatives of the employees themselves in such enterprises. Also, participation in different methods of competence development is clearly more common in KIS as compared to other types of businesses. KIS companies are also characterized by a broader scope of knowledge sharing methods used in the organization. Thus, one can conclude that KIS firms are more aware of the importance of knowledge sharing activities as they incorporate a broader set of KM tools and practices.

Thus, one can conclude that the KIS firms are, to a large extent, distinct in their approach to HRM system configuration by placing greater importance on competence development and knowledge sharing activities. This observation is in line with both theoretical assumption presented at the beginning of this article and the business models applied within these companies, which are highly knowledge-dependent.

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Zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi w usługach wiedzochłonnych

Streszczenie

Strategiczny potencjał ZZL w dostarczaniu wartości jest szczególnie istotny w przypadku przedsiębiorstw sektora usługowego, które ze względu na charakter tworzenia i sposób dostarczania wartości, są w dużej mierze zależne od kapitału ludzkiego. Problem ten jest szczególnie wyraźny w usługach opartych na wiedzy (wiedzochłonnych), gdzie kapitał ludzki stanowi kluczowy kanał transferu wartości. Jednakże badania empiryczne roli praktyk ZZL w usługach wiedzochłonnych jest rzadkością, zwłaszcza w kontekście krajów rozwijających się, tak jak w przypadku Polski. Artykuł ma więc na celu uzupełnienie tej wyraźnej luki. Wyniki reprezentatywnego badania na próbie średnich i dużych firm działających w Polsce wykazały wyraźne zróżnicowanie pomiędzy firmami produkcyjnymi, usługami wiedzochłonnymi i usługami w mniejszym stopniu opartymi na wiedzy, w ich podejściu do praktyk ZZL. Oparte na wiedzy firmy usługowe charakteryzowały się relatywnie większym zrozumieniem znaczenia kapitału ludzkiego (umiejętności i kompetencji pracowników) w kreowaniu wartości firmy i częstszym wykorzystaniem narzędzi rozwoju zawodowego pracowników oraz wymiany i rozpowszechniania wiedzy.

Ł u k a s z S i e n k i e w i c z holds a degree in human capital management awarded by the Warsaw School of Economics, where he is currently employed as an Associate Professor with the Department of Human Capital Development. He specializes in human capital management and labor market issues. Expert with the European Employment Observatory of the European Commission and national skills forecasting expert for CEDE FOP.