

# HRM CHALLENGES OF SMES IN THE LIBEREC REGION

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## Abstract:

The paper aims to introduce specifics of human resource management in small and medium sized enterprises. Nowadays companies have to face a lack of potential employees in the Czech labour market. For small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which represent the majority of business entities in the Czech Republic and which are limited with the scope of HR activities and financial support, finding of the best employees means a big challenge. The theoretical part describes specifics of HRM in SMEs and its current trend including employer branding. The second part of the paper introduces some challenges which companies have to face to become an attractive employer. Challenges are pointed out on data of selected SMEs in the Liberec region and in selected EU countries collected within the SHARPEN project.

## **Introduction**

The paper focuses on the topic of human resource management in small and medium sized enterprises. The aim is to highlight trends and challenges which SMEs have to face in current business environment. People – human resources – human capital is a crucial factor of companies' success. This topic is analysed within the SHARPEN project (SMEs HRM Attraction, Retention and Performance Enhancement Network). This 3 year project aims to analyse specifics and challenges in HRM processes in SMEs. Namely it opens door to cooperation between universities and SMEs in 5 different European regions. Primary data presented in this paper were collected during the pilot shadowing and qualitative and quantitative survey within 5 Czech SME in the Liberec region and other 9 SMEs in Finland, Germany, Lithuania and the UK. The pilot questionnaire in the Liberec region was distributed among 5 Czech firms in Liberec region in April 2017. Students who participated in SHARPEN project in these companies collected quantitative as well as qualitative data during their shadowing phase in the first year of the project. The questioned either HR managers or employees responsible for HR processes in these SMEs. Even though this constitutes a relatively small and not representative sample, the results have in a lot of ways been in line with the knowledge gained in this paper's literature review. For other named countries students used the same methodology and personal approach to get comparable data across all 5 named countries. As this was a pilot year data collection aim to help the identification of crucial factor and prepare environment for quantitative blanket survey planned in the project in autumn 2017.

## 1. SMEs and Human Resource Management

It is often suggested in the Management literature that Human Resource Management (HRM) is in many SMEs performed in a poor manner (Dundon and Wilkinson, 2003). Furthermore, some authors argue that SMEs which are unable to efficiently deal with HRM issues often fail in their business (Dess et al., 2003). One of the reasons for why HRM in SMEs be inefficient is of course the fact that there is no HR department or specialist in the firm (Koubek, 2011). In itself that does not mean that the firms' managers cannot perform good HR, it however puts another burden on their shoulders, which can lead to the aforementioned inefficiency. Another reason, which is connected with the previous one, is that when there is no full-time HR worker, the HRM issues are seen as important only when they begin to acutely interfere with the firms' business (Tocher and Rutherford, 2009).

It is not surprising to state that SMEs are disadvantaged on the labour market when compared to large firms. Large firms have the necessary resources to perform efficient HRM and when they do, it pays off. A positive relationship has been found between HRM and overall performance of large firms (Young, 2009; Saridakis, 2017). Research suggests that the same applies to SMEs (Michie and Sheehan, 2008; Patel and Cardon, 2010). Some authors (e.g. Cardon and Stevens, 2004; Hornsby and Kuratko, 2003; Koubek, 2011), put forward that HRM is even more important to SMEs than it is to larger firms, since SMEs can be much more affected by the quality of their personnel than large firms.

## 2. Current HRM challenges of SMEs in Europe

According to the European Commission, youth unemployment rate in 2016 in EU-28 was 18,7 %. In the Czech Republic, it was 10,5 % which was the second lowest rate in the EU-28 (European Commission, 2017a). Due to the fact of the low unemployment rate, it is very difficult to get reliable and hardworking employees.

Based on the literature overview the current trends of HRM in SMEs were identified as (Horváthová, Bláha and Čopíková, 2016):

- Recruitment of young and technically skilled people (including graduates).
- Using of social media as a suitable communication channel for recruitment.
- Develop an employer brand.
- Employee retention.

In many SMEs, there is a need of **recruitment of young and technically skilled people** (called as Generation Y). Together with this issue it is important to start working with social media. An important part of recruitment is a right choice of a communication channel. Social networks are one of the best recruitment tools and the most common social networks nowadays are LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. According to *International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) Institute for Business Value* and its research called *HR managers*, social networks are regularly used by 66 % of them and another 26 % are learning to use it. 42 % of HR managers use social networks as well as corporate communications and the same percentage is learned (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2013).

Just hiring young people is not enough for future prosperity of SMEs. Young people nowadays have completely different needs and desires than older generations. Even their working habits and expectations are different (The Economist, 2016). According to the *Gen Y*

and the *World of Work* survey from 2013 by the global specialist recruitment group *Hays*, interesting work (60 %), job security (47 %) and personal wealth (40 %) belong among the three most important expectations of respondents in their professional careers. The three most important factors that make up a choice of the future employer include training and development programs (53 %), offered benefits (41 %) and flexibility (37 %). We can also expect that representatives of Generation Y will not be working for the same employer for many years. 28 % of respondents want to change 1-3 employers, 46 % even 4-6 employers, 16 % 7-9 employers and 10 % would like to go through 10 and more employers (Hays, 2013).

## 2.1 “Generation X”

People of Generation X were born between the years 1965 and 1981. In the Czech Republic, they are called also *Husák’s children* according to Gustav Husák who was the president of Czechoslovakia between 1975 and 1989. Taylor and Gao (2014) describe Generation X as people who grew up in financial, family and social doubt. In employment, they are loyal and sometimes passive. Anyway, they want to learn new skills and to be well employable. Their motto is “*To work hard and play hard*”. They like stability and do not want changes. Very often, is for them their work more important than their family and they are faced with the burnout syndrome. The divorce rate has dramatically increased in this Generation. They are not used to discuss with the boss about their personal needs. They do not like conflicts. Money is a big motivation for them. Very difficult for them is the fact that they are unable to work with modern technologies as well as the younger generation. According to Kubátová and Kukulková (2013), one of the most typical features of Generation X is long-term employment. Most individuals of this generation have found a job immediately after their graduation where they are working since this time. For these people it is typical to stay at one place where they have found territory.

## 2.2 Generation Y

In recent years, new terms such as *Generation Y*, *Millennials*, *Generation Next*, *the Net Generation*, *Echo Boomers*, *iGeneration*, *Generation Me* or *the Next Great Generation* have emerged. Who are they? What are their interest and dreams? How to deal with them?

Under the all terms mentioned above are understand people who were born between 1980 and 1995 (by some experts between 1980 and 1992). These people have grown up during a time of technological and economic disruption and currently, they are starting off their professional career and entering the labour market. In 2025, the global labour force will be composed of these people by 75 %. Over the next five years, this group will be in leadership positions and will have a growing influence on a decision-making of organisations and companies (Horváthová, Bláha and Čopíková, 2016).

According to a report of *Price Waterhouse Coopers* (PWC), there are several differences compared with an older generation. Generation Y wants to have a meaningful work. Their career is supposed to be one of choice, not one chosen out of desperation. Moreover, young people are more flexible than their parents (PwC, 2011).

Generation Y was born into a period of relative peace. Since their early childhood, they have been persuaded that they can achieve everything they want. People from the Generation Y are highly ambitious and finding an interesting job full of challenges and freedoms is very important for them. Their colleagues are more like friends to them. They require a higher

standard of living, feel more responsible for their social security, and put emphasis on self-actualization (Kazdová and Smrčková, 2012).

The biggest difference between Generations X and Y is in their personal life, especially for the Generation Y partnership and family relationships are on the first place. They work very efficiently, flexibly, and can make time for their own hobbies, sport and relaxation. They prefer health, manage their duties and activities in a completely flexible regime, and at the same time, they come up with lots of new ideas and innovations that they really care about. They need an individual approach to development and education. Coaching allows them to find their own solutions in their career and personal life. The greatest motivation for them is meaningful work that they enjoy and that develops them. They are very creative, they say what they think and want to achieve the best results. Very often, however, they lack “drive”, the endurance to work for a long time to achieve a predetermined goal (Kazdová and Smrčková, 2012).

Generation Y is literally living with modern technology. Technology is absolutely natural to them. High digital literacy is the main characteristic that distinguishes them from the older generations. These young people want to be online, always communicate, write own blogs, have own websites, tweet, respond, publish their opinions, experiences, photos, videos, use social networks and create teams that they like to work for. It is a generation for which it is important to work in teams, to use modern technology, to work in own and comfortable space (Home Office) and in an own way (part-time, space-sharing) and to communicate globally and to work interculturally (Kazdová and Smrčková, 2012).

Other demands, attitudes and overall expectations of this generation lead to a change in style of work and communication in the relationship of employee-employer. In this understanding has a very important role the HR staff. Based on the knowledge of differences and needs of this generation, HR staff should change established practices to adopt Generation Y. Line managers will have to prepare themselves for this generation coming to the teams. They will have to prepare for someone, who needs more attention. If organisation fails to adequately respond to the specifics and needs of Generation Y, it will be unable to fully exploit the potential offered by this group of workers (Horváthová, Bláha and Čopíková, 2016).

### **2.3 Generation Z**

Youths born between the years 1995 to the present are members of the newest net generation, defined as Generation Z. These youths were born into a totally different technological world than what their predecessors, called Generation Y, were. It is the first generation to be born into a completely digital world (Geck, 2007). What differentiates these adolescents from those of every other generation is that they are the most electronically connected generation in history. One key difference from Generation Y is that most members of Gen Z don't remember a time before social media. As a result, they tend to live much more online and via their smartphones.

### **2.4 “Generation Alpha” of “Always-On Generation”**

These people are or will be born between 2011 and 2025, in other words, only in the 21st century. Thanks to the Internet, since their early childhood they have easy access to people, information and all world knowledge. The Internet is for them an *external brain*. They are impatient and not capable of deeper thinking. Generation Alpha grows at a time of general population ageing caused mainly by the baby boom of the 1960s and low birth rates in

following years. They will be those who will take care of older generation. Work fluctuations are assumed unless the employer offers them the right conditions (Martin and Jackson, 2010; Rezlerová, 2009; Kubátová and Kukulková, 2013).

### **3. Social media in recruitment**

Social media is a broad category, encompassing practices such as podcasting, blogging, text messaging, internet videos, and HR e-mail marketing, which are some of the more widespread applications used in recruitment (Joos, 2008).

What makes social media unique is that they allow the users to make a public profile and make their social network visible to others. Communication takes place primarily between humans who already are a part of their extended social network. This gives the opportunity to expand the social network, which can help active job seekers find a job and help employers find the job seekers.

However, there are some limitations to the use of social media in the recruitment process. It is easy to destroy an organisation's reputation through social media and there is also some uncertainty related to social media and the number of qualified applicant for a position or whether the use of social media also leads to a higher number of not qualified applicants.

Nevertheless, if social media are capable of destroying an organisation's reputation, they should probably be capable of helping to build a good reputation as well. The use of social media for organisations has benefits such as free, unlimited use and shorter response time. Social media can be also useful for attract potential employees and because of the evolved use of social media in recruiting and employer branding campaigns, it is found to be important to assess whether this way of using social media actually work (Sivertzen, 2013).

According to a survey by *Cisco* from 2013 which was attended by 1,800 respondents, 90 % of Generation Y check e-mail or news on social networks before going to school or work. These people are obsessed with real-time information. It is no wonder, therefore, that more than half of respondents (56 %) said that possible ban on access to social networks in the workplace is a reason why they would not want to work in a company (Mediaguru, 2013).

### **4. Employer Branding of SMEs**

It is well known that a high employee turnover and internal conflicts may cause severe damage to productivity and company income. In order to prevent that, employer branding is focused on getting a good reputation for both current and future employees. First of all, it is needed to define the concept of branding, according to Swystun (2007), "a brand is a mixture of attributes, tangible and intangible, symbolized in a trademark, which if managed properly, creates value and influence".

Edwards (2010) argues that "employer branding is an activity where principles of marketing are applied to HR activities". Professor Edwards compares employer branding with product branding, this last one considers how a product is represented to customers while employer branding considers current and potential employees as "branding targets".

According to Bax (2011), "employer branding is about delivering an authentic and compelling experience to candidates and employees alike by breathing the corporate values". That means

that an employer branding strategy is a “focused corporate message to current and potential employees that conveys the company’s culture and identity in a truthful and compelling manner”. Obviously, he remarked that a long-term vision is needed to nurture your organizational culture this cannot be just a quick fix or an advertising campaign to generate a rush of new applicants.

## **5. Characteristics of the Liberec region**

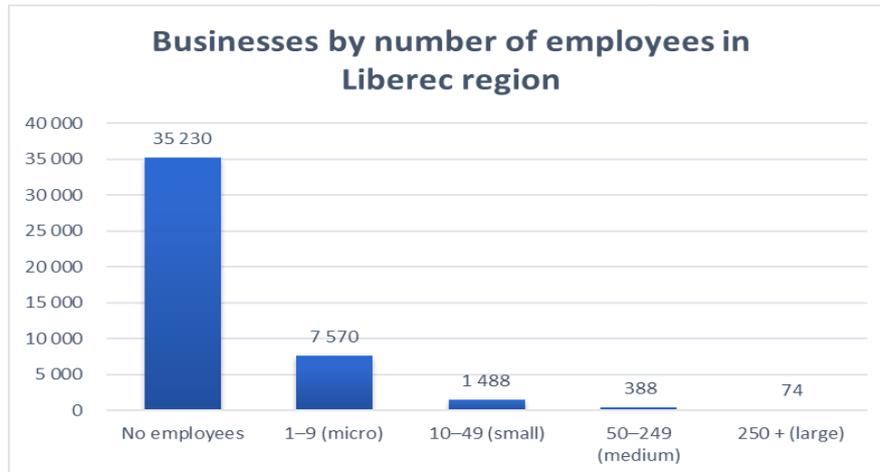
The Liberec region is situated in the north of Czech Republic (CZ) and is classified as a NUTS 3 region. It is one of the smallest regions of the CZ both in area (3 163 km<sup>2</sup>) and population (440 636). The number of inhabitants has been slowly increasing, with the exception of year 2012, since the year 2005. Significant proportion of the population growth (422 inhabitants, 48 % of overall growth) is due to international migration, with the most people arriving throughout the year 2016 being from Slovakia, Mongolia and Ukraine. The average age of inhabitants has been steadily growing for the past three decades, reaching almost 42 years of age in the last year. Additionally, the productive part of the population has been declining for the past decade reaching 65.1 % of overall population. Many aspects of the region are influenced by its neighbourhood with Germany and Poland. (CZSO, 2017a)

### **5.1 Business environment and the labour market in the Liberec region**

In the year 2016, there have been 218 500 economically active inhabitants in the Liberec region. 9 600 of these were unemployed, making the unemployment rate 4.4 %. This is the lowest unemployment rates since 2011 and is forecasted to further decline in the following months. In comparison, the CZ as a whole was experiencing an unemployment rate of 3.6 % in the last quarter of 2016 (CZSO, 2017b). Average monthly wage in 2016 was 27 326 CZK in Liberec, which is 2.65 % higher than the national average of 26 643 CZK. Most workers (37 %) were employed in the manufacturing sector followed by wholesale and retail trade, human health and social work activities and education. (CZSO, 2017a)

In terms of number of businesses operating in given CZ-NACE category, most businesses in Liberec region fall into the wholesale and retail trade category, followed by manufacturing and construction (MPSV, 2017). As to number of employees, the situation in Liberec is comparable to the situation in the whole CZ. The graph No.1 below shows that most businesses have no employees and the higher the number of employees gets, the lower number of businesses there is (CZSO, 2017c). SMEs thus represent 99 % of all companies and guarantee a large number of workplaces. For these reasons, SMEs’ development is one of urgent points in the Liberec region economic agenda and also in the whole Czech Republic and the European Union (SMEs here are defined according to European Commission, 2017b).

**Figure 1: Businesses by number of employees**



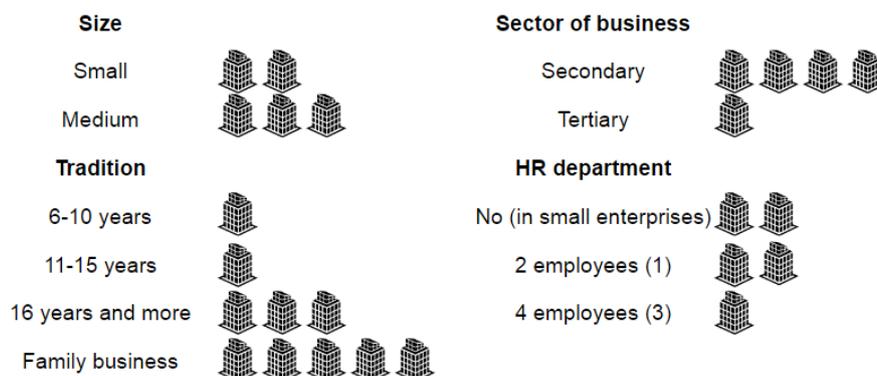
Source: CZSO, 2017c. *Ekonomické subjekty v Libereckém kraji k 31. 12. 2016*. Available at: [https://www.czso.cz/csu/xl/170125\\_res](https://www.czso.cz/csu/xl/170125_res)

In summary, Liberec region is in a similar situation as the rest of the country. Population is getting older, number of productive inhabitants is getting smaller and there are not enough workers. This situation is especially challenging to SMEs, who constitute the majority of businesses in Liberec region. Large manufacturing firms attract most of the available workforce and SMEs are left with no or less qualified workers.

## 5.2 Challenges of SMEs in the Liberec region

In this chapter the author present finding of the pilot qualitative survey done within the first year of the SHARPEN project in 5 chosen SMEs in the Liberec region. For charting of HRM in SMEs, we have chosen 5 different SMEs operating in different industries. Figure 2 shows the basic characteristics of these SMEs. Two of our chosen companies were small sized (10–49 employees) and three are medium sized (50–249 employees). Four of them operate in the secondary sector (production and industry) and only one operates in the tertiary sector. All of these companies have long-term tradition and all of them consider themselves a family business. Two of the companies’ did not have an HR department, 2 of the chosen SMEs have 2 employees in an HR department and one medium sized had 4 employees in this department.

**Figure 2: Characteristics of chosen SMEs**



Source: Sharpen survey 2017, own elaboration

Following table shows HRM functions that have been identified as most and least often used in the chosen SMEs.

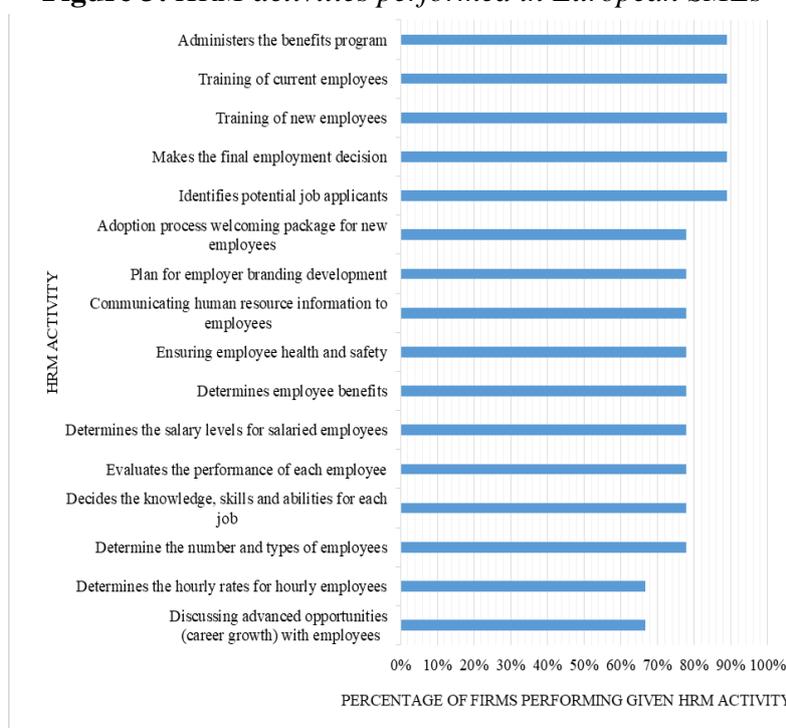
**Table 1: HRM activities in selected SMEs in the Liberec region**

HRM functions and activities which are performed in the chosen SMEs	
Most often	Rare
Determining the number and types of employees	Benefits programme
Identifying potential job applicants	Discussing advanced opportunities (career growth) with employees
Identify knowledge, skills and abilities for each job	Talent management
Training of new employees	Plan for employer branding development

Source: Sharpen survey, 2017, own elaboration

Table 1 points out the areas which chosen SMEs in the Liberec region emphasised as the most common and rare. Basic activities done by most of the SMEs were in the process of recruitment - Identifying potential job applicants, HRM planning - Determining the number and types of employees, job definition - Identifying knowledge, skills and abilities for each job and training of new employees (induction process). On the other hand SMEs do not often developed benefits programme, talent management programmes and career growth and plans for employer branding. The also do not use social media very often, especially in connection with the generation Y and Z specific approach.

**Figure 3: HRM activities performed in European SMEs**



Source: SHARPEN survey 2017, own elaboration

Comparing to Czech data other analysed SMEs in other four selected regions in the project show that these SMEs seem to pay more attention to HRM activities (see Figure 3). However based on the qualitative survey done in these 9 SMEs across 4 regions and case studies these companies notify similar challenges in difficulties to attract young generation, using social media for recruitment and make an attractive reward system based on the evaluation of employees.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the paper is to introduce specifics, challenges and trends of human resource management in small and medium sized enterprises. In the first part there introduced specifics of the human resource management in small and medium sized enterprises. The authors also point out challenges and trends SMEs have to face in human resource activities, mainly in connection with specifics of generation Y and Z and also shaping of an employer brand.

In the practical part there are presented results of the pilot survey done between selected SMEs in 5 different European regions. There were 5 Czech SMEs and 9 SMEs in other 4 European countries selected with the aim to deeply analyse their HRM processes. Comparing basic findings based on shadowing of students in SMEs and qualitative and quantitative data it seems that selected EU SMEs pay more attention to various HRM activities comparing to 5 Czech SMEs selected in the Liberec region in 2017. The authors are aware of no representativeness of the results however the deep analysis of HRM processes in selected SMEs brings an interesting insight look in specifics of HRM in SMEs nowadays.

The selected SMEs and their HR specialist point out that it is important to pay an attention to consistency and real interest in HR, exclusion of formal approach to people, finding leaders who will be respected by employees, to pay attention to employee satisfaction and engagement, to talents with required skills, strengthening of the organisation culture, induction process for all positions and work on building of an employer brand. It is not only about recruiting of good new employees but also to maintain employee retention plans.

The main value added of an existence of the HR specialist in small and medium sized enterprises was identifies in a right employee selection, using of social media for communication and employer branding support, creating a strong team of employees looking for the same goal as employer. HR specialist help to search for quality people with intrinsic values, such as corporate ones, contribute to a pleasant work environment, enjoy working and synergistically contribute to improving the organization's overall performance.

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