

The Specificity of Employee Development in Polish Small Enterprises

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Abstract—The aim of the paper is to identify some of the specific characteristics of employee development, as observed in the practice of small enterprises in Poland. Results suggest that a sizeable percentage of employers are not interested in improving the development of their employee base. This aspect is often perceived as insignificant. In addition, many employers have no theoretical or practical knowledge of employee development methods. Lack of sufficient financial support is reported as third on the list of the most important barriers to employee development. Employees, on the other hand, typically offload the responsibility of initiating this type of activities onto the employer. Employee development plans are typically flexible and accommodating. The original value offered by this research comes in the form of a detailed characteristics of employee development in small enterprises, accompanied by identification of specificity of human resource development in Polish companies.

Keywords—Employee development specificity, human resources development, small businesses, trainings.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE problems of employee development have been addressed by many researchers, both in Poland and abroad, as manifested by the formulation of such research concepts as: organisational development [1], Human Resource Development [2], the Learning Organisation concept [3], knowledge management concept [4], talent management [5] and the associated range of elaborate instruments of employee development. Both the theoretical and empirical studies in this area typically focus on employee development in large enterprises, while the practicalities of this process in smaller entities are, for the most part, overlooked. In the light of the above, it seems worthwhile to address the following question: ‘Do the activities in the broadly defined context of employee development, as applied by small enterprises, reflect the specificity and the operating conditions of this particular segment of organisations?’. This paper presents a sample of the broader research project, with the aim of identifying some of the specific elements of employee development in small enterprises in Poland, based on the following research questions:

- What are the characteristic traits of small enterprises that differentiate this segment from medium-sized and large companies?

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- What are the characteristic features of employee development in small entities?
- What factors determine employee development in small entities operating in Poland?
- What characteristic elements can be identified with respect to practical activities in employee development, as applied by small entities in Poland?

This paper is based on studies of professional literature and results of empirical studies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Distinctive Features of Small Enterprises

The author has adopted the definition of micro and small enterprises approved by the European Commission [6]. The considerations of this article relate to micro and small enterprises, however these entities will be considered jointly, without detailed distinguishing. Thus whenever the name "small enterprise" appears in the study, it should be considered the entity employing from 1 to 49 employees (due to the subject matter of the study the research does not cover the enterprises which do not employ employees - self-employment) and with the annual turnover not exceeding EUR 10 million and/or total annual balance sheet not exceeding EUR 10 million.

The limited size of small companies strongly determines not only the nature and character of work, but also the potential for employee development in this particular segment of economy.

Small organisations are not overly restricted by a jumble of regulations. Many day-to-day problems are solved in a straightforward manner, without resorting to any rigid formalities or rules observed – and relentlessly enforced – in the context of larger organisations. The distance between employees and top management is much shorter. Consequently, employees’ abilities and efforts are more immediately spotted by their superiors. Employees are tasked with a broader scope of duties and their work responsibilities are more complex, but – at the same time – the results of their labour are more immediate and evident, boosting their sense of participation in company successes. Some negative effects and inconveniences of working for a small company are emphasised by Stredwick: the reduced safety of employment, lower salary, and the lack of more elaborate work benefits, such as fitness club membership cards [7].

The non-bureaucratized management structures of small organisations largely facilitate the decision-making processes [8]. However, this type of a centralised decision centre may, in some small organisations, drastically limit the potential for

continuous development activities [9]. Employees are expected to follow the orders and obey the decisions made by the employer. On the other hand, many employers are not particularly versed in the methods and techniques of development; they fail to initiate and support proper strategies in this respect [10].

B. Employee Development in Small Enterprises

Employee development, for the sake of this study, is interpreted in process context and defined as:

'intentional system of activities (related to knowledge, skills and attitudes) addressed to individual employees, groups of employees or the whole of the employee base, undertaken at work and/or outside the work environment, either on a one-off basis, at regular intervals or in a continuous cycle, with the intention of improving the potential of both the individuals and the organisation as a whole'.

Professional literature emphasises a view that many small enterprises undertake no activities whatsoever with relation to developing the potential of employees [11], [12]. Some authors also suggest that even if certain training activities are undertaken, they are usually informal, short-term, focused on solving the most urgent problems, and not based on any predefined strategy of human resource development [12], [13]. These observations have been confirmed in a number of studies, such as the study of small companies in Thailand [14]. The results suggest that companies of the SME sector only provide training for selected employees (if at all), with training programs taking up less than two hours per week and involving less than 1% of the company gross revenue; they are also typically informal and introduced at workplace, using a limited range of training techniques.

Hill and Stewart [12] demonstrate that small companies utilise a natural, spontaneous and (most likely) involuntary approach to human resource development, largely due to the specificity of company requirements, including [13], [15]:

- orientation on specific business needs, with potential for immediate implementation in company setting;
- provision of tangible effects, e.g. complete business solutions;
- low cost and ease of access to training;
- in-training support and consultancy;
- proper organisation of training provision in terms of location, a time of the day, and session duration
- just-in-time modules, presented in concise fragments and designed to address specific subjects.

Small companies are interested in training, but they tend to emphasise the necessity for adjusting the training parameters (time, place, cost, subject matter, potential effects) to their operational specificity [13]. According to a study conducted in Great Britain, the most apparent deficit for small companies is the lack of skills directly related to company specificity [16]. This view was voiced by as many as 61% of the study respondents. Other responses, in the order of their rank, indicated the lack of fundamental skills (calculation, reading, writing – 27% of responses) and the lack of general IT skills

(17% of the respondents). The responses indicating the lack of managerial skills were decidedly less frequent (12% of responses), which may confirm the general view that entrepreneurs rarely perceive their real skill deficiencies [17] – this observation is particularly important in the context of the observation that managerial tasks in small companies are typically left in the hands of the company owner. This is also confirmed by other results of the study, suggesting that the lack of managerial skills is more readily perceived with increased company size [16].

Findings obtained by Marlow and Patton [18] suggest that practical solutions adopted in larger companies are not necessarily adoptable in a small company setting [19]. Other studies comparing the scope and character of training activities in small and large companies indicate that the latter typically present a more formalised and methodical approach to training and that they are more inclined to adopt specialised software suites and external training providers. Small companies, on the other hand, were found to be more likely to adopt less formal training methods [19]. Some authors also suggest that large companies spend a more sizeable percentage of their revenues to development activities addressed to their employees [11], [14].

The majority of studies on employee development are based on analyses of combined data for the whole SME segment. A 2012 British study [20] of owners and managers of small and medium-sized companies found a wide divergence of employee development practices also within the narrow SME segment. The findings suggest that the tendency to organise in-house training, to provide online training courses and to offer work-time allowance for training activities increased with company size (based on the criterion of employment). Larger companies are also more predisposed to seek external training (cf. Table I), while small companies are more inclined to adopt informal training.

TABLE I
 SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT OTHER THAN WORKPLACE
 INSTRUCTION [%]

| No. of employees | 0 | 1-4 | 5-9 | 10-19 | 20-49 | 50-250 |
|--|----|-----|-----|-------|-------|--------|
| • Financing external training courses | 10 | 31 | 45 | 57 | 63 | 70 |
| • Organising other internal training programmes | 7 | 25 | 35 | 53 | 61 | 75 |
| • Time allowances for employees willing to participate in training | 5 | 29 | 40 | 50 | 56 | 55 |
| • Online training sessions | 4 | 8 | 17 | 19 | 25 | 32 |
| • Informal training | 78 | 44 | 22 | 19 | 13 | 6 |

C. Polish Context

In Poland, 52.6% of employees are employed in the SME sector (with 39.2% in micro-entities, and 13.4% in small companies), and the average wages in the sector are significantly lower compared with those in large and medium-sized companies [21]. The percentage of employees with higher education is relatively high (at 23%), compared to the EU average of 25.9% [22], but the employers report problems in finding employees with skills required for the job at hand [23]. The main reason for this is the poor adjustment between

the system of vocational education and the practical requirements of companies [24]. Poland is also lacking in the level of R&D expenditures (0.77% GDP in 2011, compared to the EU average of 1.94% [25]).

The running operation of small companies is typically financed from own capital. Capital loans and credits are, to a large extent, obtained from family members and friends [26]. There is a shortage of dedicated personnel specialists. As a result, the use of proper competence requirements and formal employee evaluation systems in SME companies is quite infrequent. In effect, employees lack incentives to express their demand for training, and the companies themselves lack proper tools to analyse the training needs of their personnel [27].

Small companies are often owned by persons with considerable professional skills, but lacking in the knowledge required for managerial tasks [28]. They also report difficulties in making and maintaining foreign contacts – a strong barrier to business cooperation [29] – but they see no need for developing their skills in this or any other respect. For the same reasons, owners of SME companies are not interested in cooperation with science and research centres (they see no such need, but they also lack the knowledge required to explore the potential of such cooperation) [30].

SME employers make an excessive use of flexible forms of employment (such as part-time and seasonal employment, employee lease, etc.). And, since the resulting employee involvement and identification with company objectives is fairly low, the owners cut down their human resource development expenditures in fear of losing the skilled personnel to the competition [12], [9].

Strużyna [9], based on results of empirical studies in small companies, concludes that internal training in the SME sector is largely disorganised, and external programs are typically involved in developing specialist and technical knowledge. Employees have poor prospects for promotion. Small companies do not provide favourable conditions for organisational and personal development – this aspect is left to the employees' discretion. By cultivating behaviours that proved effective in the past, owners of SME companies build barriers to quality development. In addition, small entities have no algorithms to facilitate the process of learning from past actions.

Król [31] points out that small companies use a very limited set of methods for supporting employee development (based on postal survey conducted in 2005). The findings show that none of the micro-entities under study and only a minuscule percentage of small companies were found to utilise higher and post-graduate education as a form of employee development. However, 50% of the micro-entities and 42.1% of small companies reported the use of sporadic external training services.

Empirical studies conducted in the SME sector suggest that the majority of employees adopt a demanding and 'wait-and-see' attitudes towards their employers, holding them responsible for both the organisation and the financing of personnel training. Creative attitude, self-reliance, autotelic

behaviours (gaining knowledge for the sake of it) and grass-roots initiatives are extremely rare [32]. Moreover, Strużyna [9] points out to the ubiquitous vicious cycle phenomenon: employees express their discontent with the present situation, but do not perceive it as stimulus for change.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted between March and August 2013, using face-to-face surveys and supported by group surveys (auditorium surveys). The study targeted employers ((211 surveys) and employees (195 surveys) from small companies (with at least one employee) operating in the Lower Silesia region of Poland. Employers and employees represented different companies.

TABLE II
 BASIC INFORMATION ON COMPANIES UNDER STUDY

| (a) Number of Employees | Owners | Employees |
|--|--------|-----------|
| 1-9 | 49,30% | 24,10% |
| 10-19 | 22,80% | 26,20% |
| 20-29 | 9,00% | 15,40% |
| 30-39 | 7,60% | 8,70% |
| 40-49 | 11,40% | 23,60% |
| No data | 0,00% | 2,10% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| (b) How many years the company exist | Owners | Employees |
| do 10 | 61,60% | 53,30% |
| 11 do 20 | 26,50% | 33,30% |
| 21-30 | 10,00% | 9,20% |
| 31-40 lat | 0,00% | 0,50% |
| No data | 1,90% | 3,60% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| (c) Local population (city, town or place of registered offices) | Owners | Employees |
| Rural (with population up to 10 thousand) | 8,50% | 3,10% |
| Small town (10 - 50 thousand) | 50,20% | 16,40% |
| Town (50 - 250 thousand) | 4,30% | 5,60% |
| City (over 250 thousand) | 34,60% | 31,80% |
| N/A | 2,40% | 43,10% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| (d) Dominant line of business | Owners | Employees |
| Trade | 31,30% | 26,70% |
| Production | 16,10% | 9,70% |
| Services | 52,60% | 41,00% |
| Other | 0,00% | 22,60% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

The problem of ensuring the randomness of the respondent sample was anticipated early at the design phase. The author decided on the use of a purposeful sampling method for both survey forms to obtain representative samples of the various types of companies. In the first place, three types of companies were identified, based on their line of business: production, trade, and services. Other factors, such as the use of modern technologies, the number of employees and local population (of the city, town or place of registered offices) were also used as supplementary selection criteria. In the course of the surveys, the author also identified detailed operational and line of business characteristics of the

companies under study. Basic information on the survey sample is presented in Table II. However, the research sample falls short of the representation criterion and, as such, cannot be used for generalisation purposes.

The procedure used for analyses of the survey findings involved comparison and cross-examination of two perspectives: that of the employee and that of the owner/employer, ensured by the appropriate formulation of survey forms. The responses were examined using the following statistical analysis methods:

- Testing of significance of the differences between the groups: a chi-squared test² (accompanied by Yates's correction for continuity, as appropriate [33])
- Analysis of correlations: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient for ordinal, and Cramer's V for nominal variables.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Planning of Development Activities

Survey results are in line with the findings reported in professional literature on the subject [12], suggesting a considerable flexibility of activities. A marked majority of respondents (53.3%) subscribed to the opinion that company development plans are adjusted in a flexible manner to the current requirements (cf. Table III).

TABLE III
 PLANNING OF ACTIVITIES RELATED TO EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT (N=167)

| Development plans | Number of responses | Percentage * |
|--|---------------------|--------------|
| • Prepared in advance, related to employee evaluation results | 39 | 23.4% |
| • Adjusted in a flexible manner to the current requirements | 89 | 53.3% |
| • No planning; activities are undertaken in reaction to the needs voiced by the employees or the organisation as a whole | 19 | 11.4% |
| • Emergency measures, undertaken in response to the pressing need for particular type of skills or knowledge | 60 | 35.9% |

*the percentages do not sum up to 100, since the respondents were allowed to select multiple answers.

When asked for evaluation of development plans in their companies, some employers selected more than one answer. This may suggest that strategic development plans are prepared in advance, but must be accompanied by provisional activities undertaken in response to pressing needs. A small percentage of companies under study admitted to having no strategic plans for development, whatsoever, and reported that measures to this effect (if at all) were undertaken in response to clearly stated needs.

B. Company Attitudes to Development, in Employees' Opinion

Company stance on employee development directly translates into development potential offered by the company (chi-squared test analysis of differences between company types shows a statistical significance of $\chi^2_{12} = 132.03$; $p = 0$. H_0 hypothesis assuming no differences between the groups of

companies, with its significance level of $\alpha=0.05$, was disproved, suggesting the validity of an alternative H_1 hypothesis; the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient confirmed a moderate positive correlation at $r_s = 0,7$; $r^* = 0,14$).

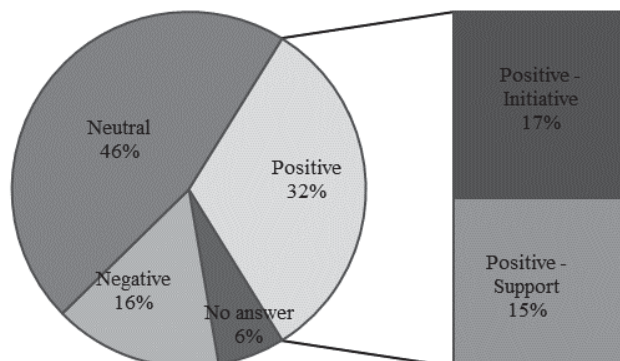


Fig. 1 The attitude of enterprises towards employee development (Employee responses)

Studies conducted among employees of small Polish companies show that 32.3% of companies under examination display a positive attitude towards employee development (see Fig. 1), by offering their support for the related activities (15.4% of responses) and by taking up initiatives on their own (16.9% of responses). In the light of other research findings suggesting a noticeable lack of development perspectives for employees in small companies [11], [12] the above results seem fairly optimistic. However, taking into account the great importance of employee development for companies [34], [35] the present distribution of attitudes should be regarded as alarming. In addition, nearly half of the companies under study (46.2% of responses) display a neutral attitude to employee development. Those companies pose no barriers for their employees to pursue development activities on their own account, but offer no support in this context and show no initiative to stimulate their progress.

Negative company attitudes towards employee development were reported by the smallest group of respondents (at 15.4%). However, taking into account the importance of the problem, such a percentage of responses should also be considered as quite alarming.

C. Company Approaches to Initiate Pro-Development Activities

The study shows a wide rift between the responses collected from employers and employees in relation to the trends for initiating pro-development activities. The employers believe that they are the most active part in this respect, while the employees suggest that the initiative is displayed mainly in a grass-roots fashion (cf. Fig. 2).

The respondents were more unanimous in their responses to the question on which of the parties should be more involved in initiating pro-development activities. Both the employers and the employees concur that the initiative, for the most part, should belong to the employer (cf. Fig. 3).

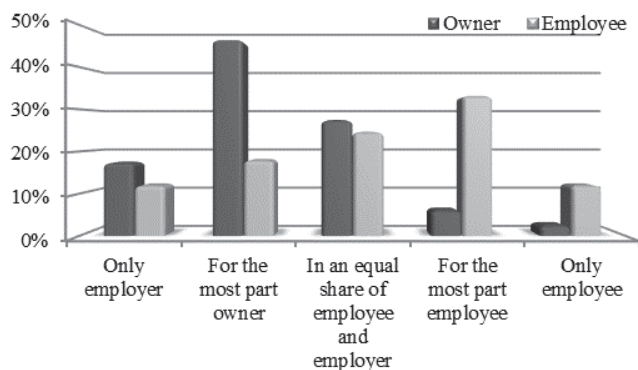


Fig. 2 Who is more active and involved in initiating employee development activities. A comparison of employers' and employees' perspectives

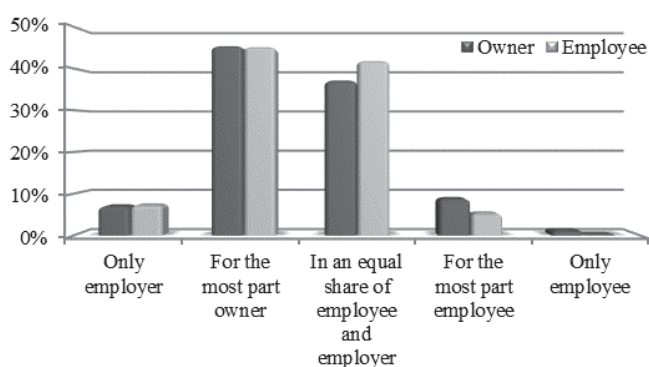


Fig. 3 Who should be more active and involved in initiating employee development activities. A comparison of employers' and employees' perspectives

D. Company Participation in Development Expenditures

Literature in the field of human resource development indicates that the cost is often a barrier for staff development in small firms [12], [9]. In the light of this information, author's research results in this area seems optimistic. The most sizeable group of responses (over 50% of examined employees and over 70% of examined employers) reported that their companies cover either the whole or the bulk of costs related to development activities. However, it must also be noted that some companies (20.3% of employee responses, 9.1% of employer responses) were reported to not participate in any of their employee development costs, whatsoever (cf. Fig. 4).

The smaller the company (based on the number of employees), the less inclined it is to participate in employee development expenditures. A chi-squared test of differences showed them to be statistically significant [at $\chi^2_{16} = 47.841$; $p=0.00005$; with significance level of $\alpha=0.05$, the H_0 hypothesis on the lack of differences between the two groups should be disproved to the benefit of the alternative hypothesis H_1], while the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient showed a moderately positive correlation [$r_s = 0.46$; $r^* = 0.15$]. These findings are in line with reports presented in professional literature [31], [14].

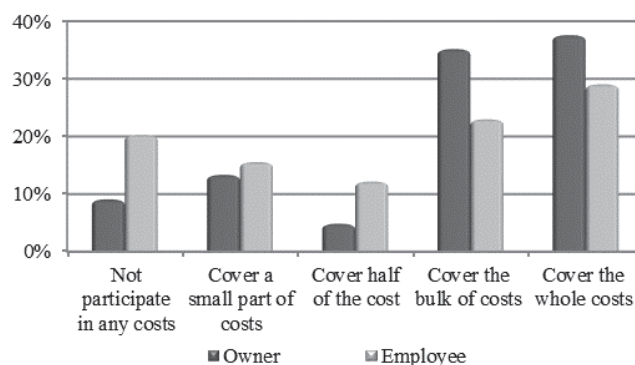


Fig. 4 Company participation in the cost of employee development. A comparison of employers' and employees' perspectives

E. Continuity of Pro-Development Activities

Employee development should be a systematic, planned and carefully controlled process, as opposed to random and incidental reactions [36]. Król [31] suggests that employee development in small companies is often a one-time measure.

This study confirms the above conclusion. Both the employers and the employees concurred that pro-development activities in their companies are often one-time or periodic in character. Continued activities were reported as infrequent.

Analytical examination of the responses to the question on the continuity of pro-development activities (cf. Fig. 5) suggests that employees are more inclined to emphasise their one-time nature, while the employers are more inclined to accentuate their continuity. It must be remembered, however, that employers are more likely to embrace the whole picture of their company position, while employees look at the situation from the narrow viewpoint of their workplace assignment.

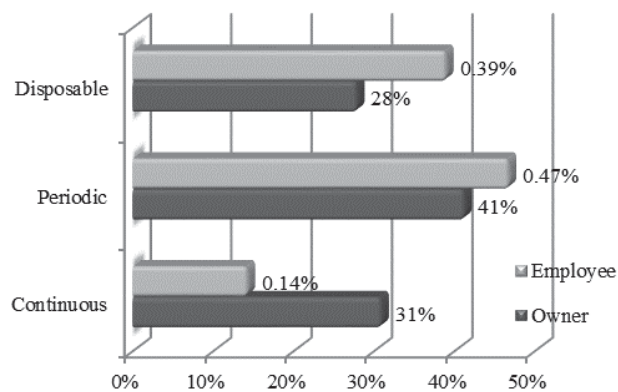


Fig. 5 Continuity of pro-development activities. A comparison of employers' and employees' perspectives

F. The Use of Selected Methods of Development

Professional literature suggests that small companies are less likely to adopt any development methods other than the simple and straightforward workplace instruction [19]. This study's findings confirm this view (cf. Fig. 6) – the most frequent response to the question on the preferred methods of development was 'workplace instruction'. On the other hand, a sizeable number of responses confirmed the use of certain

off-the-job methods, such as external training, conferences/seminars, courses and post-graduate studies.

The frequency of such activities seems fairly important in this context. However, due to the lack of this information, the resulting conclusions should be approached with due caution.



Fig. 6 Continuity of pro-development activities. A comparison of employers' and employees' perspectives

Król [31] points out that the main reason for the limited potential for development in small companies is the lack of financial resources. The findings of this study seem to contradict this conclusion. Employers under study typically reported other factors at play, such as the lack of need or the lack of knowledge required to introduce those methods. Steep cost of pro-development activities was reported fairly infrequently. However, the study's findings seem to corroborate the conclusion on general lack of knowledge and skills in many areas, quite evident among the employers and owners of small companies [28], [37], [15].

V. CONCLUSION

Practices related to employee development in small companies are typically described as one-time, provisional, addressed to narrow groups of employees, held at workplace with limited financial support, and oftentimes informal in character. Some Polish sources also suggest that small companies do not provide conditions for human resource improvement.

Human resource development in small Polish companies is perceived as fairly flexible. However, flexibility in this context is not as much related to the provisional measures introduced in response to pressing needs, but rather to the need for adjusting company development plans, based largely on the flexibility of operation typical for the SME segment.

The most alarming conclusion is the lack of interest in human resource development on the part of Polish small companies. Over 60% of the employers under study reported passive or even negative attitudes towards this form of development. This may be the result of poor education, particularly in the area of company management, and the lack

of knowledge on human resource development methods and instruments. The lack of financial resources (suggested in other studies reported in professional literature) was quite low in the ranking of responses collected from Polish SME employers. On the contrary, both the employers and the employees agreed that their companies, on the large part, covered the full extent or the sizeable bulk of expenses related to the development of their personnel.

Of note is the general lack of initiative on the part of small company employees. Polish employees typically believe that the responsibility for pro-development activities should be attributed to the employer. This finding is in striking contrast with the characteristic features of the Y generation employees, as reported in professional literature [38] and contrary to the new career model in which the employees take up more responsibility for their progress [39].

The findings of this study are limited by the narrow territorial reach (a single region) and by the non-representative sampling of respondents.

This paper provides a valuable input to the theory of human resource development as applied to employee development in the SME sector, by formulating characteristic features of pro-development activities and by describing the specificity of Polish small companies in this respect.

Suggestions for further studies include the application of the surveys on larger and more representative respondent samples from all regions of Poland and examination of foreign best practices in employee development, to be used as benchmarking sources for Polish small companies.

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