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**RESEaRCH ON THE EDUCaTIONal NEEDS OF THE EMPLOYED
PERSONNEL IN THE BlaGOEVGRaD REGION WITHIN THE
CONTEXT OF THE lIFElong lEaRNING CONCEPT**

Abstract

Education and lifelong human resources development is important for the companies involved as well as for the individuals employed. The goal of such education is intertwined with the interest of the organization for increasing effectiveness of the usage of the main production factors and the improvement of the parameters of company performance. The scale of the current economic and social change, the rapid transition to knowledge based society and the demographic pressure deriving from the ageing population and the migrational processes in Europe are challenges, which require a new approach towards education and lifelong learning. The concept of lifelong learning is realized in practice on an organizational level. The goal of this publication is to investigate the concrete educational needs of the employed personnel within the region of Blagoevgrad in the context of the lifelong learning concept.

Keywords: education, training, educational needs, lifelong learning

Introduction

The development of human capital depends on a variety of factors. The most significant are the access to and quality of education and vocational training, the

employment and career development possibilities, the effective healthcare system, pluralism and cultural rights recognition. Therefore, education, human resource development and their lifelong development is equally important to both companies and individuals. The employers are highly interested in hiring, establishing and developing high potential human capital because this is a decisive factor for the competitiveness of enterprises, the quality and market acceptance of their products and services and the successful realization of their mission and vision.

The main motive behind the argument for the increasing of the educational levels, knowledge, skills and competencies of the individuals is the fact that such a development makes those individuals more adaptive to the dynamic changes on the labour market and creates better environment for professional realization and the achievement of higher economic and social status. The goal of the current publication is to investigate the concrete educational needs of the employed personnel on the territory of the Blagoevgrad region within the context of the lifelong learning concept.

The district is situated in the South-Western part of Bulgaria and borders Greece, Macedonia, and four other districts. The area of the district is 6449 sq. km. It is the third largest in Bulgaria after Burgas and Sofia districts and comprises 5.8% of the country's territory (Regional administration Blagoevgrad, 2013). The population is 343,370 people or 4.3% of the whole population of the country (NSI, 2011).

That puts the region of Blagoevgrad in the sixth place by a number of populations in Bulgaria. Administratively the region of Blagoevgrad is divided into 14 municipalities, 96 city-halls and 280 settlements. The region is characterized with diversified economic branch structure: food and tobacco processing industries, agriculture, tourism, transport and communications, textile industry, timber and furniture industries, iron processing and machinery industry, construction materials industry, as well as pharmaceuticals, plastics, paper and shoes production. Approximately 10% of the population is unemployed (close to the national average). With its railway line and road connection, the region forms the heart of the land-based trading route between northern Greece, Bulgaria and Romania. Since the early 2000s the province enjoys a mini boom in trade from thousands Greek day-trippers from across the border, purchasing cheaper goods and services (dental, opticians, etc.). Since the early 1990s, the region has also attracted Greek manufacturers who moved their production line from Greece. Infrastructure remains relatively underdeveloped, especially regarding road and rail communications. It remains an important target for potential EU funding.

There are two major infrastructural projects in the region. The Struma motorway, which is planned to connect the capital Sofia with the Greek border and the port of Thessaloniki, is going to run through the valley of the Struma River, and will be ready in a few years. The second project is the airport of Bansko. The cost is currently estimated at around €30,000,000.

In order to achieve satisfying results, a survey was completed, successfully inquiring 285 managers and enterprise owners and 508 employees within the territory of the Blagoevgrad region. The survey was conducted between October and November 2012. The data collection method was a self-administered questionnaire. The data base was created and processed through SPSS for Windows, and the results were presented in a graphic form using Microsoft EXCEL.

1. Problem definition

There are different theoretical and practical aspects, when discussing the ideas and requirements related to the nature of the study process. However, the common features are the following (Шопов and Атанасова, 2007):

- education should be a systematic and consistent process,
- education changes knowledge, skills and work attitude,
- education increases employment outcome,
- education is closely related to the position/post of the employee, – motivation is a prerequisite for and a result of education.

The ultimate goal of education is closely related to the interest of the organization to increase the effectiveness of the main production factors and the improvement of the company performance parameters. The personnel is approached as a strategic resource that could be developed through investments, which increases the market potential of the given company or organization.

The scale of the current economic and social change, the rapid transition to knowledge based society and the demographic pressure deriving from the ageing population and the migrational processes in Europe are challenges, which require a new approach towards education and lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is defined as all educational activities, undertaken by an individual throughout his whole life in order to improve his/her knowledge, skills or abilities within the framework of his/her private civic, social or employment related perspectives. (Шопов, 2007).

In the national report of Bulgaria on the memorandum of the European Commission “A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning”, lifelong learning is defined as a target driven educational process, which constantly improves the knowledge, skills and competences of the individuals. Therefore, the process is not limited by the obtaining of vocational certificates closely related to the exercised profession, rather the constant ‘lifelong’ update of abilities, interests, knowledge and perceptions. The concept of lifelong learning also incorporates the modernization of basic skills, the educational opportunities for advanced students and the inclusion of all educational activities, including informal learning (Меморандум..., 2000)

The “National Programme on Education Development in Bulgaria” from 2009 introduced a number of innovations, which are corresponding to the goals set by the EU. Realizing that, adult oriented education is not a widely spread practice in Bulgaria, the goal of the programme is to increase the average number of adults engaged in educational activities to the EU average of 12.5% for people aged 25– 64, due to the fact that Eurostat 2005 shows that the number of people participating currently is 1.3%. What is interesting is the fact that only 19.7% from the people participating in some kind of a formal or informal learning process, declared that they would like participate in similar activities but in a different sphere. These results motivated the Ministry of Education to focus its efforts towards:

- improving the education methods for adults and including interactive forms of teaching (practical examples and simulations,
- normative relief for individuals and organizations, which is the normal practice in the European states, which would stimulate lifelong learning and the constant effort for the increase of knowledge and skills, – linking education with career development.

The concept of lifelong learning is practically realized on an organizational level. The reasons, determining the necessity of education within an organization, are the interest of the employees to develop professionally due to the constant changes within the organization and to increase their value as workers via training and learning. The three main stages of the learning process are the following:

1. Defining the needs and goals of the employee training.
2. Projecting, organizing and realizing the training programs.
3. Evaluating the effectiveness of education.

This division is conditional, thus in practice these stages are intertwined and very often simultaneously realized. In order to achieve optimal results it is obligatory to conduct an accurate survey, analysis and evaluation of the concrete

educational needs of the employees within the context of the lifelong learning concept.

2. Survey results

The survey of the concrete educational needs of the employees within the Blagoevgrad region is conducted in two major directions – management representatives (owners, co-owners, managers and experts) and workers in the enterprises surveyed.

Three hundred and three companies took place in the survey from all municipalities within the region of Blagoevgrad. These companies can be divided in three categories according to their main economic activity: 46.0% – production enterprises, 34.0% – trade enterprises and 35.0% – service enterprises.¹ According to the number of the employees, 71.7% of the surveyed companies can be defined as micro companies or small companies. The total number of individuals employed, according to their supervisors, is 16,896. Women represent 54.9% of all people that took place in the survey. The representation of age groups (Fig 1) is the following: 40–49 years of age (30.5%), followed by 30–39 years of age (27.9%), 50–59 years of age (20.4%), 18–29 years of age (16.8%) and over 59 years of age (4.4%).

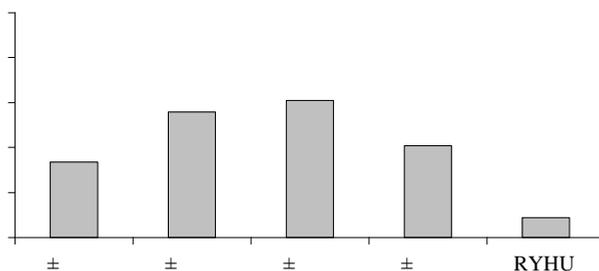


Fig. 1. Representation of age groups (%)

Three quarters of the employees have high school education, 19.0% have higher education and 8.5% have primary or lower education. Qualified workers are three times the number of the unqualified labourers.

In the survey module, dedicated to plans for company development, 81.0% of the surveyed management claims that there are plans to increase work productivity in their companies in the future. These aspirations are not limited only

¹ The total exceeds 100% because the question allows multiple answers.

by investments in new technology and machines but also include business process optimization and the increasing of the qualification of the employees.

Meanwhile, however the survey results indicated that in 29.5% of the surveyed companies, there is no employee training taking place. These are rather micro companies from the trade sphere, alongside companies which are situated in the municipalities of Kresna, Belica, Strumyani and Hadzhidimovo. 24.0% of the participants in the survey claim, that employee training takes place once a year and 31.0% that they are training their personnel more often. The big companies are the ones, which are most commonly training their workers and specialists. When asked when was the last time when education took place in their respective organization, 42.4% indicate 2012, 37.0% – 2011, 5.0% 2010 and 15.6% – earlier than 2010.

The answers to the question,² regarding the subject of the last training undertaken by the employees, is the following: labor safety training (43.2%), machines, equipment, technologies operation (apart from office equipment) (32.6%); induction training for new employees (21.5%), computer and office equipment training (10.5%), improving the qualification of the specialists in the sphere of finance and law (7.9%), improving marketing and sales employee qualification (6.1%), language training (5.9%) and other types of training (17.8%). The obligatory labor safety training took place in all types and sizes of companies, while machine operation trainings take place in relatively big enterprises and companies engaged in production.

The second part of the survey is focused on the self-evaluation of the employees participating in regard to their own professional qualification and preparation. According to 52.6% of the employees surveyed, the education and training that they received are completely sufficient for them to perform their daily tasks. The main representatives of this group are primarily men, over 50 years of age, as well as the employees working the regions of Garmen, Petrich, Kresna and Bansko. 60.3% of the surveyed personnel with high school education consider themselves fully prepared and trained for the tasks they conduct on a daily basis. 37.2% of the total participants in the study consider themselves not adequately trained for their daily tasks in a professional sense. Such self-evaluation is characteristic primarily for women, employees aged 30–39, workers from the municipalities of Simitli, Blagoevgrad, Sandanski, Hadzhidimovo and Belica and the personnel with primary or lower education.

² The total exceeds 100% because the question allows multiple answers.

The employees with higher education are somehow divided when it comes to self-evaluating their preparation and training that their level of education has provided: 46.5% consider themselves adequately prepared while 47.2% share the opposite opinion.

Two thirds of the surveyed personnel (67.0%) claims, that they need to supplement their knowledge through education (Fig. 2). Women is the group, which answers in such a way the most (75.0%) and the highly educated employees (91.0%). The share of men considering themselves in need of supplementary knowledge or skills is 23.0% lower than the same number for women. According to the place of residence, the highest necessity for supplementary education is demonstrated by the residents of the municipalities of Petrich, Hadzhidimovo, Simitli, Sandanski and Blagoevgrad. 27.0% of the employees surveyed does not want supplementary education.

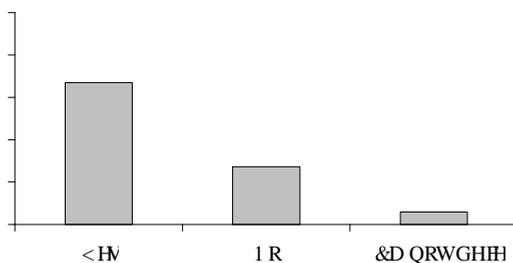


Fig. 2. Representation of the distribution of responses depending on the need for education (%)

This claim is shared primarily by men, workers over 59 years of age as well as the people with low level of education. Such an opinion is characteristic for the residents of the regions of Yakoruda, Belitsa, Garmen, Strumyani and Kresna.

84.9% of the people employed, which assesses their education and preparation as not adequate according to their daily tasks, declare that they need additional knowledge and skills. In comparison, amongst the employees with high professional self esteem, the portion of people who declare that they need training is 28.5% lower.

According to 54.5% of all employees, which took part in the survey, share the opinion that they need additional specialized knowledge and skills for the position that they currently exercise. Such attitude is demonstrated by people older than 50 years and the employees with primary or lower level of education.

Another 29.1% consider that they require knowledge and skills for a position that they currently do not exercise. Such opinion is shared by people in the age groups 30–39 and 40–49.

Furthermore, 19.7% of the participants in the survey want to acquire management knowledge and qualification. This fact is valid for the highly educated, for men and for the youngest of the employees surveyed.

Over half (55.8%) of the employees declaring the need of more knowledge and skills think that they need supplementary specialization for the position that they currently possess. The people, which do not currently require additional knowledge and skill are eager to look for information and qualification different than their own.

Conclusions

On the basis of the survey performed, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. Employees, which are currently working for companies registered before 2004 and who acquired the main part of their assets during that period are more eager to pursue supplementary education.
2. The employees, which desire additional training are working for companies where such trainings are conducted more than two times a year.
3. The companies, where the last employee training took place in 2011 or 2012 are more eager to look for additional education.
4. The companies, which employ development plans and strategies, register more employees eager to learn.
5. The employees eager to learn are more often employed in mid-sized or large enterprises.
6. There aren't significant differences in the result of the survey according to the type of organization the employees are currently employed in, its location or the average salary levels.
7. There is no connection between the desire for education and the subject of the last training conducted by the employees.
8. There aren't significant differences in the desire for education, connected to the aspirations of the company to increase production levels, income, labor productivity, investments, production profitability or the production effectiveness.

9. There is no dependency between the desire for education and the company desire for Scientific and Research Activity.

These results allow us to make the conclusion that in general there is a high registered desire for education. The educational advantages are more often identified by employees, employed in large enterprises, which have existed for a longer period with established traditions in education. One can assume that the employees of these companies can recognize the concrete advantages from the improvement of their qualifications.³ Both the interviewed managers and company experts, included in the survey as well as the employees – potential students declare that the convenience of time and place have a major role in the successful implementation and the level of the expected results.

Meanwhile it is important to note that the registration of the desire for education is on a declarative level, therefore it has to be investigated primarily as an indicator. There are risks in the period between the completion of the survey and the organization of the concrete training, which can change the intentions of the employees interviewed – their general desire for education as well as the type of education that the employee was initially interested in. The training programs and educational desires of the employees does not always correspond with the interest of their respective employers. It is possible that these training aspirations are not corresponding to the organizational strategic and tactical goals for human resource development. That is why, there is a chance that the management will not support the educational desires of its employees. Certain recommendations could be derived from the above, which suggest that all trainings should be organized with the approval and knowledge of the management, to correspond to the strategic plans of the organization, especially if such training requires absence from work. In all cases the managers should assesses the situation and the people involved in order for the most appropriate method to be selected. Furthermore, all costs and results from any training should be analyzed. On the basis of such analysis, the educational goals should be formulated, otherwise the connection “individuals in need of education – training programs” could not be made.

As a conclusion, the training of the employed personnel in an organization could become its goal only if the expected potential results could be defined as

³ During an interview with the Surveying team, employers mainly employing unqualified workers (greenhouses, forestry enterprises) shared that they do not wish to train their personnel because there is no need on one hand, while they can actually lose their workers to more qualified and therefore better paid jobs.

important enough and relevant to the realization of the strategy of the organization and the increase of its competitiveness.

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