
Knowledge Management in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

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Abstract:

Purpose: The main purpose of the research presented in the article was to diagnose the „knowledge management” process in small and medium-sized enterprises in the Lower Silesia Province. In order to achieve this goal, the first part of the article explains the meaning of the term „knowledge management” in the scientific literature on management, and then, on the basis of research, an attempt was made to answer the following questions: which factors determining the „knowledge management” process and the tasks fulfilled by the management systems „knowledge management”.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study presented was based on the analysis of literature on the subject of knowledge management and competence. The study also included secondary sources, which were communications from research of similar scope. Triangulation of research methods has enabled to obtain a broader context of the studied phenomenon and ensured a higher quality of the conducted studies. The diversity of methods was aimed at achieving a consistency of the empirical basis for the inference. A diagnostic survey has been adopted as the leading method.

Findings: The „knowledge management” in the global economy is a resource of strategic importance that affects the organisation's market value and provides a competitive advantage. The formation of a significant intellectual capital for an organisation requires the use of appropriate methods and tools supporting management, regular measurements, continuous comparison with competitors, elimination of barriers to knowledge sharing.

Practical Implications: The research results are very interesting and encourage research on a larger scale. They are a valuable source of information for managers responsible for creating the intellectual capital of the organization in terms of acquiring and sharing knowledge. On the other hand, for people responsible for recruiting employees, the results may be useful in terms of developing a candidate's profile, in particular in identifying the key competences of knowledge workers. The results also show the demand of the Polish market (in particular medium-sized companies) for IT infrastructure.

Originality/value: On the basis of empirical research, the article proposes an original set of system solutions in the field of „knowledge management” to improve the functioning of the organizations.

Keywords: Knowledge management, management, knowledge transfer.

JEL classification: J24, M12, D83, M54.

Paper Type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

The technical development of modern technologies at the end of the 20th century resulted in a revolution in management concepts. Such terms as organisation's intellectual capital and knowledge workers are becoming increasingly important. There are also such concepts as knowledge management, talent management, etc. The finance allocated to the development of staff potential shall be treated as an investment, not as a cost. The employee becomes the most valuable asset of the organisation. It is the employees, or rather their skills, that constitute the „added value” of the organisation. It is easy to purchase new technology, however the preparation and motivation of employees is a capital that is built up for a relatively long time and cannot be copied.

People are treated as the most valuable organisation „resource”. It is because of them that the organisation gains an advantage over the competition. It should be noted, however, that the same people constitute the „critical mass” in every company. Employee competence development has become the key activity of the managerial staff. Managers realize that the employees should develop professionally along with the organisation, forming a so-called intelligent organisation.

Economic practice of answering a question or a source of market advantage (Czakoń, 2005). Many studies have confirmed the impact of both the environment and the company's resources on its result (Charuongsopon and Puriwat, 2017). According to the RBV approach, the performance of an organization is mainly determined by internal resources grouped into three categories, namely: physical resources, human resources and organizational resources (Hilmiana *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, skills and tooling are needed to quickly engage your resources and gain access to those that the company does not have. Resource-Based View (RBV) is the most explored area of management while being the least instrumented (Czakoń, 2010). Therefore, it is so important to get to know and operationalize this approach. Currently, the most commonly used is VRIO (Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, Well Organized Resources) and Business Canvas Model.

The contemporary, knowledge-based organisations increasingly often seek people who eagerly learn and are open not only to improving their qualifications, but also to the development of the possessed professional competences. Survival of the organisation on today's market and its competitive advantage can be ensured by its employees - experts, people who possess unique knowledge or skills devoted to the company. According to the demographic indices, shrinkage in the resources of the labour market can be predicted. Therefore, it is preferable to recruit employees with the highest development potential.

Modern companies and organizations realize that knowledge management (KM) is a key factor for multinationals in emerging countries to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage in the global market, as it facilitates the creation and transfer

of knowledge between headquarters and its subsidiaries (Arias-Pérez *et al.*, 2019).

One of the components of the organisation's intellectual capital is human capital (the rest is structural and customer capital). Human capital is a combination of employee and manager competences. Understanding the essence of human capital by managers affects the manner of organisation management, the vision and strategy of the company. As the most valuable resource of an organisation, employees should develop together with the organisation to create an intelligent, knowledge-based organisation. Capital assets include both white-collar and blue-collar employees of an organisation.

Not all organisations perceive knowledge as a company's „resource”. They do not take any steps to improve the management process in this area either. They treat knowledge management as „technologies only” or as an „ordinary programme”. The need to cooperate, in order to acquire data to be entered into the systems and to develop the way how to use them, is not recognised.

2. The Concept of Knowledge Management in the Literature on Management Sciences

In the literature of the problem, the concept of knowledge management is defined in various ways. Knowledge is defined as the totality of reliable information about reality along with the ability to interpret it. Information (latin: *informatio*) means representation or image. It is an interdisciplinary term that is differently defined in various fields of science.

M. Armstrong and S. Taylor state that knowledge is information provided to a productive use is individual and often uncontrollable, and can be elusive. They conclude that knowledge is exhaustive and comprehensive, explicit and tacit, shared and personal, physical and mental, static and dynamic, verbal and encrypted (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014). Defining knowledge, they do not mention the network of mutual connections. Moreover, M. Armstrong and S. Taylor emphasize that knowledge management' processes are focus on storing and sharing the wisdom and understanding (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014) these processes concern interpersonal relationships, thus referring to the area of strategizing in management. Strategizing is not the main subject of this paper, but this trend emphasizes the significant role of the human factor in management (Sus, 2016; 2017), and thus - knowledge management processes. Furthermore, knowledge is a network of connections and interactions. The knowledge network is a dynamic structure, not a static one. The role of knowledge networks is to promote interactions such as knowledge acquisition, knowledge transfer and knowledge innovation, and knowledge transfer by connecting a series of interconnected network nodes (Chen *et al.*, 2019).

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- I. Nonaka and K. Takeuchi (1995) defined knowledge as „justified true belief that increases an entity’s capacity for effective action”. Thanks to these procedures, the knowledge generated by individual employees becomes the intellectual capital of the organization. On the other hand, A. Kowalczyk and B. Nogalski (2007) claim that knowledge can be divided into four basic categories:
- know-what – knowledge takes the form of data resources relating to facts and takes the form of data that can be easily stored and transferred;
 - know-why – this is knowledge about causal relationships, recognised values, social norms, etc.;
 - know-how – professional knowledge (explicit and tacit), actual skills of the employee, their professional experience, acquiring new knowledge during learning, enable the employee to apply a specific procedure or method of action;
 - know-who – refers to an individual or a team and is the domain of those who possess the above mentioned types of knowledge.

Apart from the above mentioned categories, it seems appropriate to include a further one:

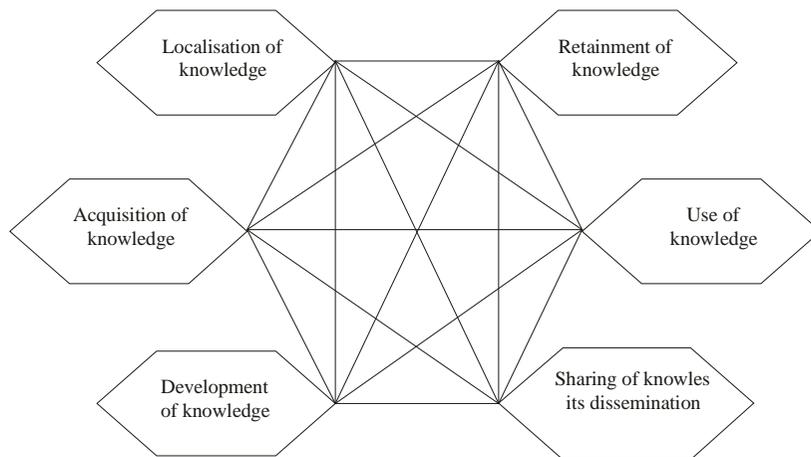
- know-whom – knowledge takes the form of a network of contacts within and outside the organisation, mutual commitments, professional reputation.

In the current crisis caused by COVID 19, knowledge management becomes important. M. Kłak believes that the knowledge management „consists in acquiring appropriate measures, methods and techniques, as well as in developing, controlling and appropriate using of the conditions that enable the processes related to creation, accumulation, flow, dissemination, equalisation and purposeful application of knowledge” (Kłak, 2010). The knowledge management scheme is shown in Figure 1.

Knowledge management involves four processes: creation process, transfer process, integration process and application process (Asiaei and Bontis, 2019).

Knowledge management systems (KMS) are information systems (Al-Tal and Emeagwali, 2019) that are perceived to facilitate organizational learning by capturing both content and process knowledge and making these knowledge available to all employees.

„Knowledge management is defined as formalization and access to experience, knowledge and expertise that creates new skills that enables prime performance, as well as stimulate innovation and increases the value of SMEs” (Utami, Ferdiansah, 2017).

Figure 1. Knowledge management scheme

Source: G. Probst, S. Raub, K. Romhardt, 2010.

Knowledge acquisition mainly consists in improving the competences of employees. Its processing (second stage) consists in the assessment of the degree of assimilation of knowledge acquired by the employee, verifying the usefulness of knowledge from the point of view of the objectives to be achieved by the employee and the organisation itself. The next stage is the sharing of hidden knowledge consisting in passing the knowledge on to other employees. In managing knowledge, organizations must implement procedures that will allow them to overcome dilemmas related to the observance of secrets. On the one hand, permission to provide data on the other, information provided (Hannah *et al.*, 2019). Employees' obligation to trust confidentiality is forced by contracts concluded with the employer.

„Knowledge management enables an organization to gain insight and understanding from its own experience and procedures. One of the key concerns that have emerged related to knowledge management is how to accomplish it successfully” (Theriou *et al.*, 2011).

Knowledge management involves several elements like human resources practices, technology, culture and organizational structures (Abubakar *et al.*, 2017). The factor that significantly influences knowledge sharing is the organisational factor. First and foremost, organisational culture plays an important role. It primarily comprises the adopted norms and values which distinguish the organisation from others. The cited authors do not define knowledge as an economic good determined by its market value. They will not emphasize its special importance in relation to other resources of the organization, namely that it is an inexhaustible resource.

3. Methods and Characteristics of the Research Sample

The study presented in this article was based on the analysis of literature on the subject of knowledge management and competence. The studies in literature also included secondary sources, which were communications from research of similar scope. Diagnostic survey and analysis of the literature, secondary sources has enabled to obtain a broader context of the studied phenomenon and ensured a higher quality of the conducted studies. The diversity of methods was aimed at achieving a consistency of the empirical basis for the inference. A diagnostic survey has been adopted as the leading method. The remaining methods applied in the paper were auxiliary (complementary).

The questionnaire – survey – has been prepared on the basis of an analysis of literature. The questionnaire was intended for employees of the Lower Silesian. In the research, the following variables were set as independent variables: the gender of the respondents, the age of the respondents, the size of the company (workplace), the place of residence.

Time survey on April 15 - September 30, 2020, scientific research was carried out on a random research sample of people who are employed in the organizations of the Lower Silesian. 356 people took part in the study. The studied group was evenly divided on the basis of gender. Women constituted 51% of the surveyed group and men constituted 49% of it.

About 69% of the respondents were young people aged 19-29. 19.7% of the respondents were aged 30 to 40. The least numerous group were employees over 40 years of age (11.2% of respondents). During the analysis of the structure of the group examined in terms of age, it should be noted that the respondents are young people at the stage of preparation for a career or early professional career, during which a crystallisation, the narrowing of the field of exploration and finalisation of the choice of profession take place. They recognise the need for continuous improvement and learning. They want to build their own intellectual capital to ensure their competitiveness on the labour market. It consists primarily of acquired knowledge, skills and experience, which are used in the work performed. They invest in themselves while simultaneously having higher requirements regarding career and professional development.

About 35% of the respondents are employees of companies employing more than 100 people. Over 21% of respondents were employed in medium-sized companies (from 21 to 50 employees) and the same percentage in organisations employing from 6 to 10 employees. The companies employing from 51 to 100 employees account for only 10.1% of the respondents. Respondents are mainly employees of small and medium companies due to the fact that they live in the surrounding villages.

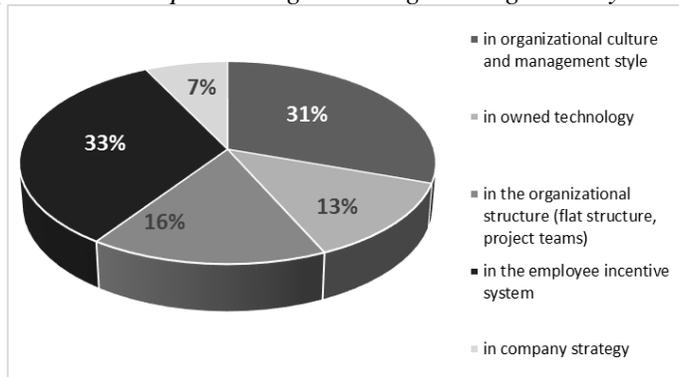
About 43% of the respondents are inhabitants of small municipalities with up to

50,000 inhabitants (Figure 4). Almost one third of the respondents are rural residents (over 28%). A relatively small group of respondents are inhabitants of municipalities with up to 10,000 inhabitants (7.3%). Only 1.1% are residents of larger cities. Therefore, the respondents are employees at small and medium companies.

4. Influence of the Environment on the Knowledge Management

Many organisations encounter numerous problems in implementing knowledge management systems. The respondents were asked to express their opinion on the implementation of changes in order to increase the efficiency of knowledge management. Their opinions are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *The problems in implementing knowledge management systems*



Source: Own research.

Over 1/3 of the respondents (33%) believe that their company requires changes in the employee motivation system in order to increase the efficiency of knowledge management. Therefore it is necessary to design appropriate motivation systems, meeting the employees' expectations. They do not necessarily have to be linked with salary motivation. Rather, they should concern the possibility of free of charge participation in practices, courses or trainings.

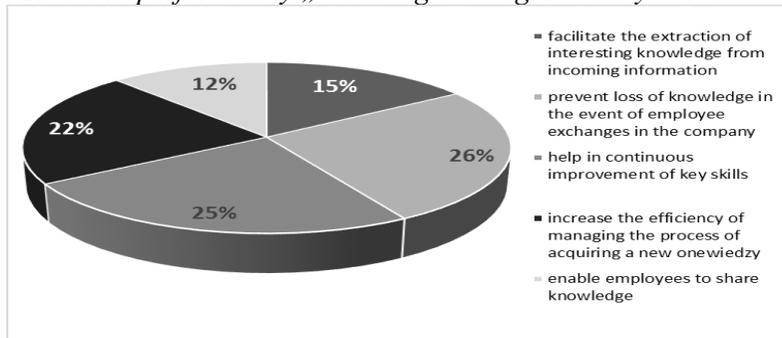
Approximately 31% of the respondents have stated that changes in their company should concern organisational culture. An appropriate climate that encourages knowledge sharing, promoting knowledge workers, should be created in the organisation.

For more than 16% of the respondents, the organisational structure is a problem. The companies employing the respondents have poor organisational structures that do not encourage knowledge sharing. No working or project teams are established within the surveyed companies. It can be assumed that every employee is on his/her own. The synergy, which can be achieved by introducing teamwork, is forgotten. Team membership gives employees prestige, recognition, higher self-esteem and a sense of strength.

Only 13% of the respondents have noticed difficulties in the technology they possess. It can be assumed that, in most companies, a barrier to sharing knowledge does not lie in technology but in people. It is worth noting that only 7% of the respondents indicate the company's strategy as a barrier.

The implementation of „knowledge management” systems by companies not only helps to increase the level of innovation, but also improves the implemented processes. The „knowledge management” systems should perform several key tasks in order to assist a company in its operations (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The tasks performed by „knowledge management” systems



Source: Own research.

According to respondents (26%), the „knowledge management” systems should prevent knowledge loss when employees are exchanged in a company. The respondents are aware of the importance of knowledge (especially the hidden one) in gaining competitive advantage. It is hard to verbalise or copy, which makes it even more valuable for an organisation. It is hard to substitute. The reason for this is an increase in the mobility of staff. It is particularly dangerous for companies preferring individual work. Therefore, databases should be created, in which all information concerning e.g. customers, products, employees would be stored securely.

More than 25% of respondents believe that the implemented systems should help continually to improve key skills. The popularity of mentoring programmes has increased in recent years. Many people believe that mentorship is the most effective way of sharing tacit knowledge.

Every fifth employee claims that these systems should increase management efficiency through the acquisition of new knowledge. The respondents are aware that the main factor stimulating development and increasing efficiency is the organisation's intellectual capital. When certain tools are used, this resource is fully utilised, which in turn gives new quality and ensures development and innovation.

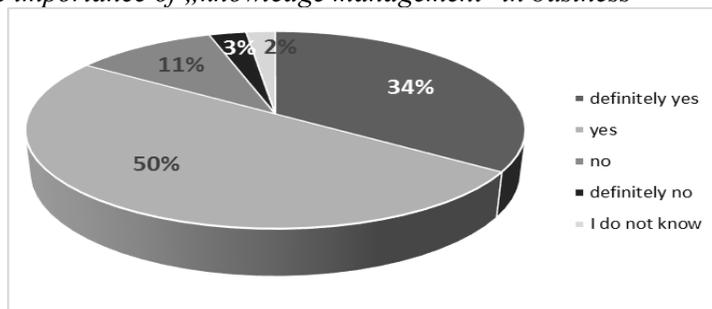
In the respondents' opinion (15%), „knowledge management” should facilitate the extraction of interesting knowledge from incoming information. Due to the

information overload, the selection of information essential for the functioning of the organisation becomes extremely important. The speed of providing information and its timeliness are also of special importance. The way people communicate within the company also plays an important role here.

The „knowledge management” systems should also make it possible for employees to share knowledge (this view is shared by only 12% of respondents). The respondents underestimate the importance of modern managing tools for e.g. communication within an organisation or with a customer. These tools improve the processes implemented in a company and ensure its rapid development. The modern IT systems often lead to the integration of the company with the customer. Such integration builds customer's loyalty and trust in the company. This often results in an increase in sales of goods and services.

According to many theorists, „knowledge management” is a ticket to business success.

Figure 4. *The importance of „knowledge management” in business*



Source: Own research.

The respondents appreciate the importance of „knowledge management” in business (Figure 8). More than 84% of respondents state that it is a „ticket” to business success and enables to create innovations. Such answers prove that more and more companies are deciding to implement this management model. The respondents notice the fact that the development of modern technologies supports organisations in this management model. Companies are becoming more and more efficient at acquiring explicit knowledge. They are able to use tacit knowledge more effectively. People should not be forgotten. IT systems are constantly being improved, but it is the people who, with an appropriate motivation system, ensure an increase in the organisation's value (added value). It is people who modify and innovate.

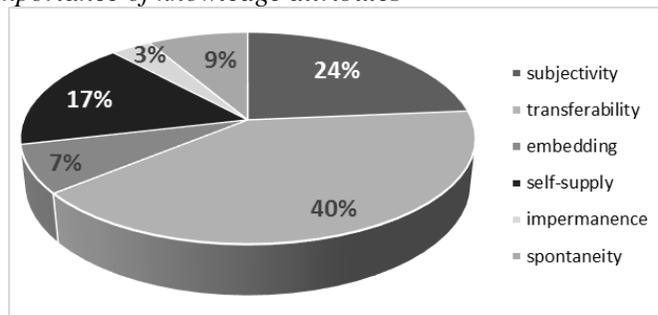
Only about 14% of respondents do not recognize the importance of „knowledge management” in modern organisations. Probably companies recruiting those employees are not able or willing to implement „knowledge management” systems. It can be assumed that the managers of these companies do not notice nor are able to implement modern management concepts and remain with standard (often bad)

solutions. In today's economy, knowledge is becoming treated as the most valuable organisation's resource. It determines an organisation's intellectual capital. It is characterised by certain attributes, which the respondents systematised from the most important to the less important (Figure 5).

Transferability was mentioned as the most important attribute of knowledge (it can be used in many places) by the respondents (40%). The respondents appreciate the possibility of using knowledge in different contexts. It can be „transferred” and applied to other new situations or a given context. The knowledge can be transferred between departments, branches or subsidiaries of the company. Thanks to knowledge transfer, the process of adaptation of newly recruited employees to the organisation becomes easier and faster.

As another attribute, respondents (23,6%) listed subjectivity (interpretation depends on the individual experience of a person who uses it, and on the context in which it appears). Simultaneously, it should be noted that speaking of the subjectivity of knowledge, we are dealing with the employee's (human's) aspiration for perfection. The intellectual capacity of employees and their autonomy in decision making are also noteworthy. It can therefore be assumed that the usefulness of the possessed knowledge resources depends on the employee's skills.

Figure 5. *The importance of knowledge attributes*



Source: *Own research.*

An important attribute of knowledge according to the respondents (17%) is self-supply (sharing knowledge does not result in the loss of its value). The respondents appreciate that this is the only organisation resource that is inexhaustible. On the contrary – its value increases with an increase in its sharing frequency.

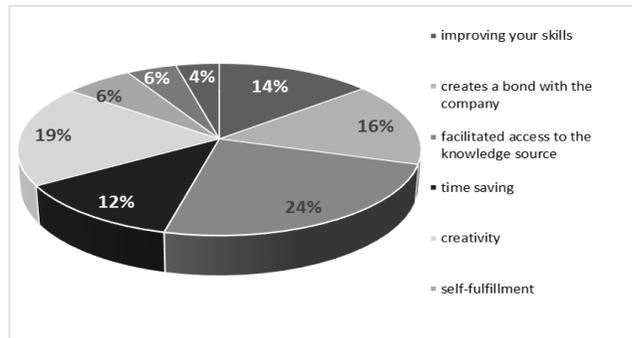
Another important attribute according to respondents (7%) is embedding (knowledge is in people's minds, which makes it difficult to transfer and share). If it cannot be verbalised, it becomes inaccessible, difficult to develop and verify.

In the opinion of the respondents, spontaneity (knowledge develops in an often uncontrolled process) – 8% and impermanence (knowledge loses its value with time) – 3% may be considered as insignificant attributes of knowledge. It is believed that

the general knowledge owned by a human being doubles every 5 years.

Implementation of „knowledge management” in the organisation brings certain benefits that concern three entities: the organisation, the employees and the market (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Benefits at the employee level from the functioning of „knowledge management”*



Source: Own research.

Over 24% of the respondents stated that „knowledge management” facilitated access to the knowledge source at a company. This entailed optimisation of the work performed, and, as a result, its higher efficiency. They see an important feature of knowledge which is transferability. It enables the use of knowledge resources in various areas at the same time (simultaneously by individual employees, in various departments or across divisions of the company). This results in optimisation of work process.

Every fifth respondent believed that „knowledge management” positively influenced employee creativity, which resulted in generating new values for the organisation. It is possible thanks to subjectivity and self-supply of knowledge. While discussing subjectivity, it should be remembered that an employee naturally strives for professional excellence. The result is the creation of new concepts and ideas. Using knowledge resources and sharing it within the organisation brings about its growth. This, in turn, generates new ideas and innovative solutions.

Almost 16% of the respondents believe that the presence of „knowledge management” attaches the employees emotionally to the organisation. A specific bond is created between the employee and the organization. Such bonding results in low turnover of staff. The respondents view this as a chance for an organisation to function in the conditions of limited human resources. In the recent years, more and more companies have been struggling with finding qualified staff. This problem affects practically the whole of Europe. Increasingly often, while taking up employment, employees take into account such factors as the atmosphere, the sense of self-fulfilment, or the opportunity for professional development.

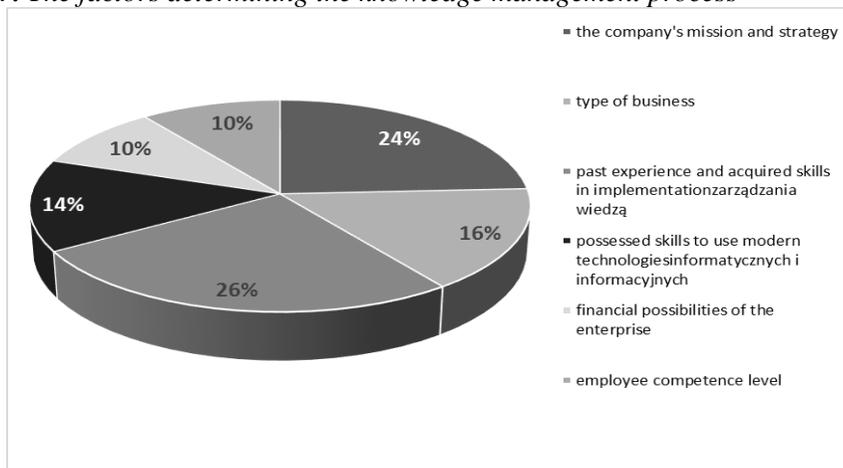
More than 14% of the respondents view „knowledge management” as an opportunity to improve their skills, and treat it as continuous development. The ability to manage competencies is more important than financial matters. The desire for perfection is a part of human nature.

For 12,4% of the respondents „knowledge management” meant time saving. They hold that skillful knowledge sharing improves virtually all processes in an organisation.

In the opinion of the employees, less significant benefits included: self-fulfilment (6%), satisfaction with work (6%), increase in the competitiveness of the employees on the job market (4%).

The knowledge management requires a specific approach to the creation and proper use of knowledge resources in an organisation in order to ensure the attainment of a competitive advantage. In the survey, the respondents were asked to indicate determinants of the knowledge management process (Figure 7).

Figure 7. The factors determining the knowledge management process



Source: Own research.

According to the respondents (26%), the main determinant of management's approach to „knowledge management” organisation is the previously gained experience and skills in the implementation of „knowledge management”. It is mainly about managers who should have information about who has the necessary knowledge to ensure competitiveness in the company, what knowledge concerning the implementation of projects other employees must have, how to shorten the time of implementation of tasks and how to avoid making mistakes and know how new knowledge is created and who is creating it.

Almost the same number of respondents (24%) states that this approach is

determined by the company's mission and strategy. According to them, the organisation of knowledge sharing is determined by the consolidation of knowledge orientation in the company's mission and vision. Organisations should be oriented towards creating a vision of knowledge, identifying gaps in knowledge, establishing barriers to knowledge sharing, creating a favourable organisational environment, and assessing the organisation's intellectual capital.

According to 16% of the respondents, the determinant of „knowledge management” organisation is the type of business activity conducted by the company, whereas 14% of them state that its determinant is the possession of skills for using modern IT and information technologies. It should be noted that the „knowledge management” is a relatively new branch of management, implementing primarily new technologies, new methods of improving the acquisition, accumulation and sharing of knowledge in the organisation.

More than 10% of the respondents believe that organising the „knowledge management” depends on the employees' skills and almost 10% of them believe that it depends on the company's financial capacity (covering the costs of the IT and information systems used).

5. Conclusion

The presented research shows a subjective approach to knowledge management, but also contributes to the further exploration of this area of management. In further studies, the research sample should be selected in a way that maintains the representativeness of the studied population.

To sum up the problem of „knowledge management”, it should be stated that it requires the development of appropriate conditions as well as an organisational culture and climate to evolve. The implementing of „knowledge management” programmes primarily contributes to an increase in the company's competitiveness on the market, supporting organisational culture, retaining talented employees, ensuring the inflow of new talented employees, creating a positive image on the external labour market.

Simultaneously, it should be stated that in the surveyed companies the possessed information technologies are not a problem, but people. The lack of appropriate incentive systems, the creation of a knowledge sharing climate and teamwork is a barrier to „knowledge management” programmes.

The „knowledge management” systems have several tasks to perform. The respondents have not indicated any task that would determine the others. Their opinions refer to several key tasks and their percentage is rather balanced. The most important tasks performed by the „knowledge management” systems include: preventing knowledge loss in the event of staff exchange in a company, helping in

continuous improvement of key skills, increasing the effectiveness of managing the process of acquiring new knowledge. All of them are aimed at improving the processes in the organisation and increasing its efficiency.

Companies should prevent the knowledge loss in the event of staff exchange within the company. When selecting employers, the employees increasingly take into account the degree of a company's innovativeness. In addition to financial benefits, development prospects or teamwork are becoming more and more important. It should be remembered that while preferring teamwork, we also protect the company against the loss of tacit knowledge. Cooperation causes the spread of tacit knowledge because it unites employees in solving problems.

Another way to prevent knowledge loss is to introduce an Intranet, where all information is stored securely and simultaneously accessible to specific groups of employees.

An important role in knowledge management is played by access to information, its flow and timeliness. Effective communication leads to an increase in the effectiveness of the processes in the company. Information and easy access to data become important. Introduction of modern IT programmes implements a company's communication to an unprecedented level of information flow.

The „knowledge management” in the global economy is a resource of strategic importance that affects the organisation's market value and provides a competitive advantage. The formation of a significant intellectual capital for an organisation requires the use of appropriate methods and tools supporting management, regular measurements, continuous comparison with competitors, elimination of barriers to knowledge sharing.

The knowledge is now considered to be the most valuable organisation's resource. It requires constant updating and modification. Knowledge can be produced by collecting, identifying, selecting, creating, sharing and adopting. This forces the environmental turbulence, in which modern organisations have to operate.

Bearing in mind the subjectivity of knowledge, the organisation should strive to provide employees with self-realisation, operational autonomy, responsibility for the company's fate, integrity with other members of the team.

Knowledge is a phenomenal resource for 21st century organisations. It progresses with an increase in its sharing frequency. Knowledge management plays a vital role in Industry 4.0. Further research should focus on trying to answer bothering questions:

- how to ensure balance in access to knowledge for both large corporations and SMEs?
- how to increase the amount of data generated in Poland?

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- what to focus on the development of infrastructure and the development of modern technologies, artificial intelligence ?
 - what to do, what does to take to ensure cybersecurity?

Industry 4.0 is not only about technology, but also about new ways of working and the role of people in industry. Related questions include:

- how to overcome the competence gaps of employees in the field of knowledge management;
- how to ensure the safety of employees when cooperating with robots.

The knowledge possessed is the driving force of economic development (Industry 4.0). It contributes to the growth of productivity and resource efficiency in all sectors of the economy. Knowledge is an indispensable resource for modern technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence) as well as a source of information for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the development of products and services.

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