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Socially Responsible Management of Human Resources in SMEs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Społecznie odpowiedzialne zarządzanie zasobami
ludzkimi w małych i średnich przedsiębiorstwach
w czasie pandemii COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The paper examines whether the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced SMEs to take socially responsible actions in their HR management.

Research Design & Methods: The paper reviews the literature with regard to human resources management in SMEs and corporate social responsibility. Empirical research was carried out with a survey, with respondents filling out an online questionnaire. The research covered 241 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in south-eastern Poland.

Findings: The main research problem was the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the continuation of socially responsible activities in HR management at SMEs. The first hypothesis – that there is a correlation between the application of social responsibility before the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of socially responsible human resources

management activities during the pandemic – was verified. The second hypothesis – that the implementation of socially responsible activities does not depend on the location of SMEs – was not confirmed.

Implications/Recommendations: The results of the research show that during the COVID-19 pandemic companies continued to combine employee performance assessments with CSR activities, rewarding socially responsible activities undertaken by employees, providing employees with favourable working conditions, and supporting them in training and professional development.

Contribution: The research and analysis both enrich the current scientific knowledge base on social responsibility with data on the social commitment of employers to employees in a crisis situation.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), human resources management (HRM), corporate social responsibility (CSR), COVID-19 pandemic.

JEL Classification: M14, M54.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem artykułu jest ustalenie, czy pandemia COVID-19 wpłynęła na podejmowanie działań społecznie odpowiedzialnych w obszarze zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi przez małe i średnie przedsiębiorstwa (MŚP).

Metodyka badań: W artykule dokonano przeglądu literatury w odniesieniu do zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi w MŚP oraz społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu. Badania empiryczne przeprowadzono na podstawie metody badań ankietowych. Zastosowano technikę badań internetowych z wykorzystaniem kwestionariusza ankiety. Badaniami objęto 241 małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw działających na terenie Polski Południowo-Wschodniej.

Wyniki badań: Głównym problemem badawczym była analiza wpływu pandemii COVID-19 na kontynuowanie przez MŚP społecznie odpowiedzialnych działań w obszarze zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi. W wyniku przeprowadzonych badań hipoteza 1 (istnienie zależności pomiędzy stosowaniem społecznej odpowiedzialności przed pandemią COVID-19 a realizacją działań społecznie odpowiedzialnych w obszarze zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi w czasie pandemii) została zweryfikowana pozytywnie, natomiast hipoteza 2 (realizacja działań społecznie odpowiedzialnych nie zależy od lokalizacji MŚP) nie została potwierdzona.

Wnioski: Wyniki badań wskazują, że w czasie pandemii COVID-19 przedsiębiorcy nadal uwzględniali w ocenie pracowników działania na rzecz CSR, nagradzali je oraz zapewniali pracownikom korzystne warunki pracy, a także wspierali ich w szkoleniach i rozwoju zawodowym.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Przeprowadzone przez autorki pracy badania i ich analiza wzbogacają dotychczasowy dorobek naukowy w obszarze społecznej odpowiedzialności o dane dotyczące społecznego zaangażowania pracodawców na rzecz pracowników w sytuacji kryzysowej.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: małe i średnie przedsiębiorstwa (MŚP), zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi (ZZL), społeczna odpowiedzialność organizacji (CSR), pandemia COVID-19.

1. Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been a global challenge for the 21st century for small and medium-sized enterprises that has caused serious disruption to the economy and business operations. The pandemic has resulted in supply chain disruptions, cash flow problems, decreased demand for goods and services, a decline in confidence, and a partial or complete suspension of economic activity. The difficult situation companies have faced has also affected employees as their livelihoods were at risk. Over the last two years, the socio-economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous changes in the approach to management, including human resources management (Matuska & Koczerga 2021, p. 89). The changes concern both the organisation of work and the need to use modern technologies. The issues related to ensuring appropriate working conditions have become particularly important. They include support for employee well-being, competency management, proper communication, integration of employee teams, and appropriate motivation. The pandemic has forced employers to change their focus on the employee, who has become managers' center of attention.

During the pandemic some companies have distinguished themselves with a proactive attitude and measures by providing support to employees. Some enterprises managed to retain employees and pay them even when operations were suspended. However, many companies were forced to lay off employees or reduce their working hours. During this period, a responsible approach to human resources management, one that focused on protecting the health and safety of employees, was of key importance. In the short-term perspective, applying the principle of social responsibility in HR management increases the trust and efficiency of employees. Enterprises that care about the safety of their employees are also more attractive to investors.

The purpose of this paper was to present whether the COVID-19 pandemic influenced SMEs to take socially responsible actions by SMEs in HR management.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility and the Employee

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) defines corporate social responsibility (CSR) as: "activities of enterprises contributing to sustainable economic development, focused on cooperation with employees, their families, local community and the entire society for the purpose of improving the quality of their lives" (Teneta-Skwiercz 2013, p. 40).

CSR is a kind of social contract that leads organisations to act ethically and responsibly (economically, ecologically and socially), minimising the negative effects of running a business while maximising its positive effects (Maignan & Ferrell 2004, pp. 3–19).

Social responsibility is the commitment of enterprises to sustainable development and to improving the quality of life of the entire society. CSR cannot be reduced only to the implementation of image goals or giving money away (sponsorship). Nor is it only about complying with the provisions of labour law or environmental protection (Klimek 2019, p. 183). Not only a specific style of managing (people, products, processes, entire organisations), social responsibility is a philosophy of the company's operation, one that undertakes a voluntary commitment to respect the rights of employees, society and the environment, exceeding the applicable legal requirements.

There are two dimensions of CSR: internal and external. The internal includes (Klimek 2019, p. 183):

- human resources management, including employee involvement, equality, fair wages, work-life balance,
- occupational health and safety, including principles of work safety or forms of health care,
- ethical programmes for employees, i.e. ethical codes or training in ethics,
- an ability to adapt to changes, including, for instance, flexibility in employment, minimising the negative effects of changes, minimising the negative impact on the environment,
- corporate supervision and its principles, e.g. information transparency.

The external dimension includes:

- impact on local society,
- relationships with suppliers and customers,
- environmental impact,
- human rights.

The essence of social responsibility is also presented in the ISO 26000 standard, published by the International Organization for Standardization in November 2010. CSR covers the entire policy of the organisation, its strategy that takes into account social, ethical and environmental aspects in its activities and in its contacts with stakeholders (Rok 2012, p. 362).

The BS ISO 26000:2010 standard entitled *Guidance on Social Responsibility (ISO 26000... 2010, pp. 14–68)* distinguishes seven areas of social responsibility which are intended to help organisations identify problems that arise as a result of organisational activities undertaken within each of them. The areas include organisational governance (principles and standards of enterprise management), human rights, work practices, the natural environment, fair market practices, relations with consumers and activities for the benefit of the local community. These areas are intended to help organisations identify problems that arise as a result of the organisation's activities undertaken within each area:

- organisational governance – includes the principles and standards relating to broadly understood enterprise management. In order for the organisation to be effectively managed, it should implement the principles of transparency, accountability, ethical conduct, respect for issue raised by stakeholders, legal requirements, international standards and human rights;

- human rights – fundamental rights that every organisation should respect and include civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights which take precedence over other rights;

- work practices – responsibility for employees and the workplace, including: employee recruitment, disciplinary procedures and complaints, transfer and posting of employees, termination of employment, training and professional development, health, health and safety at work, working time and remuneration;

- natural environment – each organisation should try to limit its impact on the environment, taking into account the direct and indirect economic, social, health and environmental effects of its decisions and actions;

- fair market practices – covers the organisation's ethical behaviour towards all stakeholders (in particular partners, suppliers, customers, competitors, government organisations and local communities);

- relations with consumers – each organisation is accountable to consumers (clients). Responsibility in this respect includes the use of clear and transparent commercial information and the promotion of sustainable consumption;

- activities for the benefit of the local community – as all organisations have an impact on the communities in which they operate, they should engage in activities for the benefit of local communities, thus helping to strengthen civil society.

Some companies focus their CSR activities on employees (HR management, in other words), hoping that in the long term they will help the company achieve positive reactions from investors (Qiu *et al.* 2021, pp. 1–12). During the crisis, CSR activities allowed for the creation of stronger ties with employees than had existed prior to the crisis. Remote work has led employers to find new ways to manage employee performance. Hence, in order to increase employee involvement, many employers organised virtual meetings with them (Camilleri 2021, p. 12).

In the theory and practice of SMEs, HR management that strives to practice CSR – employment, training, evaluation, remuneration and providing SME employees with a usually ethically acceptable work environment (Ceranić & Popović 2009, p. 73) – is of great importance. HR management that employs CSR consider numerous factors, including employee involvement in decision-making processes, the opportunity to develop and improve one's qualifications, work-life balance, fair remuneration, improved communication between employees and management, and easy access to information about changes in the company's strategy (Bem-Kozieł 2008, p. 110).

Research by Burgdorf (2021, p. 53) shows that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs invested less in CSR than large companies because they were forced to deploy their resources in a struggle for survival.

3. Human Resources Management in SMEs

The role of small and medium-sized enterprises is indisputable for the economy of any country. Research has shown that on a global scale, SMEs conduct over 90% of all business activities (Ceranić & Popović 2009, p. 71).

Two important features SMEs boast are flexibility and ease of adapting to the dynamic changes taking place in the economy based on knowledge and innovation. Companies from this sector have much lower material and financial resources than larger companies (Matejun & Motyka 2016, p. 44). The past several decades have shown that resources such as technology, finance and production processes provide SMEs smaller competitive advantage. However, employees, their intellectual capital, competences, creativity, attitude to clients, motivation or ability to learn are all factors that distinguish SMEs and influence the growth of their importance (Ceranić & Popović 2009, p. 72). Drucker (1998, p. 282) emphasises that a person is the most versatile, productive and fertile resource of all available wealth. Human resources have a unique character (Matejun & Motyka 2016, p. 43) because they cannot be imitated by the competition. Over time, their value and usefulness increase (Adamik 2003, pp. 126–127). Moreover, employers assess the competences possessed by human capital to be among the most difficult elements for competition to copy (Cyran 2017, p. 36). An increase in the importance of human capital influences has brought about a change in employer-employee relationships.

Employers prefer employees who pursue their own goals and help the organisation achieve its own goals, while at the same time accepting responsibility for the results the company achieves. They also prize inventiveness and openness to change. As the number of skilled employees rises, the requirements of employees towards employers change. Apart from having their economic security ensured, employees expect to do interesting work that enables them to improve and develop (Rybak 2004, p. 181). Employees' requirements are related not only to the economic aspect, but also to the "socio-ethical dimension of humanity" (Bem-Kozieł 2008, p. 112).

A main goal of HR management in SMEs is to combine the improvement of employee efficiency with an ethical and socially responsible approach. Achieving this goal is conducive to achieving other strategic goals, including profit, productivity, and customer and employee satisfaction.

Small and medium-sized enterprises usually do not have a separate department dedicated to HR management (Fabi, Raymond & Lacoursière 2009, pp. 7–25). The HR management process in small enterprises often depends on the personal preferences of the owner/manager. For SME managers, the source of knowledge

and ideas on how to manage human resources is their own experience and often an informal approach to management. The results of research conducted by Zakrzewska-Bielawska (2007, p. 90) show that small and medium-sized companies employ well-established management patterns without taking into account the diverse needs of employees, which in the end may cause the company to fail. In SMEs, the strategic approach to HR is more moderate than in large companies, and best HR management practices are only applied less systematically (Johnson 2000, pp. 69–82). Some researchers have argued that formal personnel practices make a company more transparent, and thus more attractive for employees (Nguyen & Bryant 2004, p. 611).

Global competition also leads companies to embrace professional HR management (Naz, Aftab & Awais 2016, p. 700). If an enterprise is dominated by an inflexible owner/manager, it may be difficult to implement the HRM model applied in large enterprises. The lack of formal organisational structures and relationships may be helpful in implementing HRM practices in SMEs (Wiesner 2001, p. 45).

The use of participatory practices by SME owners/managers in managing employees helps boost enterprise performance and effective competition in the market (Wiesner 2001, p. 48). Investing in employee participation programmes and creating incentives for non-professional roles are an important success factor for SMEs that want to promote innovation and entrepreneurship (Hayton 2003, p. 386).

As the role of employees in SMEs has changed, so too has the approach to creating employment plans recruitment. For example, recruitment is not only the act of hiring an employee, but also of preparing and training them and ultimately introducing them to their work.

In the knowledge-based economy, employees' developing qualifications are highly relevant. The training process is particularly important for SMEs that have limited resources and which should react quickly to changing operating circumstances. Companies all too rarely use training, especially external forms, due to financial constraints, information gaps and a lack of awareness of the benefits (*Management Training...* 2002, p. 5). But training and development do improve company results (de Kok & Uhlaner 2001, pp. 273–291). This is also confirmed by the results of research on the impact of HR management on SME results. In their study, Naz, Aftab and Awais (2016) adopted recruitment, selection, training and development, remuneration policy and employee evaluation as independent variables, and SME results as the dependent variable. The results of regression and correlation confirmed that all independent variables had an impact on the results (Naz, Aftab & Awais 2016, p. 706). Investments in training, even of a small number of employees, improving their skills, knowledge and competences, helps companies build good relations with customers, an extremely important factor determining competitiveness (Aurangzeb, Asif & Amin 2021, p. 687).

During the pandemic, companies used a number of mechanisms to support employees, including working from home, introducing procedures related to health and safety at work, introducing the obligation to use personal protective equipment, maintaining social distance, limiting business trips, guaranteeing the possibility of taking paid holidays, employee volunteering and employee assistance programmes (Mahmud, Ding & Hasan 2021, p. 8). Such measures enable socially responsible SMEs to strengthen both their image and mutual relations with employees. In order to increase employee motivation and strengthen their sense of job security, employers have systematically contacted employees and provided current information related to COVID-19.

4. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Functioning of SMEs in Selected Areas – the Results of Our Research

Research on how the pandemic affected enterprises has been published in the last year, particularly on the short- and long-term impact of the pandemic on enterprises (Cucculelli & Peruzzi 2018, pp. 459–474; Karabag 2020, pp. 1–6; Kraus *et al.* 2020, pp. 1067–1092; Moradian *et al.* 2020, pp. 1–7; Rodrigues *et al.* 2021, pp. 1–21). However, a systematic review of the literature and research has yet to be done.

Several studies attempting to analyse the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight its serious negative impact on employees, customers and supply chains. The negative significance of the economic recession caused by the pandemic was emphasised by Açıkgöz & Günay (2020, pp. 520–526). The pair also note of all enterprises, SMEs suffered the most under the pandemic, with the restrictions introduced by governments reducing their financial liquidity or in some cases driving them into insolvency (Runyan 2006, pp. 12–26; Anderson *et al.* 2020, pp. 931–934; Baker & Judge 2020, p. 620; Kraus *et al.* 2020, pp. 1067–1092; Le *et al.* 2020, pp. 3683–3692; McCloskey & Heymann 2020, p. 148; Gregurec, Tomičić Furjan & Tomičić-Pupek 2021, p. 1098).

The pandemic also disrupted HR management at SMEs, as companies had to take measures to protect jobs and guarantee safe working conditions.

The research used for this paper mainly referred to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on “work practices”, which, among other things, covers responsibility for employees and the workplace. This includes: employee recruitment, transfer and posting of employees, termination of employment, training and professional development, health, safety and hygiene at work, working time and remuneration.

The results presented in this paper are the outcome of our own research, which seeks to identify responsible actions taken by SMEs for the benefit of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary research problem was the analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the continuation of socially responsible activities

in HR management by SMEs. The study focused on a single area CSR – work practices. The research is a part of wider research aimed at identifying the changes that the pandemic has forced on companies from the SME sector.

The research was conducted by employees of the Faculty of Management of the Rzeszow University of Technology in the period March–June 2021. The research sample consisted of 241 enterprises operating in south-eastern Poland (voivodships: Podkarpackie, Świętokrzyskie and Lubelskie), located both in urban (63%) and rural (37%) areas. The measurement and the analysis covered enterprises classified into one of the following categories: sole proprietorship (23%), micro-enterprises (35%), small enterprises (23%) and medium-sized enterprises (19%); 0.03 percent was micro companies, 0.38 small companies, and 1.47 medium companies from the total number of companies located in the area. Survey respondents are people with full knowledge of how the company surveyed functions, including management staff, owners or individuals indicated by them. The sample was selected using the purposive method, while the method of questionnaire research was used in our own research. The questionnaire was developed in Polish on the basis of the literature on the subject. Internet research was used, with respondents completing a questionnaire on a website. Before the final version of the questionnaire was developed, a pilot study was conducted, with academic experts and company managers as participants. This was intended to minimise the likelihood of errors.

The research and analysis fill the research gap regarding how the pandemic influenced the functioning of SMEs in Poland and the actions taken by owners/managers in terms of responsible human resources management.

Description and statistical analysis (Mann-Whitney U test) have been used to describe and analyse the data collected.

Taking into account the conclusions from the analysis of the literature on the subject, the following hypotheses were adopted:

Hypothesis 1: There is a relationship between the use of social responsibility before the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of socially responsible activities in human resources management during the pandemic.

Hypothesis 2: The implementation of socially responsible activities does not depend on the location of the SMEs.

Only 8% of the enterprises (20 companies) started a new type of activity, entered a new sector or changed industries as a result of the pandemic.

The average length of existence of the companies that participated was 15 years. Half of the companies had been operating for 10 years or less, and the other half for longer. Most often, companies had been operating in the market for 5 years. There were 21 such companies, or 9% of the total surveyed. Six months was the shortest period a company had been operating, and 170 years – the longest. The volatility index shows that the companies are highly diversified in terms of their activities.

As a result of the pandemic, 18% of the enterprises surveyed (44 companies) made redundancies.

Figure 1 shows the percentage that introduced or increased the use of remote work (from home) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic: 83 enterprises introduced remote work, while 38 enterprises increased it and in 120 no work was done remotely.

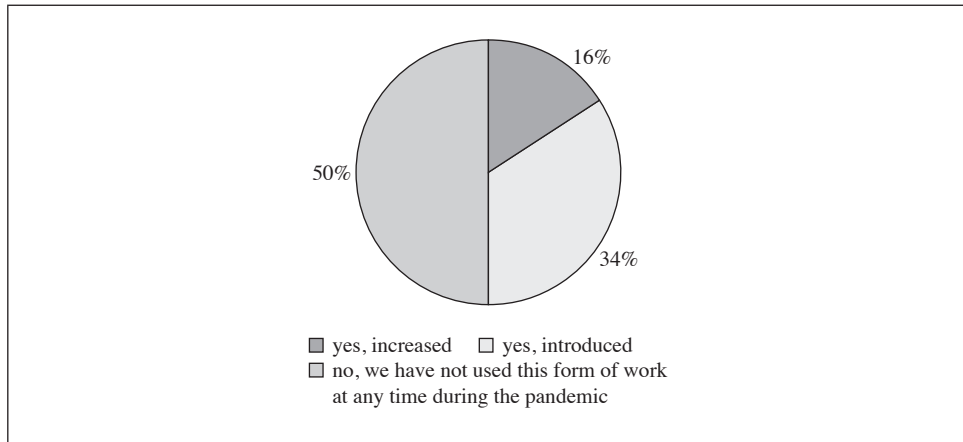


Fig. 1. Has the Use of Remote Work (from Home) Been Introduced or Increased at Your Company as a Result of COVID-19?

Source: the authors.

Study respondents were asked if their enterprise had undertaken any SR activities in the period before the pandemic. Only 29% of the surveyed SMEs had. Then, using the Mann-Whitney U test (the research was carried out at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$), the existence of a relationship between companies that used CSR before the COVID-19 pandemic and those that did not was confirmed, as was the relationship between the assessment of employee performance and activities for CSR (0.0010), rewarding employee activities within CSR (0.0003), ensuring appropriate and favourable working conditions (0.0054) and supporting employees in training and professional development (0.0003). This is shown in Figure 2.

68% of the respondents indicated greater care for social relations and a good atmosphere of cooperation (online meetings, help for sick employees) have emerged. The companies surveyed also ensure good communication with employees – 61% indicate that they talk to employees about their problems and concerns more often, while 64% ensure that they explain themselves to employees when difficult decisions must be made.

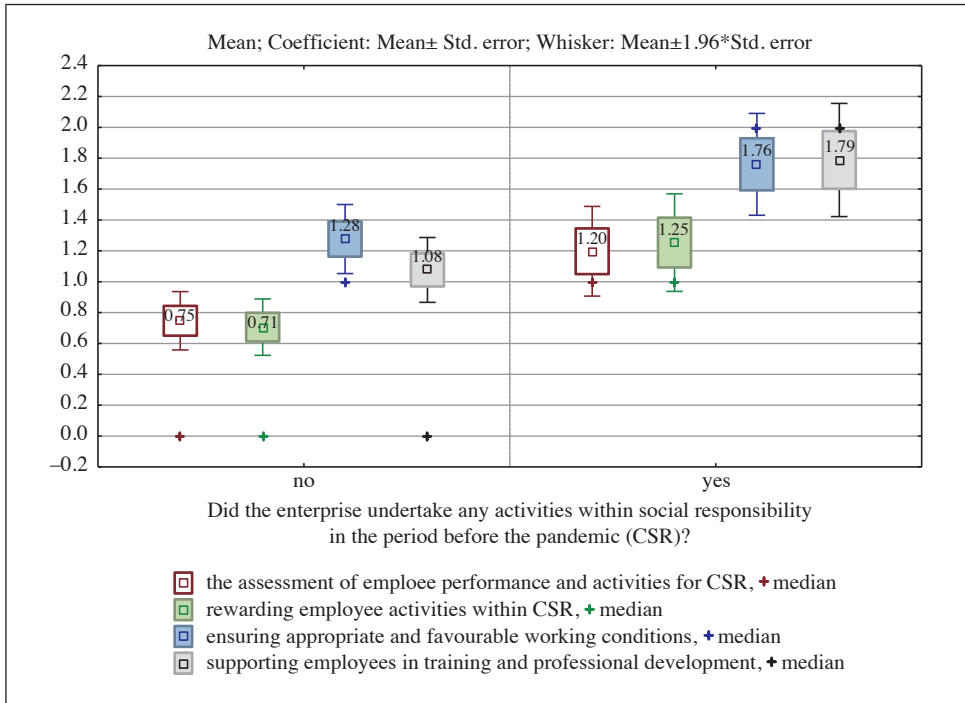


Fig. 2. A Comparison between Companies Using (and Not Using) CSR before the COVID-19 Pandemic in Selected Aspects

Source: the authors.

In the case of the company’s hub, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used (at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$). The study showed four differences in the assessments of individual statements. One analysed the impact of an activity on the assessment of problems with the payment of benefits for employees $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0458$), the need to change employment conditions $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0090$), and enabling employees with special needs to work at convenient hours $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0460$). Problems paying employees benefits and the need to change employment conditions occurred much more often in companies located in the city (1.65 and 1.82 on average). Companies located in the city allowed their employees to work at convenient hours more often (an average grade 1.42).

5. Conclusions

As the analyses show, Hypothesis 1 was confirmed: There is a relationship between the application of social responsibility before the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of socially responsible activities in HR management during the

pandemic. The results also show that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, employers continued to combine employee performance assessments with CSR activities, rewarding socially responsible activities undertaken by employees and providing employees with favourable working conditions and supporting them in training and professional development.

The second hypothesis was not confirmed. The research showed a correlation between the location of the enterprise and the payment of employee benefits, introducing changes in employment conditions and enabling employees with special needs (e.g. single parents) to work at convenient hours.

To summarise the research, people running small and medium-sized enterprises, despite a significant deterioration in the conditions for running a business, still undertake voluntary actions for their employees.

Only SMEs operating in Poland's southeast were included in the research. The small number of respondents and the fact that the results obtained could have been influenced by the subjective assessment of the respondents were factors limiting the research. For future research we recommend conducting comparative research on SMEs operating in other regions of Poland.

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