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## On Reducing Occupational Fraud Risk in SMEs: Recommendations

Jak ograniczyć ryzyko nadużyć pracowniczych  
w sektorze małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw?  
Rekomendacje

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To propose recommendations for SMEs interested in reducing the occupational fraud risk.

**Research Design & Methods:** The study is based on an analysis of the relevant literature, reports on fraud, the author's own preliminary research, and an analysis of court case files pertaining to occupational fraud.

**Findings:** Occupational fraud in SMEs in Poland is largely detected by accident, as a result of a job rotation or changes in internal procedures, whereas the most popular detection method applied by enterprises in general are routine internal audits (as a global report on fraud indicates).

**Implications/Recommendations:** The risk of occupational fraud in the SME sector cannot be completely eliminated, but measures can be implemented to reduce its occurrence. These can be divided into soft measures (taking care of ethics at every juncture) and hard measures (facilitating the reporting of occupational fraud).

**Contribution:** The paper indicates ways of detecting occupational fraud in SMEs in Poland and, based on these observations, proposes recommendations for reducing the risk of occupational fraud in companies in this sector.

**Article type:** original article.

**Keywords:** occupational fraud, employee abuse, occupational fraud risk, SMEs, risk reduction.

**JEL Classification:** M5.

## STRESZCZENIE

**Cel:** Celem artykułu jest zaproponowanie zaleceń dla sektora małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw (MŚP), wpływających na ograniczanie ryzyka nadużyć pracowniczych.

**Metodyka badań:** W artykule wykorzystano metodę analizy literatury, raportów dotyczących nadużyć oraz wstępnych badań własnych polegających na analizie dokumentów sądowych, które odnoszą się do nadużyć pracowniczych.

**Wyniki badań:** Wyniki badań wskazują, że nadużycia pracownicze w przedsiębiorstwach sektora MŚP w Polsce wykrywane są przez przypadek, poprzez rotację pracowników i zmianę procedur wewnętrznych. Uwzględniając dane na temat wszystkich przedsiębiorstw, które zostały zawarte w raportach dotyczących nadużyć, najpopularniejszym sposobem ich wykrywania są rutynowe audyty wewnętrzne.

**Wnioski:** Ryzyka nadużyć pracowniczych w przedsiębiorstwach sektora MŚP nie da się całkowicie wyeliminować, można jednak wdrażać działania ograniczające jego występowanie. Można wyróżnić działania o charakterze miękkim (np. ciągłe dbanie o etykę) oraz twardym (np. ułatwienie zgłaszania nadużyć pracowniczych).

**Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny:** Główną wartością jest wskazanie sposobów wykrywania nadużyć w przedsiębiorstwach sektora MŚP w Polsce i zaproponowanie na ich podstawie zaleceń wpływających na ograniczanie ryzyka nadużyć pracowniczych.

**Typ artykułu:** oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nadużycia pracownicze, ryzyko nadużyć pracowniczych, sektor MŚP, ograniczanie ryzyka.

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## 1. Introduction

Occupational fraud is a problem that affects virtually every enterprise. Despite its prevalence, actions taken to address the issue remain largely insufficient. Companies are frequently either unaware of this risk or unfamiliar with the risk-management tools and the costs of implementing them.

The number of publications dedicated to occupational fraud risk in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)<sup>1</sup> is relatively small. Researchers tend to focus on

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<sup>1</sup> The article adopts the definition of the SME sector used by the European Union. According to Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of June 17, 2014, an enterprise must meet at least

fraud committed in larger business entities (cf. Bishop & Hydoski 2010, Kramer 2015, pp. 6–7), seeking to identify typical fraud schemes, primarily financial ones, as well as the means of preventing them. However, companies operating on a smaller scale may differ in this respect. Occupational fraud also results in higher financial losses in SMEs than large corporations (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2018, 2020). On top of financial consequences, fraud also has a negative impact, particularly in smaller enterprises, on employee morale, productivity, and work quality. In view of the above, the primary research problem explored in this article is as follows: What actions can be taken by SMEs to reduce the risk of occupational fraud? This article attempts to answer this question based on analysis of the relevant literature, my own preliminary research on the SME sector in Poland, and available reports. This study provides recommendations for SMEs on how to reduce the risk of occupational fraud.

## 2. Review of Literature and Reports

Occupational fraud (also known as internal or employee fraud) has been addressed across multiple disciplines, including law, sociology, economics, finance, management and quality sciences. It is often synonymous with the term “abuse” or, more broadly, “economic crime”. However, the latter refers to specific situations and acts covered in the penal code and as such is regulated by criminal law. As a result, not every act of fraud will be recognised as economic crime (Kutera 2008, p. 17). In the literature in English, abuse is defined as the improper use of something, an unjust or corrupt practice, while fraud describes a wrongful or criminal deception intended to result in financial or personal gain (Oxford Lexico 2019). Given the widespread occurrence of fraud in the US, in 1988 the country established The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE). The Association offers training in the detection and prevention of fraud, particularly financial fraud. Following the definition adopted by the ACFE, occupational fraud is “the use of one’s occupation for personal enrichment through the deliberate misuse or misapplication of the organisation’s resources or assets”, whereby “an employee, manager,

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two criteria to be considered to be operating in the SME sector. The first criterion is the number of people employed – it must be less than 250. Another is the size of the annual turnover and the annual balance sheet total – for an enterprise to be considered an SME, its annual turnover must not exceed 50 million euros or its annual balance sheet total must not exceed 43 million euros (Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014). This definition differs from that used, for example, in the US – the Small Business Administration (SBA) classifies small businesses according to its ownership structure, number of employees, earnings and industry (U.S. Small Business Administration 2023). For example, in manufacturing, an SME is a firm with 500 or fewer employees. In contrast, businesses that mine copper ore and nickel ore can have up to 1,500 employees and still be identified as SMEs (Liberto 2022).

or executive commits fraud against his or her employer” (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2019). In Polish legislation, this definition refers to both people employed under contracts of employment (permanent employees) and those working on civil law contracts. Occupational fraud is a morally reprehensible act (Maciejewska 2016, p. 163), and as such should not be tolerated regardless of the possible consequences or their scale for the enterprise.

Occupational fraud can take many forms, including the three most common: corruption, asset misappropriation, and financial statement fraud (Wells 2006, p. 46). Other types include theft of company assets, manipulation of sales and inventory, overstatement of business expenses and working time, use of company property and business information for private purposes, and excessive use of sick leave. These forms of fraud are present in both large corporations and SMEs. However, in the latter the risk is more likely to become reality, causing greater losses than in large corporations (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2020, p. 25). Risk-reducing measures are therefore of paramount importance for this group.

D. Cressey developed the concept of the Fraud Triangle in the 1920s, and it is still widely accepted as the foundation of fraud research. Cressey maintained three factors lead to fraudulent behaviour: pressure (motive), opportunity, and rationalisation. While the concept itself is being constantly developed (e.g. Wolfe & Hermanson 2004, Dorminey *et al.* 2012, Kakati & Goswami 2019, Vousinas 2019), all new models that try to explain the causes of fraud and which underpin fraud research make references to the Fraud Triangle.

Enterprises must focus on the component of opportunity, i.e. circumstances that contribute to the potential of fraud being committed. The risk of such circumstances is higher in organisations with weak or no mechanisms of internal control, insufficient asset safeguards, and unclear rules of acceptable conduct. Of course, the companies must provide these themselves. What they have less control over is the fraud-triggering motives that result from the employee’s individual situation (e.g. personal financial obligations). They also cannot control rationalisation – that is, how an employee justifies behaviour to him or herself to make fraud an acceptable act. To a certain degree, this factor can be reduced if the company employs the right people. In some situations, employees follow company rules and regulations only because they are afraid or would feel ashamed and rejected by people they care about if they were caught (Huang *et al.* 2017, p. 1344).

Rothberg (2011) put forward the 10/10/80 principle, which holds that 10% of employees will never succumb to fraudulent behaviour, 10% will do so if they have the opportunity, and 80% will commit fraud if they are able to justify their actions. Conducted between the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2019 and the first quarter (Q1) of 2020 in the SME sector in Poland, research shows that, next to legal, financial, market, strategic, and operational risks, the primary type of risk enterprises in

Poland face comes from personnel. While companies struggle to find qualified staff, when they do find them there is a risk of occupational fraud being committed (Dankiewicz, Ostrowska-Dankiewicz & Bulut 2020, p. 520). Such a significant risk and a high percentage of possible fraudsters among employees would seem to take a disproportionately high toll on smaller enterprises due to their inability to provide sufficient internal control systems and the lack of dedicated tools to prevent and detect internal fraud. And indeed, these enterprises face the highest risk of occupational fraud (cf. Kramer 2015, p. 4; Bartoszewicz & Bartoszewicz 2016, p. 60). Their worse position is further exacerbated by the fact that, compared to large corporations, SMEs have a reduced capacity to absorb losses caused by white-collar crime.

Occupational fraud may have a significant negative impact on company operations, not only generating financial losses but also affecting the company's reputation, image, relations with contractors, other employees' morale, efficiency, and work quality. According to the ACFE, occupational fraud costs enterprises an estimated 5% of annual revenues (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2020, p. 4), with enterprises that employ less than 100 employees reporting higher losses than large corporations (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2020, p. 5). Recent studies show that organisations in Poland suffered an average loss of PLN 400,000 (approx. EUR 88,000) to occupational fraud over a two-year period, while more than one third of companies declared losses exceeding PLN 4 million (approx. EUR 888,889) (PwC 2020b). In extreme cases, occupational fraud can even lead to bankruptcy. The US Chamber of Commerce estimates that nearly 30% of all business bankruptcies in the United States may be related to employee theft or the misappropriation of assets (Walker 2018). This makes it essential to help companies, particularly SMEs, reduce the risk of occupational fraud.

### 3. Methods

In the third quarter of 2019, an analysis of a non-randomly selected sample of cases considered before the Third Criminal Division of the District Court in Wrocław, Poland, was conducted (based on case reference numbers) to establish how companies could reduce the risk of occupational fraud. The criminal divisions of Poland's district courts typically deal with major crimes, certain misdemeanours, and cases of particular importance and complexity. For the purposes of this analysis, cases were selected from 2016–2018 that concluded with a verdict, a concurrent sentence, a court order, or a ruling to terminate legal proceedings. The court was selected following its consent to participate in the study, while the choice of the criminal division was dictated by the fact that occupational fraud may be treated as an offense or a crime pursuant to the following articles of the Polish Penal Code (LexLege 2019): Article 265 § 1: disclosure or use of information classified as “secret” or “top secret”; Article 270: forging a document and using it as authentic;

Article 270a: forging an invoice and using it as authentic; Article 271a: providing false information in invoices; Article 278: theft; Article 284: misappropriation of property; Article 286: fraud; Article 287: computer fraud; Article 288: destruction of property belonging to someone else; Article 296: causing damage in business operations; Article 296a: managerial bribery; Article 299: money laundering; or Article 303: failure to document business activities or undue bookkeeping. These articles of the Penal Code served as the basis for the selection of cases for the analysis. In 2016–2018, a total of 233 cases were handled (and completed) by the said Court with reference to one of the articles listed above. Of these, 201 cases were selected for a detailed analysis. Cases pertaining to other forms of illicit conduct not specified in the articles listed above, such as the sale, purchase or possession of drugs, murder, abuse of power by a public official, sale of identity documents, or obstruction of a creditor's satisfaction, were excluded from the primary database.

Because not all case files were available (some were transferred to another court or an expert, while access to others was denied), 21% of the pre-selected cases were subjected to final verification involving occupational fraud. Of these, nine companies that had experienced occupational fraud were classified as SMEs. They were identified based on the personnel size or revenues generated, depending on which data were available on EMIS (Emerging Markets Information Service, <https://www.emis.com/pl>, accessed: 12.05.2020) for the year in which the fraud was committed. These companies primarily engaged in services (67%) and trade (33%). In addition, reference was made to excerpts from the 2020 PwC report published to supplement the results of the analysis. While the report is a global review, this study focused only on data from Poland. The data from the report referred to instances of occupational fraud committed in the two years preceding the survey (PwC does not present the exact period of the survey) (PwC 2020b).

#### **4. Results**

Out of over 1,000 cases heard by the Third Criminal Division of the District Court in Wrocław in 2016–2018, essentially only a few were related to occupational fraud in companies. Our observation agreed with PwC's research (2020b), which shows that in the study period only 11% of Polish enterprises decided to notify law enforcement authorities (e.g. the prosecutor's office, the police, the Central Anti-corruption Bureau) about an instance of fraud detected in their organisation, despite the fact that nearly 50% of entrepreneurs in Poland experienced fraud that was classified as economic crime, with over 60% of them committed with the participation of employees (PwC 2020b).

This apparent reluctance to publicise fraud may be due to companies striving to avoid damaging their image. Another barrier is the cost of potential court proceedings and their average duration, which in Poland only continues to increase.

The average duration of proceedings in a district court in 2019 was 8.7 months. That was half a month longer than in 2016 and 1.7 months longer than in 2011–2012 (Defratyka 2021).

The analysis of the selected cases allowed us to review the occupational fraud detection methods in SMEs, with the following ways found to be the most common in the detection of fraud in that sector:

- random (accidental) verification and control tests performed by a company employee,
- job rotation,
- modification of internal procedures.

Given the additional data from the PwC report, it was established that accidental detection accounted for 9% of all cases of fraud, and job rotation for another 3%. Information from law enforcement bodies or regulating institutions provided for the detection of an additional 3%. However, 34% of these instances of fraud (and 39% globally) were committed by external perpetrators, while for another 3% no information was provided about the perpetrator or the classification of the affected enterprise (as a large corporation or an SME). The report also shows that while routine internal audits proved to be the most common fraud detection method, companies did not implement fraud risk-management practices or advanced data analysis, while information from whistleblowers, whether provided through ethical lines or others, accounted for 6% of all cases of fraud detected (PwC 2020a, p. 5; 2020b). As Moritz (2016, pp. 5–6) argues, most enterprises are not sufficiently prepared to detect fraud. The most common reason is the lack of two things – resources and a fraud risk-management strategy.

In view of the above, soft and hard measures are proposed to reduce the risk of occupational fraud.

## 5. Discussion

Research conducted in American enterprises indicates that the occupational fraud risks faced by smaller enterprises differ from those their larger counterparts must combat (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners 2020, p. 5). Based on this observation, our findings, the analysis of the literature and reports on fraud prevention, a number of recommendations can be proposed to help SMEs reduce the risk they face (see Table 1).

Most cases of fraud, particularly in SMEs, are committed by trusted, long-tenured employees. After all, given their knowledge of the company's shortcomings and errors, they are in a better position to find loopholes and cover their tracks (see Hess & Cottrell 2016, p. 16). In smaller enterprises, employees generally find it easier to gain the trust of the owner; however, this does not mean that company owners cannot trust their employees at all. Moreover, owners and managers should

also ensure that employees have a sense of justice and integrity at work, both of which have a crucial effect on their behaviour (cf. Wojtkowiak 2019, p. 134).

Table 1. Reducing the Occupational Fraud Risk in SMEs

Recommendation	Description
Soft	
Ethics is everything	Rules of ethical conduct should be precisely defined along with what constitutes morally acceptable behaviour. The company's goals should always be pursued in compliance with the applicable standards – also through the implementation of the abridged code of conduct and ethics
No excuse for bad decisions even if they bring good results	Unethical decisions cannot be ignored even if they profit the company – the ends never justifies the means. The decision-making process requires due diligence and transparency. Good decision-making requires a broad search for broad information, playing devil's advocate to uncover logical flaws, careful testing and analysis, and validation with key stakeholders
Lead by example	Company culture and the work environment should promote open dialogue, understanding and ethical behaviour. The primary responsibility of owners and managers is therefore to set a good example – to behave in an honest and ethical manner, positively influencing employee morale
Involve employees in decision-making	Including employees in the decision-making process requires determining how deep their participation should be. An employee should act not only at the instruction of their supervisor, but primarily because they are aware of what will be beneficial and useful to the company. This promotes a sense of responsibility for the company, which in turn increases integrity
Never ignore a single case of even minor misconduct	Employees must be held accountable for all types of occupational fraud, from the smallest cases to those that bring significant losses to the company. Smaller transgressions, if uncontrolled, pave the way for larger problems
Hard	
Reporting occupational fraud must be easy and anonymous	Companies should implement fraud reporting mechanisms (via e-mail, regular mail, a dedicated form on the company's website, or a specially created platform for this purpose), and ensure the anonymity of those who use them. These channels should be available not only to company employees, but also to outsiders (vendors, customers, partners)
Regular internal and external inspections and audits	Companies need to conduct regular and unannounced inspections and audits, both internal (especially if they have adequate staff and dedicated audit departments) and external ones
Constant monitoring	Tasks performed by employees should be monitored and verified not only directly, but also based on performance reports
Division of responsibilities	Responsibilities should be divided to avoid making a single employee entirely responsible for one aspect (e.g. financial) of company operations



Table 1 cont'd

Recommendation	Description
Implement procedures for critical processes	Critical processes in an organisation include those related to the circulation of cash or other funds and assets, as well as the recording and monitoring of time actually spent working for remote workers. The necessary procedures must be implemented and then verified for compliance
Enterprise data analytics	Regular analysis of data collected in the company’s systems makes it possible to verify business processes for any alarming signs or incidents that may indicate fraud
Employee training	By organising and conducting training courses on fraud prevention for all employees, companies increase awareness and show how to detect such incidents and why they happen in the first place. Once armed with this knowledge, people become more reluctant to commit fraud
Regular risk reviews and updates	A systematic verification and updates on the types of occupational frauds are recommended even if the company has not implemented a comprehensive risk management system
Provide employees with the tools and resources they need to achieve goals	Even if ambitious, company goals should be realistic, and employees should have the appropriate resources and tools to achieve them. Managers should think carefully about setting goals that will lead employees to do their best without breaking their loyalty by violating their sense of fairness. Additionally, if circumstances change such that an agreed upon goal is no longer attainable, managers should change the goal to reflect the new realities of the business. Otherwise, employees of SMEs may feel pushed to pursue the goals in a less ethical manner, thinking that their behaviour is justified

Source: the author, based on (Bishop & Hydoski 2010, pp. 104–110; Kramer 2015, pp. 12–15; Hess & Cottrell 2016, pp. 15–17).

As highlighted by Kramer (2015, p. 4), while company owners and managers should trust employees, they should verify their behaviour without being afraid that this will create an atmosphere of mistrust in the enterprise. Moreover, they can, or perhaps should, be involved in the company’s critical functions such as accounting, which will not signal a lack of trust but be a sign that employees’ activities are subject to control. These tasks can also be outsourced to internal audit departments (if there are any in enterprises) or other independent employees who will act as critical authorizers of selected business events. Both our analysis of the court documents and practical experience show that owners and managers can be supported in their decisions by referring to regular data analyses of their company’s operations. As technology has advanced, the role of digitisation has risen, as reflected by the databases and systems for the storing and processing of nearly all company data. Continuously collected and aggregated, such data can be analysed in detail to identify the indicators that can help SMEs reduce occupational fraud.

However, it is equally necessary to organise random checks so as to compare the data stored in the company systems with the actual documents, e.g. invoices from vendors. Regular job rotation also appears to be a good practice.

## 6. Summary

While occupational fraud risk cannot be eliminated, certain measures can be implemented to prevent it given that some case of fraud, including those with the highest financial toll, continue to be detected by accident, as a result of job rotation or a modification of internal procedures. To this end, this paper has made a number of recommendations, divided into two categories: soft and hard. The former do not require large investments and can serve as an effective tool in fighting white-collar crime. In this category, the actions company owners and managers take play a key role in influencing employee behaviour. Hard recommendations fall within the low-cost category and involve, for example, the facilitation of fraud reporting mechanisms, implementation of procedures for the most important processes, regular data analysis and verification, and the definition of realistic goals for employees. Compared to the magnitude of the consequences of fraud, hard steps are low cost. Naturally, a company must be able to use the tools with respect to the jobs its employees do and the costs of implementing them. According to a PwC report, cost is the most frequently cited reason that activities and programmes aimed at reducing occupational fraud are foregone (PwC 2020b). However, the cost of not preventing fraud can outstrip the price of implementing the measures that could have stopped it. In terms of limitations of this research, the diversity of the SME sector makes it difficult to recommend tools that will be useful for every type of business. This may limit the applicability of some tools, though an attempt has been made to provide universal solutions.

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