

LABOR QUALITY IN AN ENTERPRISE AS A SUBJECT OF RESEARCH

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Abstract:

Labor which has been evolving together with a human being since the dawn of time very often becomes highly organized, e.g. in form of an enterprise. One of the enterprise theories refers to its resources and the way they are used. Concentrating on these issues, I am enabled to examine the labor quality as a set of skills and competences realized by a human within the organization.

Key words: *resource-based view on enterprises, labor quality.*

1. Introduction

During the current phase of business development, the most important stakeholders of each enterprise become its owners and customers. Thanks to the market confrontation of their needs and abilities, new enterprises emerge and function. An enterprise becomes an organization of certain material and non-material resources and skills which allow to achieve common goals with the widely understood labor processes. This way, the enterprise managers and employees join the circle of the stakeholders mentioned above. By bringing their expertise, abilities and skills to the enterprise, they create one of its most important resources – human ones.

Enterprise theories try to explain the nature of resources in various ways. One of the theories deals with the aforementioned resources and processes and with the way they are organized. It seems to be particularly focused on the labor, emphasizing the role and importance of human skills and competences.

The purpose of this study is to consider the labor quality as an important specificity of using the enterprise resources. The reflections shall be used as a starting point for further research and to create a theoretical model of labor quality determinants which in turn shall provide basis for further empirical research.

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2. Resource-based view on enterprises

One of the main axes of enterprise development theory is the resource-based view. It indicates that the nature and power of an enterprise lie in the typical, common-sense factors such as the technological potential, human knowledge or management techniques improvement (Noga, 2011, pp. 176-177) – both in the resources and competences of the organization.

The origins of this theory may be detected as early as in the opinions of the economy science precursors. In his review of the economic thought achievements, one of the authors (Kunasz 2006) observes that the notion of resources (production factors) appeared in the classic economists' thought. This author emphasizes that even William Petty enumerated four factors of wealth: labor, land, professional qualifications and other resources which make labor more efficient. He also states that Adam Smith indicated that labor and land are the main production factors together with the capital. David Ricardo in turn, as the aforementioned author notices, in his labor-based view explains the goods value changes with technical progress leading to the labor efficiency increase. Then, he cites Jean-Baptiste Say who rejected some theses of Smith or Ricardo but rated labor, land and capital among the value-making factors. Additionally, he extended the notion of production labor and paid special attention to the role of an entrepreneur of particular organizational and managerial capabilities. Then, he refers to Karl Marx who belied labor was the only source of value increase and treated capital as a particular form of "objectified labor". He also differentiated between labor force and labor. Product value of the former – potential ability to labor (the object of transaction) is determined by the labor period necessary to regenerate it (support of the laborer and his family). He notices that Alfred Marshall, creator of the neoclassical school, increased importance of enterprise. Thanks to it, an entrepreneur makes the production organized correctly by combining the production factors and using the existing conditions. As the referenced author indicates, Joseph Schumpeter treated innovations as combinations of various material elements and human productive force. Innovations understood this way become, by increasing effectiveness of the resources used, a basis for achieving competitive advantage by the enterprise. However, he claims that Edith Penrose avoided the notion of "production factors" and treated enterprises as a unique collection of production resources (Kunasz, 2006, pp. 34-38). Nevertheless, it is assumed that the proper shaping and development of the resource-based view on enterprises took place in the 1980s and 1990s (Lichtarski, 2003, p. 37; Ujwary-Gil, 2009).

The contemporary resource-based view on enterprises is a result of discussions based on three, seemingly different, issues: outstanding

competences, Ricardian economics and enterprise increase. At first, the research on competences dealt with the managers' impact onto the enterprise results and then, through the social competence, they evolved towards the institutional leader. From the Ricardian economics, dealing with but not limited to land management (a perfectly non-flexible factor), a theory of resources as a source of economic rent is drawn. The enterprise increase theory contributes with perceiving the organization as a structure which combines and coordinates the activities of employees, as well as other resources. The production capacities of resources are among the factors which restrict the enterprise increase (Czerniachowicz, 2012, pp. 102-103).

The enterprise efficiency and effectiveness are determined by its resources and the capabilities of using them. *Resources* are, in other words, production factors owned or controlled by an organization; with the use of other resources or skills, they are transformed into final products (Lichtarski, 2003, p. 38). Thus, not only the resources owned by the enterprise count – all other resources which are at its disposal are also important (Czerniachowicz, 2012 p. 102). Resources are classified according to various criteria; the most common classification differentiates between material and non-material resources. It must be emphasized that the very common classification into material and non-material resources, although it helps to achieve good results, it also brings a lot of troubles, too. They arise from ambiguity in classifying various resources and their groups into the two categories. The most extreme example of this seem to be human resources which are assigned to one group or another¹.

The skills are abilities to use resources, that is to deploy and use them so that the enterprise's aims are achieved. These are indirect goods created by the enterprise for more effective use of the resources owned. By frequent links to knowledge, and similarly to it, the skills are of hidden character. Unlike the material resources, skills increase while being used. One of the authors divides skills into competences and key competences. *The Competences* are the skills which relate to the business branch while the *key competences* are those which are of the greatest importance for the company and are decisive for its competitive advantage (Lichtarski, 2003, p. 38). However, from the enterprise's values perspective, its resources make a certain hierarchy. The lowest in the hierarchy are resources.

The above implies that not all the resources are equally important for the competitive results achieved by the enterprise. The resources and skills which are particularly valuable for the enterprise build its key competences. They are of some important distinctive features (Czerniachowicz, 2012 p. 105; Lichtarski, 2003, p. 38-39; Ujwary-Gil, 2009):

¹ Cf. (Kunasz, 2006, p. 40) and (Noga, 2011, p. 177; Ujwary-Gil, 2009).

- strategic value – they allow for making good use of chances and overcoming hazards,
- they are rarely owned by competing businesses – the rarer they are the higher strategic advantage of the enterprise is,
- difficulties with substituting which prevents some resources from being replaced with other ones and this way they remain rare,
- difficulties with imitating and copying which is now a quick and easy way to achieve high profits but this can be prevented by the use of secret resources and competences,
- complementarity – the more the resource is connected with other resources, the more difficult it is to imitate,
- ability to introduce changes which allows to modify and improve the present resources and skills and this way, increase the distance from possible imitators,
- durability understood as a consequence of the features mentioned above, i.e. length of time throughout which the resource support the enterprise in achieving income.

The features mentioned above seem to suit best the non-material resources, as well as skills and competences of the enterprise. This matches the theory analyzed here which emphasizes that material resources are not decisive for the competitive advantage as they are easily imitable and immobile (Hall, 1992, quoted after: Ujwary-Gil, 2009). Thus, these are the non-material resources which are believed to be the main source and power increasing competitiveness of an organization. The characteristics which make them distinguishable include but are not limited to the ability of simultaneous and multiple use, long time of accumulation, increase of value throughout the period of use, carrying out by people (Obłój, 2001, p. 222).

In the resource view, it is indicated that only the enterprises whose managers are able to create unique combinations of material and human resources remain in the market (Noga, 2011, pp.177-178). In this context, people are not a resource itself but rather carriers of resources. This also seems to explain the terminological evolution towards human capital (Ujwary-Gil, 2009) and further, towards intellectual capital of an organization. The conditions necessary for forming key competences and developing human capital in an enterprise are: advantage in innovations and knowledge, unique organizational culture and relatively durable customer relations, both on the buyers' and suppliers' side. In many enterprises, development is equated with development of knowledge making up the intellectual capital contributed to the organization by various stakeholder groups (Noga, 2011, pp. 92-101). An analysis of operation of various enterprises, of various countries and branches, which have been in good condition for over a hundred years, revealed that their common feature is specific approach to the employees. They are treated as the

main source of the enterprise success. These organizations are more likely to sell off fixed assets in reaction to changing market environment than to dismiss employees – their philosophy is to create a community based on the expertise of several generations. It must be noticed that not all the stakeholders bring intellectual capital to the enterprise but only those whose activity contributes to creating new values, bringing measurable market benefits (new products, organizational solutions, quality), (Lichtarski, 2003, pp. 130-131).

The source of competitive advantage is in rare resources and/or skills to use them more effectively. This is a wider look at effectiveness, involving more economical production or better fulfillment of customers' needs. Thus, this refers equally to the effective organization of the operations conducted and processes implemented. Effectiveness results from the diversity of production factors as material and non-material resources, as well as from their complementing each other. With these resources, enterprises provide their customers with added value in form of the aforementioned savings or better fulfillment of their needs (Ujwary-Gil, 2009).

As an enterprise is analyzed from the angle of its resources and competences, this theory is an internal-external approach. In the period preceding increase of interest in this concept, great significance was attached to the surroundings and the relations between the surroundings and the enterprise (Porter's Five Forces Analysis). The resource-based view primarily refers to the internal factors and then analyses external conditions (Czerniachowicz, 2012, p. 102; Kunasz, 2006, p. 38).

The emphasized role of non-material resources, including in particular competences, abilities and skills of people creating an enterprise, draws our attention towards labor characteristic of human capital. Additionally, effectiveness of organization of the processes which create added value make us reflect on their quality. Hence, the following part of this study is going to be devoted to the labor quality issue.

3. Issues concerning the quality of labor

Quality, in which representatives of various professions and sciences have been interested in since ancient times, have not been defined explicitly yet. On the contrary, increasing number of authors agree that it is impossible to define it unambiguously and categorically. An etymological origin of this word is Latin *qualitas* introduced in the 1st Century B.C. on the basis of Greek *poiotes* understood as a property or characteristic of an attribute. It is believed that this concept was introduced to the philosophy by Plato to describe a certain degree of perfectness, as an evaluative judgment which is inseparably connected with the user. Aristotle, in turn, recognized quality as “what makes a thing

be a thing”. Hence, from a philosophical perspective, the quality is a feature or a group of features which distinguish a particular object from the others (Skrzypek, 2002, p. 15). Quality is defined in various ways in the management sciences, as well. The variety of definitions extends from the most general and universal to the more detailed ones, referring to particular resources, processes or products and their characteristics². Some of these general expressions take form not so much of scientific definitions as rather literary aphorisms.

Tadeusz Kotarbinski, the creator of praxeology, indicated that the notion of *labor* is very ambiguous which results from the fact that there is no single understanding of it. He defined *labor* as a series of activities characteristic of overcoming difficulties in order to fulfill somebody’s vital needs³. He indicated that in various situations different features of labor are emphasized (unpleasant effort, an activity to which someone is devoted, productive character of labour, the opposite of play, forced labor). The above-mentioned necessity to overcome difficulties mentioned creates an enforced situation; thus, a significant feature of labor is its enforcement. Hence, in the praxeological meaning, labor is contrasted with all non-serious activities, not threatened by any enforcement, or with play (Kotarbiński, 1965, pp. 88-91). This is a very general explanation of labor which reflects the praxeological idea of generalizing the efficient operation theory. This way, it is possible to use a very meaning of this concept and to make it detail according to particular conditions and situations. Nevertheless, the definition cited here seems to reflect excellently the nature and fundamental sense of labor which contributes to a human and enables him/her to survive and develop. The enforcing character of labor brings further meaningful results, i.e. the nature of motivation: “The point is that a man/woman would do willingly what he/she must do; that he/she does not do what he/she must only because he/she must do it but that he/she would find pleasure in it and, as a result streamline his/her labor by showing generosity in devoting to it” (Kotarbiński, 1965, p. 231). What is emphasized here is the necessity of an employee engagement (motivation) in the laboring process, which is a condition of the labor streamline. The labor, and in further perspective – the whole enterprise – may remain really efficient only as an effect of constant attention to the efficiency. Thus way, labor still remains one of the basic production factors and the main resource of an enterprise, realized by the employees and managers of various organizational levels.

One of the most outstanding Polish quality scientists defines *the quality of labor* as an extent to which the employee fulfils the requirements and duly performs the laboring process. Requirements on the employee concern

² Cf. (Kolman, 2009; S. Wawak, 2007, p. 212).

³ That is to perform serious tasks which, if not performed, may bring a threat compared to loss of life, health, means of support, personal freedom, social position, good name, peace of consciousness, joy of living (Kotarbiński, 1965, p. 88).

his/her personal characteristics and qualifications and the requirements concerning the process focus on the production equipment, technology and the environment. The quality of labor understood this way is one of the main constituents of the production quality (Kolman, 2009, sp. 340). Another author, having analyzed many definitions and approaches to the problems of both quality and labor, defines the quality of labor as an extent to which labor is made and its effects influence the laborer, organization, customers and the environment. The labor itself depends on the way the tasks are organized and on the attitude of the laborer (S. Wawak, 2007, p. 219). Such presentation of the labor quality, although restricted with the lack of universality, draws attention to a few important issues. First, he indicates clearly that labor, as well as its quality, remains in close relation to its effects. Then, he emphasizes that labor influences development of an organization, its stakeholders and environment, and the extent of this influence reflects the quality of labor. He indicates the main labor quality determinants which are: the way the task fulfillment is organized and the attitude of people – laborers.

Ambiguity of the labor quality issue seem to result in a way from the aforementioned individual and unique character of each enterprise. This originality of organization relates to the unique method of combining specific resources and competences, which guarantees not only the market success but also leads to further evolution and uniqueness of both the processes and resources. That is why, in order to enable better understanding of the labor quality issue, the following paragraphs shall present some of the most important issues which either reflect the nature of this issue or are significant for its level and understanding.

The three basic production factors mentioned in the first part of this study are often supplemented with a fourth one, which is the entrepreneur. This is a person who makes decisions on his/her own, unlike a manager who makes decisions on behalf of the owners. One fact is common for the two: both play the role of a supervisor. Thus, the labor of supervisors and subordinates should be detailed in the labor factor. It must be emphasized that the supervisor does not manage people as such but only the labor they do. This way, it is possible to discuss managing some others' labor – which is the case only for supervisors – and managing one's own labor by a manager or employee. Such management aims at obtaining competitive advantage as an effect of strategic deployment of highly-qualified and engaged employees (T. Wawak, 2002, p. 94-95).

Dealing with the issue of labor quality, it must be stressed that its level is perceived very individually. Various authors use various definition of this quality, depending on the situation context and details, just as it is differently perceived by individual stakeholders of the enterprise. It seems characteristic that the labor quality is not only differently but even contrary assessed, within

the scope of one process, by the employees and their supervisors. This occurs when the supervisors try to achieve labor quality improvement by intimidating employees. To ensure their safety, they are able to work longer or more effectively, or even make less mistakes, which from the employee's point of view seems to prove labor quality improvement. However, the employees' attitude to labour deteriorates, their internal motivation decreases or even ceases and, as a result, they assess their labor quality as highly unsatisfactory (Panek, 2002, p. 241-243). Obviously, such a situation is unfavorable or even destructive for an enterprise, in particular from the resource-based point of view. Nevertheless, by generalization, it can be indicated that unanimity of labor quality assessment made by the employees and their supervisors is of high influence to this quality.

Another issue which conditions and helps to understand the labor quality issue is human resources management⁴. This area of management is responsible for implementation of the personnel strategy, which in turn results from the general enterprise strategy. It consists of several functions whose fulfillment should ensure right human resources. Depending on the business character and branch, as well as on the size of the enterprise, the functions are more or less complex and detailed. Nevertheless, using one author's conclusion, it may be stated that the quality of each function fulfillment influences the quality of labor of the enterprise members (Oleksyn, 2010, p. 370).

The labor quality level depends on several factors resulting from the enterprise itself, its resources, skills and competences. Because labor is inseparably connected with a human, the main groups of its quality determinants relate to the human as a laboring subject. The base is well-trained engaged and well-motivated staff. This staff must be equipped with leading technology, up-to-date machines and devices, as well as good managers. Organization should be based on leadership, delegating authorizations, increasing employees' responsibility and extending their field of operation. Increase of labor quality is possible, in turn, by continuous employee development, expanding knowledge of employees and, as a result, of the whole organization), obtaining extra qualifications and new specializations, which means learning should become a constant element of an employee's life (T. Wawak, 2002, pp. 103-104). Obviously, the above examples do not exhaust the collection of labor quality conditions but only indicate the most important ones, also from the perspective of the resource-based and competence-based view on enterprise. Former reflections may lead the reader to a wrong conviction that all the enterprise characteristics influence the quality of labor positively. This is not the case, of course. Thus, to maintain even minimum balance,

⁴ This is both a very important and extensive issue which, for obvious reasons, shall not be presented here in detail; more information about it can be found in: (Oleksyn, 2010).

some examples of phenomena destructive for the quality of labor should be mentioned. These are, among others, excessive stress at labor or professional burnout. The former is often an effect of excessive or incorrectly selected method of motivating employees, good in intentions but not necessarily in the results. The latter (professional burnout) occurs as an effect of continuous of continuously repeated emotional agitation which, as a result, deprives an employee of his/her ability to labor. This phenomenon is often the reason of not only low quality of labor but also low employees' morale, high absence factor and employment fluctuation (Panek, 2002, pp. 243-246).

Using the above definitions and findings, it is possible to assume that the quality of labor is both the extent to which the requirements on the laborer and labor process are fulfilled, as well as the extent to which it influences development of the organization and its stakeholders. It depends on the qualifications, features and attitudes of the laborer, as well as on the technology used and method of task organization.

In the context of labor quality, the problem of perfectionism is worth mentioning. It happens, particularly in popular thought (and, as a result, in the management practice) that the quality of work is equated with perfectionism. Sometimes this connotation brings very negative effects. Obviously, there are some activities and labors which require perfect performance but usually it is sufficient to make them just well. In all these situations, the required good level should be enough. Otherwise the enterprise (and individual employees, as well) exposes itself to excessive costs resulting from logarithmic increase of time and effort necessary to perform particular labor (Oleksyn, 2010, p. 377).

4. Quality of labor as a component of the enterprise competences

Even the definitions of labor quality presented above seem to place it in the resource-based and competence-based view on the enterprise. It is indicated that the quality of one of the main production factors, i.e. labor, is decisive for the development of its stakeholders, environment and the enterprise itself. On the other hand, organization of tasks, included in the enterprise competences and skills, becomes the labor quality determinant. Employees' qualifications and attitudes, in turn, treated as the low labor quality factor, are at the same time an important element of human capital – the most important resource of an enterprise.

He perceives the labor quality improvement as a source of profit increase, value added and value of the organization itself. These effects may be achieved by caring about the increase of labor quality of all the organization members, in particular of managers responsible for management quality. This leads to increasingly better use of outlays, both in the aspect of their profitability

and of the quality of products (T. Wawak, 2002, p. 100). Higher profitability translates into cost reduction, which additionally improves their relation to the quality of products offered.

Each enterprise operates to fulfill its stakeholders' needs and increase the value added at the same time. To achieve that, it is necessary to increase production, improve quality, reduce costs, limit delivery times, as well as improve personnel safety and morale. Improvement in these six areas is nothing else but increase of productivity. Increase of productivity is an activity essential for employee development and, as a result, the quality of labor. It must be born in mind that while quality is determined by the customer requirements, reasons for which the customer expectations cannot be fulfilled mainly because of gaps in the labor system and processes. Thus, the role of organization participants is to streamline processes, not only remind employees to labor better (Tkaczyk, Wierzbicki, 2003, pp. 59-67). A recipe for this is continuous taking care of widely-understood quality, in particular labor quality.

A substantial link between the quality of labor and resource-based and competence-based view on enterprise seems to be some of the economic measures used to assess an enterprise operation. For example, productivity or effectiveness must be mentioned here. However, there is a lot of confusion with these notions in the literature. While productivity is popularly treated as a relation of production volume to the outlays incurred for the production, effectiveness is explained in various ways, often contradictory⁵. With its terminological clarity, praxeology may be helpful here.

Practical assessment of an activity seem to determine the quality of labor; at the same time, they are a specific expression of competences accumulated in the enterprise. They concern the product (effect of labor); the laborer; co-operation and the labor itself (the way of laboring and activities) – in its various aspects, such as energy of activity, economy, effectiveness or organization.

Thus, the quality of labor seems to be determined by such product features as, for example, precision, lack of interjections or durability. Precision is the degree of deviation from an intended product feature (the highest precision is when the deviation is the smallest), which makes the product well done – as an effect of successful operation – or not. The product of labor should be free from interjections, faults and defects which proves its purity and purity of the labor itself. Durability concerns the products intended for long-term use (as opposed to the temporarily used) and it is opposite to junk products which are shoddy and break quickly. The aforementioned precision, purity, solidity and durability are owed to such human virtues as reliability, diligence and foresight (as opposite to carelessness and negligence). From the economy perspective

⁵ This is the relationship between the effects obtained and the outlays incurred; as efficiency, effectiveness; as a capability to implement the enterprise strategy and achieve the purposes assumed (Tkaczyk, Wierzbicki, 2003, p. 62).

(which shall be discussed below), people can be divided into lazy ones or diligent and industrious ones. An expert in his/her profession is a person who knows it very well (is able to assess and give advice) while a master has all practical virtues to the highest extent. On the other hand, a bungler is a person who cannot do what he/she does (makes sloppy labor). A positive feature in the field of co-operation is for instance discipline. Now, various aspects of the assessment of the labor itself should be discussed. As far as the energy in undertaking tasks is concerned, using all the resources and force necessary to achieve the planned aim should be appreciated (energy, courage), which is opposite to sluggish pace. Another variant of energy is an initiative, creativity (independent creating of plans and trying to fulfill them) which determine resourceful people and which is opposite to automatism and routine. As the labor progresses, intensity of efforts, patience, perseverance and eagerness are appreciate, contrary to sluggishness and short-time enthusiasm. The aspect of economy requires (at using the resources owned) avoiding wastage, which may be overcome in two ways: by economizing and productivity. Economizing assumes smaller use of resources while productivity also requires the same amount and quality of products – at lower use of resources. Apart from productivity, also efficiency should be mentioned; to labor efficiently means to achieve the same productive effect at lower period of time spent on laboring. Among other usable values of labor, skills, effectiveness and efficiency should be indicated. Skills are understood as dexterity and competence; at the same time, skills are components of efficiency. Efficiency, in turn, is an ordinary condition of the effectiveness of operations⁶. An activity is effective when it result in a planned effect; the opposite of effectiveness is counter-effectiveness and lack of effectiveness is ineffectiveness. Also the symptoms of good labor of organizational character are included in the enterprise competences. The concern merging of activity elements into harmonized wholes. An order is indicated here, understood as of subsequent activities, to make them easier and possible to perform. Equally important value is simplicity (opposite to complexity) of the operation method. What is also emphasized is the necessity of planning and consistency in implementing the plan assumed which should be purposeful, relatively detailed, but not stiff – rather flexible. Finally, it must be added that in relation to good labor each change for better, in all the aspects mentioned above, is a form of streamline (Kotarbiński, 1965, pp. 394-408). This streamline, taking care of constant correcting and improving, seems to be very well incorporated in the problem of quality in an enterprise.

⁶ Effectiveness is sometimes understood in two ways: as all values of practical activities together (detailed assessment: of efficiency, profitability, economy, rationality, etc.) or as each of the good labour values separately (effectiveness is efficiency, effectiveness is profitability, effectiveness is economy, etc.), (Pszczolowski, 1978, p. 227).

The system of activity practical assessment presented here describes and explains the issue of human labor quality to a large extent. On account of that, it can be used as a starting point to build a theoretical model of labor quality determinants. Creation of such a model would give a basis for further analyses and empirical research on the problem of labor quality.

To sum up, it can be stated that while labor itself, understood as one of the production factors or – more precisely – a labor potential personified by human beings – is one of the enterprise resources, the process of labor cannot be equated with the resource. On the other hand, the quality of labor, established to large extent by the practical assessments of activity, seems to express the enterprise competences (which is the way of using the resources) rather than the resources and potential of the enterprise.

5. Conclusion

The existence and operation of each enterprise concentrates on fulfilling needs of widely-understood clients and it is possible thanks to possessing suitable resources. One of the main resources of each enterprise, i.e. labor potential, is realized by a human. Qualifications and characteristics of people being the enterprise stakeholders create the human capital which, together with the structure and other resources of the enterprise, realize its competences. To fulfill its competences correctly, an enterprise must coordinate and organized its resources properly, using suitable skills and competences. An inherent element of these processes, providing long-lasting and development of an enterprise, is continuous improvement. This improvement manifests in constant increase of operation effectiveness, which is possible by taking care of suitable quality of resources and processes in the enterprise. All these elements are consolidated within a theory which discerns the enterprise competitive advantage in its resources and competences.

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