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## Corporate practice in preserving knowledge regarding mothers on child-care leave (based on empirical research)

### Abstract

The question of knowledge management has become a highlighted issue in the companies' everyday life. Knowledge itself is the most important capital of organizations, and acquiring, developing and preserving it means a lot of tasks and requirements for the companies. The complex activities of the knowledge management system appear with different priorities in the practice of companies, which depend on the company's circle of activities, its organizational structure, its innovative willingness, the content of HR, and some others. However, it is a fact that preserving and keeping employees' knowledge is one of the most emphasized areas of a knowledge management system in companies.

This issue especially becomes highlighted when an employee leaves the company. How and what can be done in order not to lose the knowledge she possesses representing value for the company? Is there an already elaborated protocol at companies for managing this issue or is it possible that companies are not aware of the importance of this problem?

Similar ideas and thoughts have motivated this research, which had the aim to recognize how knowledge preserving operates at Hungarian companies in a special life situation during the knowledge-transfer of employees leaving the company with the reason of child-care.

The results of qualitative and quantitative researches justified that companies usually do not calculate on losing knowledge if a woman goes on child-care leave for shorter or longer period of time; although they are aware of the fact that not all the knowledge of the would-be mothers remain at the company.

**Keywords:** knowledge management, child-care leave, knowledge loss.

**JEL Classification:** I29.

### Introduction

Although management studies have already been emphasizing for a long time that human capital and the knowledge based on that give the greatest value of the company; it is a fact that the practice and concept of knowledge-management has not yet developed to an obvious and elaborated protocol in case of each company. While complex learning and developing systems are necessary because of the complexity of knowledge (either talking about tacit or explicit knowledge (Polányi, 1966), companies do not pay any or enough attention to some elements of knowledge-management.

Preserving and transferring knowledge, acquiring new ideas are activities and program systems, which require elaborated practice in order to operate successfully and to minimize knowledge-losses. Companies usually face this problem when employees leave them either temporarily or permanently. It remains a question in this situation how the leaving employee shares her knowledge with the company, what knowledge elements she leaves and what elements she takes with her (Tjakraatmadja et al., 2011).

Last year there was a research examining this question in case of employees who went on child-care for shorter or for longer period of time or who left their companies finally without no previous intention (Bencsik-Juhász, 2014).

The length of child-care leave is one the longest in Hungary (3 years/child), therefore when a mother leaves the company her knowledge is considered a lost value, only if the company does something to save the knowledge not to get lost.

Hungarian researches justified (Bálint, Köllő, 2009; Reizer, 2011) that the general length of being absent from the workplace was 4.7 years from the middle of 1990s till the middle of the first decade of the new millennium. It means that women were away from the labor-market and from their companies for quite a long time; from the time of leaving their companies until finishing the child-care leave. Therefore preserving and actualizing their professional knowledge has been and it is still a question to be solved by them and by their own companies. Among others, the question to be answered is the following: according to what protocol is knowledge-transfer and its practical solution implemented at certain companies?

As knowledge-transfer (Argote and Ingram, 2000) is a type of knowledge-spreading activity between individuals and groups at an organization, this can be the base of strengthening the competitiveness of the company. Although it is a fact that organizations have to cope with numerous tasks and difficulties in case knowledge-transfer happens especially between employees and in case it is about learning new tasks (Letmathe, Schweitzer, Zielinsk, 2011).

The transfer of knowledge-types happens in different ways. As tacit knowledge basically exists in the

mind, the transfer of this knowledge happens on the base of observation and perception. The receiver maps knowledge this way and then builds in into her own activity. Just on the contrary, explicit knowledge is rational and can be expressed well (Schröder, 2003; Davenport and Porsak, 2000).

Furthermore knowledge-sharing can be implemented directly or indirectly and its success can be influenced by several factors such as people participating in the interaction, corporate culture or trust (Bencsik, 2012). A question may arise to what extent the given corporate knowledge can be linked to people and thus what influences the complexity of knowledge, its ability to be transferred and to be preserved.

The latter system of activity, namely the preservation of knowledge may require several tasks, but it is still a question whether they are able to operate and if yes, whether they operate successfully at the companies (Ghobadi-D'Ambra, 2011). The present study shows – along with proving the framed hypotheses – some results of our quantitative research, which was carried out with companies to observe knowledge-transferring and knowledge-preserving processes in case of women who have gone on child-care leave.

## 1. Introduction of the research, its hypothesis and its methods

The research was based on two-sided surveys. The surveys basically analyzed what knowledge management elements and tasks can be identified in case of women going on child-care leave, being on child-care leave and returning from child-care leave to labor market. The analysis was carried out from the side of the participants, which means mothers going on child-care leave and employers employing them. The research was carried out from the view of both the mothers and the organizations in order to get a wider approach to the problem and to reveal possible solutions. The present study publishes one part of the results of the researches carried out at the companies.

Our corporate research basically consists of two parts. On one hand, in-depth interviews were made with approximately 50 companies, and then a quantitative research was made with a questionnaire based on the results of the qualitative results with the cooperation of 80 organizations in order to get to know the correlations in more details. During the quantitative survey with the questionnaire, the justification of the following hypothesis could be implemented:

*Hypothesis: The companies participating in the survey know that they need to calculate on knowledge-loss when a pregnant woman leaves the*

*company and they possess an elaborated knowledge-management practice to reduce this loss.*

In accordance with professional literature (Bencsik, 2013; Haziah et al., 2013) companies usually link knowledge to individuals, therefore on their leaving the company they calculate on knowledge loss. According to Haziah and her co-writers the previously mentioned loss has effects on the company and they try to find some possibilities and solutions to ease its shortage.

The present research tried to find answers – among others – for the question whether there are any protocols relieving these losses with regard to the companies' preserving the knowledge of mothers going on child-care leave within the company in the future.

As it was mentioned previously, the researches consist of two parts: a qualitative and a quantitative part. It is not the aim of the paper to discuss the in-depth interviews in details; rather it focuses on summarizing the results briefly, which was the base of the quantitative research. The most important results of the non-representative study in cooperation with the 50 companies were the following:

- ◆ Among the companies participating in the research there were some companies, which noticed the importance of trying to keep the knowledge of the mother for the organization when she was about to go on a child-care leave.
- ◆ Most of the companies had elaborated knowledge-transferring practice for preserving their knowledge before their leaving the company.
- ◆ The process of knowledge-transfer could be implemented with the reason of preserving knowledge, where would-be mothers had active roles, which means that they shared their own knowledge personally with the colleagues substituting them and they often supported their work as their mentors until their going on child-care leave.
- ◆ Documenting the knowledge of the would-be mothers was not a characteristic practice in favor of preserving knowledge.
- ◆ Most of the companies knew that despite the organized knowledge-transferring practice (between the mother and the colleague substituting her) they also had to calculate on losses, and the volume of the loss depended on the method of organizing substitution, the characteristics of the substituting person and the willingness of the would-be mother to transfer her knowledge.

The questionnaire used during the quantitative research consisted of mainly closed questions and was basically built on nominal and metrical scales. The questions examined the issues, tasks and insti-

tutional effects of knowledge-management in four fields in case of women going on child-care leave. The structure of the questionnaire is shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. The system of questionnaire for the organizations

1. Life-situation (period before becoming parents)	2. Life-situation (period of pregnancy)	3. Life-situation (period of child-care at home)	4. Life-situation (returning to work after the period of child-care)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ General description of the organization (profile, regional division, size, etc.)</li> <li>◆ What are the requirements towards the employees regarding knowledge and skills necessary for their work?</li> <li>◆ What kind of knowledge-developing protocol operates within the institution?</li> <li>◆ Is there knowledge-management process within the company? If yes, what is it like?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ How the substitution of pregnant employees is solved?</li> <li>◆ How is knowledge-transfer implemented between the mother and the person substituting her?</li> <li>◆ What type of knowledge would-be mothers are not able to transfer?</li> <li>◆ What can be the sources of knowledge-loss?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ What is the method of keeping touch with the mothers staying at home?</li> <li>◆ What knowledge should mothers develop at home?</li> <li>◆ Do they provide help for the mothers in preserving their knowledge? How?</li> <li>◆ What kind of knowledge a mother-staying-at-home can acquire, which can later be utilized successfully at the company?</li> <li>◆ Are mothers-staying-at home involved in corporate knowledge-management processes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Do they have special returning protocol for mothers?</li> <li>◆ Is there knowledge-assessment for mothers on their returning to the company?</li> <li>◆ What weaknesses and strengths do the returning mothers have from the aspect of knowledge-management?</li> <li>◆ What knowledge-management tools are used in case of mothers returning from maternity leave in order to update their knowledge?</li> </ul>

Source: own table.

The present paper uses the results of the first two circles of questions.

Evaluating the results of the questionnaire was carried out with the help of one- and multiple-variable statistical methods. Collecting the samples was carried out with an online anonymous questionnaire based on the snowball method. During testing it turned out that it was not necessary to alter the questionnaire as all the questions were understandable for all the respondents. All the samples were used during analyzing the questionnaires as all of them could be evaluated. Although the research is not representative; according to the authors it can give a view about the practice of Hungarian companies.

## 2. The results of the research

The introduction of the results starts with the specification of the sample.

Out of the examined 80 companies, 66.3% was from Central-Hungary, 13.8% of them was from North-Hungary, 8.8% of them was from West-Transdanubium, 3.8%-3.8% could be found in North part of the Great-Plain and in Central-Transdanubium, while 2.5% of them was located in South part of the Great Plain and 1.3% in the part of South-Transdanubium. As far as the fields of activities of the companies are concerned the majority of the companies represented in the sample came from the trading sector (18.8%) and from the financial sector (18.8%). Regarding the type of companies, nearly half (48.8%) of the companies were limited liability companies, while the second most frequent form was

private limited company (20%), then they were followed by the private enterprises (11.3%). Based on the organizational sizes, which refer to the number of employees at the company, the organizations participating in the sample can be grouped according to the followings: 28.8%-28.8% represented micro- (2-8 people) and small companies (9-49 people), 26.3% (more than 250 people) big companies, while 16.3% of them (50-249 people) were middle-sized companies.

Employers basically expect the following features from their workers: appropriate professional knowledge, preciseness, diligence, strength and the ability to endure stress. Although at the same time 43.8% of all the examined companies required special knowledge from the employees and in case of nearly half of these companies (48.4%) this knowledge also differentiated the workers, which means that the lack of their knowledge could influence the knowledge-content of the organization on their leaving the company. The question arose whether there is significant correspondence between the activity of the organization and the expectations of the companies towards their workers having special knowledge. But in case of the companies participating in our sample, there was no significant correlation (Pearson chi-square test: 18.242 df: 12 sign.: 0.109  $p > 0.05$ ).

It is not by chance that the knowledge also ensuring the competitiveness of the companies can only suit the requirements of the market with goal-oriented and usual development; therefore almost 76.3% of the companies considered training at their companies necessary and important. With regard to this, based

on the activity companies were not significantly correlated (Pearson chi-square test: 7.858 df: 12 sign.: 0.796  $p > 0.05$ ).

It was also examined if an employer requires special knowledge from his employees, then why is any training necessary within the company. There was no significant correlation between the two variables (Pearson chi-square test: 3.078 df: 1 sign.: 0.079  $p > 0.05$ ), which means that if special knowledge is needed, then 85.7% of the companies, but if special knowledge is not needed, then 68.9% of the companies considered education important. The following table shows how the training of the employees was fulfilled in case of companies answering the questionnaire.

Table 2. Training solutions

Training solutions	%
Within the framework of our courses	19.80
With the help of mentors	8.30
Within the framework of outside courses	21.90
With providing study trips	4.70
With providing professional magazines	8.90
With providing professional database	6.30
With participation at conferences	11.50
With study contract	9.90
There is no opportunity supporting training	8.30
Other	0.50

Source: own table.

It can clearly be seen from the data of the Table 2 that the most frequently applied training solutions were the courses organized by the company itself or by an outer company.

Regarding the trainings, 27.5% of the employers made differences between their workers. The method of differentiation had many types. The following Table 3 summarizes some solutions applied by the organizations.

Table 3. Possibilities of differentiating workers based on trainings

Solutions
'The members of the group deal with different system supports, thus they are provided trainings according to their activities'
'We choose the most suitable training for our workers according to their positions'
'The special knowledge of workers are registered in a training matrix and the knowledge of each field means a 10-10% pay-rise'
'Based on their qualifications'
'Different departments participate at different trainings based on their exact activities'
'They participate at trainings which suit their scope of activities'
'We differentiate employees based on professional and experimental evaluation'
'As the scope of activities is quite diversified, the employees who have more diversified qualification can be employed in more fields, thus their experience will be more widespread. Due to this their promotional chances are also more serious and their salary-demand may be higher.'

Source: own table.

It can clearly be seen from the quotations in the table that trainings were basically organized based on the employees 'scope of activity, professional experience and qualification.

The majority of employers participating in the sample supported individual trainings, outside the company for their employees in different ways. In most of the cases they supported their workers' demand for individual knowledge development with work-time allowance (51%) and with financial support (22.4%). However almost 20% of the companies did not provide any support for their employees in this respect.

In the second part of the research the knowledge-transferring processes of women going on child-care leave was examined. The organization of the leaving mother's work was solved by the employers in the following ways.

Nearly 39.7% of the employers participating in the sample employed a new colleague for the position of the pregnant mother, 30.6% of the employers solved this problem with re-alignment, and 25.6% of them shared the tasks between other employees, less than 1% of the employers ceased the pregnant mothers' job, while 3.3% of them tried to solve the substitution somehow else.

If the mother went on child-care leave, then in most cases she was the one who did the training of the new colleague (in 41.6%), but using the help of mentors was also quite usual (32.7%) or when the new colleagues learned things by themselves (8.9%). At the same time in 11.9% of the cases, there was nobody who helped in training the new colleague as employers considered it unnecessary. The lack of training the new colleague was rarer in companies where special knowledge was required (5.7%), than in companies where it was not (22.2%).

11.3% of the companies did not spend time on handing over the knowledge, but in the majority of the companies usually 2 weeks (26.3%), or more than 4 weeks (21.3%) were spent on delivering knowledge in details.

Almost 85% of the employers did not think of any dangers during knowledge-transfer if the pregnant mother was about to go on child-care leave. Those who have different ideas mentioned the following dangers.

Table 4. Dangers of knowledge-transfer

Dangers
'Transferring important information precisely the way the other party wishes'
'Routine, experience and the ability to rank activities with time in direct proportion cannot be handed over'
'We see danger in the fact that we will not find the proper person, who can fill this position and can observe the tasks and activities in their depth'
'We know the work of the so far assigned person'

Table 4 (cont.). Dangers of knowledge-transfer

Dangers
'Knowledge-transfer remains incomplete'
'Handing over non-efficient methods'
'Complaints of partners due to mistakes occurring during the process of information-transfer or maybe losing partners'
'No experience of the new colleagues'
'There are more special scopes of activities, where we hardly or cannot at all find competent mentors'

Source: own table.

The enumerated dangers were demonstrated without the demand for completeness, but it can clearly be seen from the examples mentioned that companies cannot be completely sure that the knowledge of the mother will stay within the company when she goes on child-care leave.

Table 5. Some elements of knowledge-management at companies with regard to pregnant mothers

Statements	N	Average	Deviation	Std. error
Before a mother goes on child-care leave from our company, we expect her to hand over her tasks and knowledge to the colleague substituting her.	80	3.76	1.371	.153
Before a pregnant mother goes on child-care leave, we always ask her opinion about choosing the colleague who will substitute her and she is always present when we chose that colleague	80	2.68	1.357	.152
Before a pregnant mother goes on a child-care leave, she can participate at our training programs.	80	3.16	1.335	.149
If a mother is on child-care leave, we also support her knowledge-development.	80	2.55	1.242	.139
If a mother is on child-care leave, the company continuously keeps the contact with the mother who is staying at home.	80	3.09	1.361	.152

Source: own table.

The results show that companies mainly expect the mothers to hand over their knowledge to the company and to the colleagues substituting them. Of course it is still a question whether mothers are still motivated and whether it is their interest as well to transfer all their knowledge to the new colleagues and what guarantee are they given to secure their positions at the company in the future (Bencsik-Juhász, 2013). At the same time it has no positive message to the pregnant mothers that their company does not really participate in their knowledge-development during their stay at home; moreover the company is not really active in keeping the connection with them, which might create the feeling in the employee that she is not welcome there.

The research examined whether the opinions of the organizations about the statements are different in more aspects. F-test was used for this. There were no significant differences in opinions as regards dangers in transferring tasks and knowledge between companies finding dangers and companies finding fewer problems during knowledge-transfer.

During substituting the mothers at companies, the new or substituting colleague should basically meet

It is not by chance that in case of the respondents companies, 25% of them said that there is knowledge which cannot at all be transferred by the mothers going on child-care leave. 40% of the companies had elaborated protocol for transferring tasks and knowledge if it turns out that their colleague is pregnant.

Regarding knowledge-transfer and knowledge-sharing there were statements phrased in the questionnaire for the companies, and employers had to decide on a 5-scale Likert-scale to what extent the statements were true for them. The complete identification with the statements could be signed by 5 and the rejection had to be marked by 1. The following table summarizes some results referring to the statements.

the following requirements in the order of importance: professional knowledge, loadability, preciseness, ability to cooperate, IT knowledge, etc.

Finally, almost 61.3% of the employers agreed in the date of return with the mother, which could give the feeling of security and the ability to plan to both parties, as both parties know how much they should count on each other and on their knowledge in the future.

Although it is a fact that only 17.5% of the employers could somehow help the mother, who is staying at home to have an up-to-date professional knowledge on her returning to the company. This can also mean that women are somehow left alone to upgrade their knowledge and to have active knowledge suiting the requirements of the market and of their company when they go back to work. This is also important from the point of view to be a successful employee of their old company or of a new one.

**Conclusion**

The present paper showed some characteristic features of corporate knowledge-preserving practice

in case of pregnant, but still active employees. Based on the results of the research, the hypothesis phrased in the article can be rejected. The majority of the responding companies did not calculate on knowledge loss in this life situation despite the fact that knowledge and intellectual capital is the number one value of the companies (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Thus preserving corporate knowledge capital for their company is essential (Bencsik, 2012). Although nearly one quarter of the responding companies was aware of the fact that there is knowledge, which cannot at all be transferred by the mother going on child-care leave.

It can also be seen from the research that less than every second company thought that they should apply a consciously elaborated practice in this situation with the aim of minimizing knowledge loss.

Although the practice of knowledge-management existed in several places, those practices were valid mainly for the active employees and they were not using them in case of inactive workers and in case of mothers on child-care leave. This fact of course does not motivate the mothers' knowledge-transferring motivation and it can weaken their labor-market chances to return to their workplaces (Juhász, 2012; Bencsik-Juhász, 2013).

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