

COMPANIES COOPERATING IN KNOWLEDGE MAINTENANCE AND TRANSFORMATION FOR WOMEN GOING TO CHILD-CARE LEAVE

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Abstract

An important question of today's world is how a company is able to develop its accumulated knowledge; how it can transform it, if necessary; finally, how it can retain it in a solid, valuable form for the organization. This year, we examined a special situation where employees spend a considerable amount of time away from the company (although their absence is not permanent), and they are inactive for their organization. In our research, such employees were young mothers who went on child-care leave and stayed there for a longer period of time. To assess the situation, we conducted a two-sided in-depth interview, the aim of which was to have a glimpse into the practices of firms regarding the above problem.

Key words: Child-care leave, Knowledge maintenance, Knowledge transfer

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Introduction

Organized knowledge is receiving more and more emphasis and attention in practical life as well as in scientific researches. The professional literature is offering firms several techniques to enable them to optimize, develop, maintain and handle the accumulated knowledge in their organization. Still, it remains a fact that when an employee leaves the organization, it will unavoidably affect the organizational knowledge capital too.

This year, we examined a special situation where employees spend a considerable, but not permanent, amount of time away from the company, becoming inactive for their organization. In our research, such employees were young mothers who went on child-care leave and stayed there for a longer period of time.

Female employment is a timely topic in Hungary as we have the smallest number of women employed in the entire European Union. Not only do we have to achieve the principle of equal work-equal payment, but we also have to become more practical and reinforce women's active presence in the labour market (Oláh-Pakurár, 2011).

Child-care leave is the longest in Hungary in the entire EU as mothers are allowed to stay at home with their children for as much as three years. For this reason, when a woman announces that she is pregnant, her company will inevitably face new tasks. We are examining the question how the different organizations arrange the replacement of these women, how and by what means they train the new employees and what they do to retain the knowledge which would be lost with the temporary absence of the original employee.

To outline the situation, we conducted a two-side in-depth interview this year with the aim of getting to know the general practice of the various companies concerning this question. We also wanted to know how women returning from their child-care leave to the labour market relate to this problem.

To achieve this goal, we first interviewed the mothers about knowledge retaining and knowledge transfer and how these things were solved before and during their child-care leave, as well as once they decided to re-integrate into their original place of work. On the other hand, we also examined the organizations, conducting in-depth interviews with approximately 50 Hungarian companies concerning their practice in similar situations. Our essay concentrates on those parts of our company researches which deal with young mothers before going on child-care leave. We wanted to know how knowledge is retained and transferred in this situation, how the companies organize the replacement of the pregnant women and what roles the Hungarian firms play in this process.

1 A Brief Outlook on the Hungarian Practice

Before giving a detailed presentation of our research, we would briefly have a look at the Hungarian practice concerning pregnancy and child-care as well as its effect on women's knowledge and their chances of re-integration to their workplace.

As we have already mentioned, the length of available child-care in Hungary is one of the biggest within the European union, which means that mothers can spend as much as up to three years at home with their children. This long absence from work has divided the professional and scientific community as experts cannot agree whether this practice has a positive or negative effect on the mother's re-integration.

It is a fact that the advanced child-support system also affected the employment of women. Bálint-Köllő (2007) indicated that the current support system indeed motivated young mothers to stay at home with their children for a longer period of time.

Reizer (2011, with reference to Köllő's calculations) claims that "the average time between leaving the job and returning from the child support system in Hungary was 4.7 years on average between 1997 and 2005," while the same number was even higher among families with more children; this figure is remarkable even on an international level.

At the same time, András Gábos (2008) mentions among other things that although the mother's early return to work may have a positive effect in so far as she contributes to the income of the family, the same early return may also affect the development and adult performance of the child in a negative way.

Zsuzsa Blaskó summarized the situation in 2010, examining what the ideal period is for the mother to stay at home before returning to work. Her research was thorough and included the areas of the child's health, physical, mental and psycho-social development. Based on these factors, the author came to the conclusion that the mother's return to work before her child is three years old is not harmful in itself, but only if some necessary requirements are provided: sufficient and good quality child-care system, the presence of tools and means which facilitates the reconciliation of work and private life as well as the mother's right to decide when she wants to return to work.

At the same time, Hungarian women typically return to work for financial considerations, and they are less likely to do so because of their career (Pongráczné, 2002).

It is a sad fact that those women who would like to return to work sooner than three years will face difficulties. The first problem to be solved is to arrange for someone to look after the baby during the day. Parents with a child younger than three years may turn to state crèches, family child-care institutions, perhaps relatives or babysitters. However, state institutions are overcrowded (the statistics of KSH, the Central Statistical Office showed a 109% utilization in 2011), and although new places are established, they have so far failed to meet demands. Privately owned institutions, on the other hand, charge a lot of money, and there are few families today who can afford such amounts.

Another hardship in their return is that atypical employment forms are not yet widespread in Hungary; in fact, our country belongs to the group with the smallest number of such jobs in the European Union.

These hardships are huge motivating factors for women to stay at home as long as possible. However, the inherent danger in doing so is that the more time they spend away from the world of work, the smaller chances they have to return to their former company or even to find new employment. This is an especially grave danger if their knowledge, which used to be

a form of capital for the company, gets out of date over time, becoming less useful and less valuable.

It is no wonder, then, that this year, we conducted a research only the qualitative part of which has been closed so far, with the quantitative part being arranged at the moment. Our aim was to find out about the ways and methods companies use to retain the knowledge of the mothers about to leave on child-care. Also, we wanted to know what these companies do to retain the value of their employees' knowledge for the young mothers themselves, to better enable them to re-integrate to the world of work without much problem. Naturally, we were also curious what kind of protocol exists for such situations at the various companies, if any, and whether we could find positive or negative examples concerning this question.

In our current paper, we are using the results of our all-inclusive research which deal with women who were already pregnant, but were still working and are trying to transfer their knowledge to their firm in some way.

Among other things, the aim of our research was to prove the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis:

The firms in our research are not prepared and do not possess appropriate protocols to solve the knowledge transfer of women who are about to leave on child-care in order to retain the knowledge capital represented by their pregnant employee.

In the following pages, we are examining the validity of our claim.

2 Research Progress and Results

As we have already mentioned, we conducted our research during the spring and summer of this year with the inclusion of 50 companies. We conducted in-depth interviews with these firms to have a glimpse of the general situation. The interviews were proceeding along groups of questions which we had written in advance; the questions could be divided into 4 categories.

The first group concentrated primarily on introducing the company, with special attention to knowledge management and the general relevant practices within the organization. Also, we asked questions here about training practices.

The second group was concerned with the knowledge transfer procedures used by the employees who wanted to pass their knowledge before going on pregnancy leave.

The aim of the third group of questions was to find out how much the organizations were willing to cooperate with their employees on child-care leave to retain and develop their knowledge even while they were away from work.

Finally, we wanted to get a closer view of the practices which firms usually turned to when they wanted to assist their employees away on child-care leave so they could return to work more smoothly: we were particularly interested in how their companies helped them to update their knowledge. In our current essay, we are presenting the results of the first two groups of questions in order to prove our hypothesis.

As we have already mentioned, we interviewed 50 companies, about 60% of which came from three regions of the country: Western-Transdanubia, Mid-Transdanubia and the Central Hungarian region. About 13 firms were dealing with public service, while the others came from the private sector, with business pursuits such as insurance, banking, manufacturing, trading, educational service provider etc.

Regarding the size of the company, mid-level firms were represented in the greatest number (22), while 19 were big company, 7 were small ones, and there were two micro-companies as well.

At the beginning of our research, we examined what the general practice is at the firms concerning knowledge management; within this area, we primarily focussed on developing and retaining knowledge.

Every single organization which took part in our research found it important to train their employees, irrespective of their size or type of business venture. Knowledge and its development was a primary concern at all interviewed firms. Concerning the practices, we received the following answer from one of the companies:

“The difference between us and our competitors is that we regularly send our employees to further trainings. We need the appropriate amount of professional qualification and experience in all fields. Every line of work is specialized and complex, so we naturally want to employ people with expert knowledge. When you mention trainings, yes, depending on the line of work, we do train people.”

Besides languages and information technology, firms specific knowledge to be of high priority for their employees. As for firms in the public sector, their employees were supposed

to have legally required professional knowledge, which had to be refreshed periodically, so these organizations arranged for courses which either prepared people for required professional exams or helped them to maintain their knowledge. We found that of those companies taking part in our research, the big firms had a well-established system and programmes for their own employees. At one of these organizations, the HR-manager summarized their training system in the following way:

“There are several possibilities to train at our companies. There is a so-called “orientation training”: this enables successful integration and functioning within the organization. There are skill-oriented trainings like leadership courses. There are also ad hoc courses if the need arises: for example, to start a language course. We have regular lectures in specific topics, and we also have simulation trainings.”

At every organization, the employees are already in possession of the minimally required skills at the beginning of their employment; later, the organizations typically strive to enhance that knowledge with skills and information specifically characteristic of the company, which means any additional knowledge is for the benefit of their workers.

After outlining the educational and training situation in our research, we concentrated on the things the firms are willing to do to retain this accumulated knowledge in some way when one of their employees leave the company for some reason, typically because of her pregnancy. Will her knowledge be lost or not, and what does the company do to prevent such losses?

Based on our research, when a worker announces her pregnancy at a firm, there is typically a protocol during which the organization contact the soon-to-be mother to arrange for supplementing her tasks; also, the company attempts to find replacement, typically by hiring new workforce, re-grouping tasks or dividing the original tasks within the company. While looking for replacement for their pregnant colleague, firms set up a group of requirements which the replacement will have to meet.

“The primary requirement is that the new employer who is supposed to take over the work of our colleague has to possess all the necessary qualifications and professional knowledge for the job. Acquiring company-specific skills is done during work. Our company puts great emphasis on the presence of competences which are necessary for the successful completion of the job (independence, responsibility taking, customer-centeredness, conflict handling, preciseness...).”

Arranging replacement is no easy task either:

“The primary concern is that replacement should be manageable within the region, perhaps even with regrouping workforce. Naturally, we have to take into consideration the burden on individual branches, the preparedness of our available workforce, whether there are people under training, is there any replacement training already introduced or under way, who in the region are in possession of the necessary qualifications, what the individual needs are etc.”

The importance of knowledge transfer is acknowledged and implemented by most firms. Knowledge transfer is especially important in this case because the knowledge of a person about to leave temporarily may disappear permanently if the company is not careful enough:

“Yes, it is very important for us that the new colleagues should get all the necessary information, but the most important thing is perhaps that they should learn to use their communication skills as effectively as possible in order to be able to solve problems and integrate into the new surroundings quicker. Naturally, company-specific skills should be transferred as well, but these skills are available during the training period in written and oral form as well.”

In most of the organizations which took part in the research, when a pregnant colleague left the company, the question of replacement or hiring new workforce was typically solved in cooperation with the original colleague. Naturally, this also depends on the type of work the soon-to-be mother was doing before her pregnancy. In this process, the expecting mothers monitor the training process of the replacement and pass knowledge to them as a kind of mentor:

“The first step consists of passing on the common routine and individually tailored tasks, which is followed by less frequent strategic duties which require the collective knowledge of a group within the company. Finally, we take the tasks which are complicated, require independent thinking and specialized skills and involve the entire company. By transferring knowledge this way, the workers have the chance to acquire knowledge during their work first from the individual teams and organizational groups, then from the entire organizational structure.”

No matter how careful the knowledge transfer process is, several of the companies interviewed by us saw that the loss of a certain amount of knowledge was unavoidable and should be prepared for. One of the companies saw the danger in the following way:

“You cannot pass every single detail, and human relationships network cannot change that easily.”

This meant that young mothers were unable to share “excess knowledge” coming from their emotional intelligence, and companies eventually have to put up with these losses.

Another company said about the above danger:

“The less time we have to transfer knowledge, the less we will be able to pass, that is, a lot of vital information may be lost. Replacement, on the other hand, allows the new worker to see things from a slightly different point of view and perhaps improve on them. An outsider sometimes sees more things.”

The companies examined in our research usually made an agreement with the mothers about the date of their return, which was explained from the company’s part by organizational and human resources reasons. In a given organization, these pregnant colleagues worked until a date agreed upon with the company, and there were two distinct practices in this respect. Either the pregnant women worked alone, and the replacement only arrived after she left for pregnancy leave, or, more typically, she worked together with her replacement during the training period up to the day she left. One of the companies gave the following explanation for this practice:

“Transferring knowledge is not completed merely by finding a replacement or dividing her duties among the others; this is why the colleague who is leaving works closely together with her replacement during the training period. Any possible division of labour was done through their cooperation, but mostly by consulting with the worker who was about to pass over her job.”

Finally, our research gave a rather mixed picture about the firms’ practices concerning whether a pregnant colleague about to leave on child-care leave could take part in courses

organized or at least supported by her firm. Some of the firms thought that by giving her the possibility of professional development, they also symbolically tell her that she is expected back. At the same time, another, although not as numerous, group of companies, failed to see any reason for investing in the training of these workers as they did not see any guarantee that these mothers would return to their companies after their child-care leave. Of course, the question remains whether this practice motivates these mothers to return to the firm at all.

Conclusion

Our current paper was dealing with some of the results of our in-depth interviews conducted this year. Our aim was to examine the validity of the hypothesis stated during our research. The results persuaded us that the hypothesis was not valid.

It can be said that the organizations taking part in the research realized that in a situation where a pregnant mother leaves the company, even if temporarily, it is a high priority maintain the valuable missing knowledge she represents. Besides realizing this, companies also presented some established methods to maintain this knowledge, showing that they are trying to keep knowledge elements within the organization with the active help of the mothers. At the same time, these companies know that loss of knowledge is still inevitable, but the amount of loss depends on the company and the mother as well as on how much they can solve the mother's replacement. We think that such losses can be minimized by conscious planning, cooperation with the mother and by making the mother feel that she is respected and accepted.

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