Motivation and organisational culture from the perspective of SME employees - a case study at the time of COVID-19 pandemic

Tibor Zsigmond, Ladislav Mura, Renáta Machová, Ferenc Bakó, Marcell Kupi

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Tibor Zsigmond

Department of Management,
Faculty of Economics and Informatics,
J. Selye University,
Bratislavská Cesta 3322,
945 01 Komárno, Slovakia
Email: zsigmondt@ujs.sk

Ladislav Mura*

Department of Tourism,
Faculty of Commerce,
University of Economics in Bratislava,
Dolnozemská Cesta 1, 852 35 Bratislava, Slovakia
Email: ladislav.mura@euba.sk
*Corresponding author

Renáta Machová

Department of Management,
Faculty of Economics and Informatics,
J. Selye University,
Bratislavská Cesta 3322,
945 01 Komárno, Slovakia
Email: machovar@ujs.sk

Ferenc Bakó

Department of General and Applied Economics,
Kautz Gyula Faculty of Business and Economics,
Széchényi István University in Győr,
Egyetem tér 1, 9026 Győr, Hungary
Email: bako.ferenc@sze.hu

Marcell Kupi

Department of Tourism
Kautz Gyula Faculty of Business and Economics,
Széchényi István University in Győr,
Egyetem tér 1, 9026 Győr, Hungary
Email: kupi.marcell@sze.hu

Abstract: The aim of the research is to investigate the relationship between motivation and organisational culture from the viewpont of employees working at SMEs in Slovakia. The study examines all of this during the COVID-19 period, which took a heavy toll on individuals' social and organisational relationships as well. To investigate this, first the overlaps between the two areas were indentified. When exploring the theoretical part, the authors faced with the problem that the influence of motivation and organisational culture was usually examined together, and not on each other. A questionnaire survey was conducted, to which 581 valuable responses were received. Based on the results, it was proven that the wider the range of motivation tools used, the more positive the employees evaluate the organisational culture. All of this is worth considering for companies that would like to build a suitable organisational culture in their company.

Biographical notes: Tibor Zsigmond is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Informatics, János Selye University. He completed his doctoral studies at this faculty too, defending his dissertation in August 2021. He published more than 70 papers, some of which are listed in international databases (WoS, Scopus). He was the Slovakian winner of 'Danubius Young Scientist Award 2022'.

Ladislav Mura an Associate Professor, is a Slovak expert on small and medium business sector, international businesses, and the human resources management. He is the author of three domestic scientific monographs on internationalisation of business and human resources management, and co-author of foreign scientific monographs. He has published many articles in various scientific journals.

Renáta Machová is the Vice-Rector for Education and External Relations at János Selye University in Slovakia. She is also an Associate Professor at the Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Informatics. She is a long-term expert from practice, currently a university teacher, a professional expert in EU legal norms in the field of business and employment support policy. Her scientific research activities deal with managerial aspects of management and of small and medium-sized enterprises from different perspectives. She published over 160 articles in conference proceedings and indexed journals.

Ferenc Bakó is an Assistant Professor and a researcher in network theory and regional sciences. His interdisciplinary publications have been published in several journals, dealing with micro-market aspects, from the state of entrepreneurship to macro-market analysis.

Marcell Kupi is an Assistant Professor and a researcher in digitalisation, tourism and regional sciences. His interdisciplinary publications have been published in several journals, dealing with micro-market aspects, from the state of entrepreneurship to macro-market analysis.

1   Introduction

The human resources play a key role in the company. Motivated employees will perform an activity or task in order to achieve maximum results by doing their best. Companies and their employees are the backbone of any business activity (Kryvinska et al., 2013; Urikova et al., 2013). If the employees work well and successfully contribute to the progress of the company, the achieved benefits will be visible for both parties – employees will continue work to satisfy their needs, while the company can grow and maintain its position on the market (Sołtysik et al., 2020; Berke et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Job satisfaction of workers might also be increased by higher wages, better working terms, conditions, and management that employers provide for them (Cizrelioğulları and Babayiğit, 2022). Companies can also improve the creativity and innovativeness of their employees by implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities that stimulate satisfaction of workers (Metzker and Zvarikova, 2021; Berber et al., 2022; Androniceanu et al., 2022).

The scientific literature provides different definitions of the organisational culture. One of them defines organisational culture as a subjective perception of the work environment and its impact on the individual (Glisson, 2007; Rozsa et al., 2019; Gelencsér et al., 2020). According to Cucu-Ciuhan and Guita-Alexandru (2014), the organisational culture is formed as a result of the repeated interactions between the members of the organisation, which includes the beliefs and values of individuals who make up the organisation. The organisational structure and the work environment are in close relation with the human resources, therefore it is based on patterns of perception based on the behaviour of the individual. It is accepted by the professionals that the influence of organisational culture, both in positive and negative manner has impact on achieving the company goals, which are closely linked to motivation, commitment/determination of employees and their satisfaction with work, performance and attitude (Seiler et al., 2012).

Organisational culture is an informal way of observing the life and membership in the organisation, which is connecting the employees and has impact on how they think about themselves and their work. Even though they are not formal, the way they think about themselves and their work can be interpreted and makes close bonds in the organisation (Cycyota et al., 2016).

Organisational culture is a diverse interaction of characteristics of habits that affect the group of people living in the same environment (Gartner, 2004). Sekaran (2014) defines the organisational culture as a research field, which equals to understanding and improvement of the behaviour and attitude of individuals and groups in the company.

Communication is a very important activity in an organisation or company, it plays an essential role how employees can cooperate effectively in order to achieve common goals (Wang, 2009). A quite common type of communication is the interpersonal communication. The interpersonal communication between the employees and the leaders, the communication between the employees of the company is a significant factor in forming an effective organisation.

According to Mujeeb and Ahmad (2011), Madu (2012) and Arifin (2015), organisational performance is significantly affected by the organisational culture. However, Homburg et al. (2014) found that organisational performance is determined by the employee performance. Organisations are trying to improve the performance of their employees in order to achieve the organisational goals. In order to improve the employee

performance, it is necessary to motivate the employees. Work motivation is an encouragement of employees to act or behave in a certain way. Power is the willingness of the individual to act according to his/her abilities (Agarwala, 2008).

Grant (2012) and Grant and Berg (2012) claim that work motivation is defined as a condition that influences the formation, management and maintenance of behaviour related to work environment. Low work motivation of employees is indicated by laziness, being late from work, and increasing number of absent days. This results in decreasing productivity, as no sanctions are introduced to fight the absences, so the employees take every opportunity to stay away from work. According to Cucu-Ciuhan and Guita-Alexandru (2014), the motivation to work significantly influences the attitude towards work.

Based on Maseko (2017), motivation gained significant attention in numerous scientific studies. Nevertheless, we believe that further research is required, since the influence by organisations – technological development, economic crisis, geopolitical changes – will significantly influence the environment the organisations operate in.

COVID-19 had an enormous impact both on the economy and the employees (Chen et al., 2021; Kramarova et al., 2022; Svabova et al., 2021). Not only large-scale changes on workplaces took place (home office, layoffs, closures), but also changes in private sphere (increased time spent with family and relatives, death in the family) most of the people were not prepared for (Stefan et al., 2020; Mihalca et al., 2021; Rozsa et al., 2022; Androniceanu, 2020). All of these factors could significantly influence the attitude of employees to their work and workplace.

Taking into account the above listed, the goal of our research is to examine the relationship between motivation and the organisational culture in the Slovak SMEs, based on the opinion provided by employees during the pandemic COVID-19. The topic is novel and current, since the mutual influence of motivation and organisational culture on each other has not been adequately addressed in previous studies.

2   Theoretical background

Several researches have already addressed the issue of organisational culture and motivation. In most of the cases their parallel effect on the employee performance (Arifin, 2015; Paais and Pattiruhu, 2020; Tarmizi et al., 2021; Hajduová and Sebestyén, 2021) or the commitment to the organisation (Moon, 2000; Austen and Zacny, 2015; van den Broek et al., 2017; Parmar et al., 2022) was examined. The current research is trying to find out what kind of interaction can be observed between them. The mutual influence of two factors on one another has not been adequately addressed. Below we introduce the research activities related to this issue.

According to Wiener and Vardy (1990), 'value' is part of the culture, which can be perceived as a motivational variable. Denison (1996) claims that an organisational structure has to be supporting, risk-taking, cohesive and motivating. The listed contribute to increased level of work satisfaction and motivation both on individual and organisational level. Mahal (2009) examines the organisational culture and the organisational atmosphere as determinants of motivation. In his research 'constructive' and 'defensive', he listed types of company culture. The research shows that the company culture has significant impact on increasing the motivation level of company employees.

Strong company culture contributes to improvement of employee motivation. Sokro (2012) claims that there is strong interaction between the organisational culture and motivation. Motivated employees dominate especially in strong cultures. Once employees are acquainted and adhere to company culture, these values become an integral part of their behaviour, and they will find it difficult to differentiate these values from their personal ones.

Based on Otelea and Popescu (2014), the essence of organisational behaviour is expressed in workplace motivation of individuals. Cucu-Ciuhan and Guita-Alexandru (2014) examined the relationship between the organisational culture and the employee motivation among the academic employees at state universities. Their research shows that the impact of organisational culture is crucial when it comes to work motivation of the members of the organisation (Androniceanu et al., 2020). In their research, they differentiated four types of organisational culture, which partially follow the Quinn model (1988), but the concept of motivation is also highlighted. According to this, there are the following types of organisational culture:

1   Power – the access to resources is imbalanced. Those with power use resources to satisfy or prevent the satisfaction of the needs of others and thereby control their behaviour.

2   Role – the power of leaders is determined by a system of various structures and procedures. The fight for power takes place within a framework of certain rules. The tasks and reward of individuals in various roles are clearly defined in writing. The employees fulfil different tasks in order to be rewarded. Both the individuals and the organisation must comply with the obligations they have undertaken.

3   Task – compared to the previous two types of culture listed, this organisational culture is based on intrinsic motivation and not the extrinsic one. Employees follow a common goal. The mission of the organisation is to attract and release the energy of the individual in order to achieve their personal goals.

4   Support – it can be defined as an organisational culture based on mutual trust of the individual and the organisation. Employees feel to be valued as human beings and not as robots performing certain tasks.

Based on their results, a strong relationship can be detected between the desired organisational structure and the motivation. It is clear that the power-based culture is preferred by individuals with high economic motivation. Individuals with high level of social motivation prefer the support-based organisational culture, but feel comfortable in a role-based and task-based company cultures as well. It was proved that there is significant correlation between the existing culture and the motivational values at the workplace. The individuals, who can continuously perceive the economic values of the organisation, will perceive the organisational culture as a power-based. Those individuals, who believe that their workplace provides self-satisfaction, tend to have heterogeneous perception about the organisational culture. Regarding the existing organisational culture, the power-type culture ranks the first, followed by a role-type culture. According to our opinion, a change is required in terms of organisational culture, given a preference to support or task-type organisational cultures.

Panagiotis et al. (2014) and Cameron and Quinn (2011) used the division of clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, market regarding the organisational culture. In their research, they

examine the relationship between the motivation and the organisational structure. Most of the examined companies in their research belong to 'hierarchy' or 'clan' type of organisational culture. Based on their results, it can be generally concluded that individuals are not satisfied with the dominant culture of their organisation. They prioritise the 'clan' type of culture beside the 'adhocracy' type. Furthermore, it was concluded that there is an inverse correlation between the level of motivation and the 'hierarchy' type of culture, while positive correlation can be detected between the employee motivation and the 'clan' culture.

Maseko (2017), reviewing the scientific literature between 2011 and 2016 also pointed out the close relationship between the motivation and organisational culture. According to Yusof et al. (2016), the organisational culture is important in developing the appropriate motivation for the company employees. Later, the impact of organisational culture on teachers was examined by Rivai et al. (2019). He came to the conclusion that organisational culture has significant positive effect on motivation and performance of the individual. The study of Ukrainska (2021) confirms that the motivation system of the organisation's personnel has direct impact on the organisational culture. According to Melnyk et al. (2021), Cepel (2021) and Kotaskova et al. (2020), the appropriate motivation of employees contributes to development of efficient organisational culture.

3 Methods and methodology

The aim of our research is to examine the relationship between motivation and organisational culture at Slovak SMEs based on the employee opinion. Further sub-goal of our research was to assess the characteristics of organisational culture in those organisations, where the respondents of the research work. Our further goal was to examine the employee motivation tools used in these companies.

The research was conducted between 5 August 2022 and 25 September 2022. We used a questionnaire survey as a quantitative research method. We considered this method the most appropriate, as a large number of respondents can be asked during a short time interval. We applied a 5-point Likert scale; the results were interpreted as a data measured on an interval scale. The respondents were reached by using the Snowball method (Malhotra, 2019), since the focus of our research was on employees themselves, in case of which we did not have an access to the list, where all the Slovak SMEs were listed. We used an e-mail communication to share our survey with employees who showed positive feedback and interest during a previous research. We used a Survio platform, which made it possible to obtain information that our questionnaire was opened by 1,800 people. 33.4% of the respondents filled in the questionnaire (N = 600). When clearing data, we got rid of those questionnaires, which were filled incorrectly or were not complete. We also excluded the questionnaires submitted by sole proprietors. Finally, we could work with 581 valid responses when processing the obtained data, in order to meet the listed requirements.

We calculated the sample size based on Cochran (1977):

$$n = z2 * p * (1-p)/e2 \qquad (1)$$

$$
\begin{aligned}
&n\,(\text{finite population correction})\\
&\quad = [z2 * p * (1-p)/e2]/[1 + (z2 * p * (1-p)/(e2 * N))]
\end{aligned}
\qquad (2)
$$

A sample size of 385 corresponds with a confidence level of 95% and margin of error of 5% when the population is larger than 100,000. Since Slovakia has XY inhabitants, the minimum sample in our case was 385.

n   the sample size

z   z-score associated with a level of confidence

p   sample proportion (decimal)

e   margin of error (decimal)

N   population size.

The following hypothesis was set in the research:

H1 The variety of employee motivation tools applied, shows correlation with the image created about the organisational culture of the company.

Higher the number of motivational tools used in the organisation, the more employees feel that the organisation's culture is positive. The IBM SPSS softer was used for testing – F-test and T-test were applied, which are the most frequently used statistical methods in case of normally distributed samples.

4   Results and discussion

The ratio of male and female respondents was approximately the same in the sample. The ratio of female respondents was a bit higher (53.2%), while the ratio of male respondents was 46.8%. This shows similarity with the values of Slovstat (2022), where the ratio of male respondents was 48.9% and the female respondents stood at 51.1%. The age group of our respondents was determined based on the generation groups of Berkup (2014). However, we had to make a change compared to the original theory, as in the case of generation Z indicated by him, the upper limit of age for this generation was not specified. According to a recent finding (McCrindle et al., 2021), Generation Alfa is a group of those respondents who were born after 2010, so the youngest representatives of generation Z were born in 2009. We wanted our questionnaire to be completed by respondents older than 18. In our research, the youngest group represented is the group of respondents born between 1995 and 2002.

Regarding the position of employees, originally we formed three categories, but those respondents who chose the option 'owner' are not included in the presented research, as we were interested in the opinion of employees. As it was also stated in the methodology, the owners of the SMEs were excluded from the research analysis. It is presented that the net income/month of most of the respondents (45.1%) is between €501 and €1,000. In 2021, the average gross salary was €1,211, while the net income calculated from this amount is €849.48 in Slovakia (Solíková, 2022; Epi, 2021).

We also examined the size of the companies the respondents work for. We take into consideration only the number of employees in the company. Furthermore, only those micro-enterprises were examined, which have at least one employee, who is not the owner of the company or not self-employed. According to the obtained results, most of the respondents are employed by medium-sized companies. Most of the respondents

(26.3%) work for companies that deal with trade. It is followed by the employees of processing companies (12.4%), education (8.1%) and construction (7.2%).

Table 1   The characteristics of the sample

Gender		Position	
Male	46.8%	Employee	73.7%
Female	53.2%	Manager	26.3%
Age group		*Length of employment*	
Baby boom and generation X	25.3%	Less than a year	16.9%
Generation Y	44.8%	1–5 years	53.9%
Generation Z	29.9%	6–10	11.7%
Qualification		11–20 years	13.3%
Secondary	53.5%	More than 20 years	4.3%
Tertiary	46.5%	*Net income/month*	
Size of the enterprise		Below €500	14.5%
Micro	22.2%	€501–1,000	45.1%
Small	28.6%	€1,001–1,500	26.2%
Medium	49.2%	Above €1,500	14.3%

         Source: Own editing

The first question of the questionnaire survey examined the characteristics of the organisational culture, where the respondents had to rank the listed options as the following: 1 = the least characteristic and 5 = the most characteristic option. The individual items were determined on the basis of work Tóbiás-Kosár (2016), Bencsik et al. (2018) or Jusko et al., (2021), who based their research on the scientific work of Quinn (1988). The presented study differs from the mentioned research in the aspect that the employees of the company were asked and not the employers. The mean, standard deviation, mode and median are presented in Table 2.

It can be seen that the respondents agreed the most with the following statements: learning is accepted among the employees (3.93), employees fulfil the requirements of the leaders (3.86) and the clearly determined goals (3.75). In our opinion, the results are not accidental, since the respondents were employees of the companies, so they knew exactly how much they learned from their colleagues. Many of the respondents answered that they fulfil the requirements of their leader. It is important to point out that most of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their organisation is not characterised by a hierarchical system (2.81). This statement can be perceived as an inverted statement, so it can be said that more employees think that a hierarchical system prevails in their workplace. As a negative research outcome has to be mentioned that the high degree of employee decision making (3.08), and the variety of positions (2.96) came to the bottom of the list in evaluation.

The research results are similar to results obtained by Tóbiás-Kosár (2016), based on which the employees of the organisations fulfil the requirements of the leaders (4.5), identify themselves with the strategic objectives (4.43), the goals in the company are clearly determined (4.29). In the research of Tóbiás-Kosár, in addition to non-characteristic hierarchical system (3.29) and the decision-making independence of

employees (2.36), conflict resolution of leadership (1.64) was ranked as the weakest. Overall, we obtained lower averages than Tóbiás-Kosár (2016). It can be explained by the fact that in present study were involved only the employees and not the owners of the organisations.

Table 2   Characteristics of the organisational culture

	Mean	St. dev.	Mode	Median
Learning is accepted among employees.	3.93	1.10	5.00	4.00
Employees fulfil the requirements of the leader.	3.86	0.95	4.00	4.00
The goals are clearly determined.	3.75	1.18	5.00	4.00
Open company atmosphere	3.64	1.06	3.00	4.00
The processes are characterised by teamwork	3.57	1.16	4.00	4.00
Colleagues trust each other	3.54	1.16	4.00	4.00
Spontaneous cooperation is frequent	3.51	1.13	4.00	4.00
Employees identify themselves with the strategic goals of the company	3.48	1.03	3.00	3.00
Leadership is characterised by conflict resolution	3.44	1.21	3.00	4.00
Employees are motivated for knowledge exchange	3.39	1.18	4.00	3.00
Employee relationships are close and based on trust	3.34	1.16	3.00	3.00
Bottom-up initiative is supported by the top management	3.30	1.19	3.00	3.00
Subordinates are provided a high degree of decision making	3.08	1.10	3.00	3.00
Positions vary	2.96	1.27	3.00	3.00
Hierarchical relations are not characteristic	2.81	1.18	3.00	3.00

Source: Own editing

Figure 1   Encouraging knowledge sharing
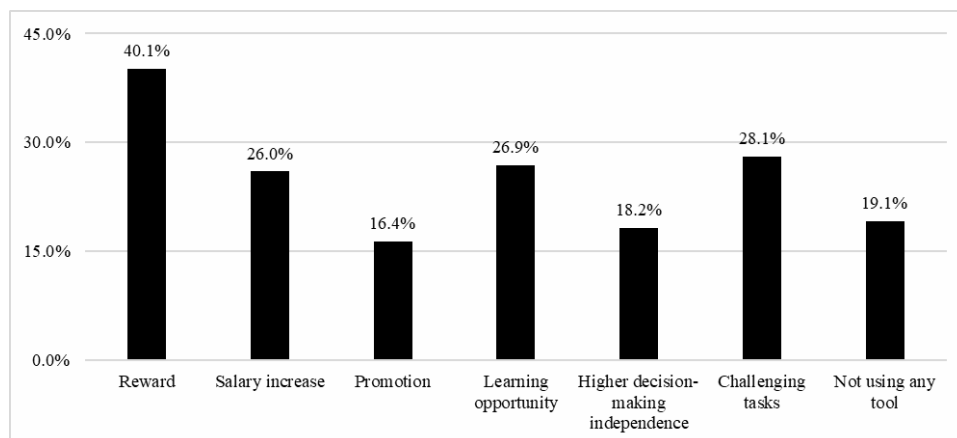
Source: Own editing based on questionnaire research

The next question asked the respondents what motivational tools are used by the company they work for. The respondents were provided six options to choose from and an additional category 'no motivational tools at all' was also added. The respondents

could select several options, so there may be overlaps between the results of each category. The obtained results show that at the most of the companies, employee reward for creative ideas or knowledge sharing is provided once (40.1%). It can be an efficient tool for motivation short-term, but it is not certain that it provides satisfaction for an employee in long-term. The rest of the options seemed less popular tools for motivation. Challenging tasks (28.1%) and the learning opportunity (26.9%) have also reached high ranking. These motivation tools are popular among the employees who would like to develop themselves. In this case, we speak about intrinsic motivation, which is focusing on acquiring knowledge. The intrinsic motivation of individuals can be improved, if the independence and competency are highlighted. If the behaviour is rewarded, the self-rewarding behaviour can become a tool. This category involves the freedom in decision making, but this option was marked with lower number of respondents (18.2%).

It is necessary to mention the salary increase (26.0%) as a motivation tool. Similarly, to financial incentives provided once for an employee, it is also a financial tool for motivation, but the effect lasts longer. This is a disadvantage of this type of incentive, since the employees get used to the higher salary, and will not recognise that their good financial position is due to their earlier success achieved in the company. The leaders and managers cannot constantly increase the salary of the employee. The significant difference between the salaries of employees will not motivate those with lower income. It can result in negative or hostile behaviour from the side of those with lower salary.

It is not surprising that promotion as an option was chosen by a relatively low number of respondents (16.4%), as most of the employees have chance for promotion in medium-sized organisations. As a relevant problem can be detected that 19.1% of the respondents do not feel that sharing knowledge and valuable ideas are not motivating factors.

H_1 The variety of employee motivation tools applied, shows correlation with the image created about the organisational culture of the company.

As the first pillar of our research, we examined the variety of motivating systems and the employee satisfaction. We applied a 5-point Likert scale containing statements with positive attitude (1 = the least characteristic, 5 = the most characteristic). The 15 statements involved were presented as an index based on the following methodology:

We set up categories based on the principle of a simple weighing procedure. When determining the categories, the number of respondents was calculated on the logarithm basis and multiplied by 3.3 then 1 was added to the result. The length of the intervals was obtained by dividing the difference between the largest and the smallest value by the interval length. Based on this methodology, we set up 10 categories (k = 10.12), where the distance is h = 5.5. The lowest interval started at value 14, while the maximum index value could be 70.

The index category with an average value of 6.74 explains the quality of workplace atmosphere by evaluating the individual factors (which also serves to express satisfaction).

It is clearly presented in the figure that due to the low number of elements, the first two categories show outstanding values. The extreme dissatisfaction is therefore a rare phenomenon based on the sample. This is mostly typical for employees working at the lower levels of hierarchical organisations with lots of employees. If the extreme cases are

excluded from the distribution analysis, the sample is slightly skewed to the right, which points in the direction of positive attitude.

Table 3   Frequency of index values in case of n=581 respondents

Index category	Frequency
1	1
2	7
3	15
4	29
5	83
6	121
7	129
8	88
9	84
10	24

Source: Own editing

Figure 2   Values of index distribution and the boxplot diagram (see online version for colours)
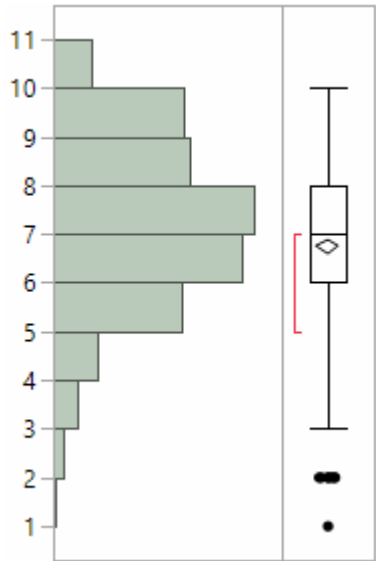
Source: Own editing

We included into the analysis the total value of the number of motivation tools displayed on a nominal scale, thus obtaining a scale with a minimum value of 0 and the maximum value 6. The variance analysis looked for a correlation between the variables, during which an increasing slope was detected. The correlation between the variables gained significance by applying F-test and T-test, according to which the more motivation tools are used, the more positive the satisfaction and the workplace atmosphere is.

Table 4   Statistics of F-test

Source	DF	Sum of squares	Mean square	F Ratio
Lack of fit	5	48.3929	9.67858	3.6954
Pure error	574	1,503.3650	2.61910	*Prob > F*
Total error	579	1,551.7579		0.0027*
				Max RSq
				0.1496

Source	Nparm	DF	Sum of squares	F ratio	Prob > F
Motivational tool	1	1	216.04930	80.6134	<.0001*

Statistics of F-test

Term	Estimate	Std error	t Ratio	Prob>|t|
Intercept	5.991103	0.108169	55.39	<.0001*
Motivational tool	0.4858066	0.054108	8.98	<.0001*

Source: Own editing

5   Conclusions

Based on the research results, the majority of employees involved in the survey (mean = 3.93; SD = 1.10) agreed that learning from colleagues is generally accepted between the employees. It means that high emphasis is put on knowledge sharing. This confirms the results of the study made by company Degreed (2016) which states that 55% of employees learn from their peers at the organisation. It was also revealed that employees think that they meet the expectations of their leaders (mean = 3.86; SD = 0.95) and the goals are clearly determined (mean = 3.75; SD = 1.18). In terms of further results, this can be definitely mentioned as a positive result, since Opstrup and Pihl-Thingvad (2018, p.5) states that "clear organizational goals can be expected to have a positive impact on the employees' psychosocial work environment".

The research revealed that in some of the companies there are employees who have more influence than others, but also employees at the lowest rank of hierarchy ('hierarchical system is not typical' mean = 2.81; SD = 1.18). The hierarchy determines the relationship between the employees, as well as the actions and communication existing between them. Furthermore, some of the employees have limited decision-making autonomy ('subordinates are provided a high degree of decision making' mean = 3.08; SD = 1.10). In order to make decisions, they have to share information with their superiors. This can help the knowledge sharing activity within the company, but can happen that some of the employees do not express their opinion, since decision making is not their task and might be afraid that their superiors will not consider their suggestions.

It is a significant problem that most of the respondents (19.1%) indicated that employees are not motivated by any eccentric motivational tool. It can easily happen that disappointed employees will not share their opinion and knowledge with the superiors, as they do not feel it can be important (Wang, 2004; Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005). If their position is not endangered, they do not feel any motivation to share their knowledge with

other employees, it is not likely that their goal will be to make the company better. It is important that they can feel the success of the company as their personal success.

In this research, it was revealed (F = 80.6134, p = 0.0001; t = 8.98, p = 0.0001) that the diversity of motivation tools shows a correlation with the image created about the organisational culture. It means that wider is the variety of motivation tools used in the company, the more employees feel that the company has a positive organisational culture. If the company leaders would like to create a positive organisational culture, which will be beneficiary later, it is important to asses the needs of the employees and develop an appropriate motivation system. It will improve the company image and improves the satisfaction within a company.

We faced several obstacles during our research. It is necessary to mention the lack of time and financial barriers, which had significant effect on the number of responses. Furthermore, the online questionnaire survey did not make it possible for certain groups of respondents to fill in the questionnaire and participate in the survey (older respondents, socially disadvantaged, respondents with no internet access). It is also necessary to mention the drawback of quantitative methods. We used a self-completion questionnaire, where we can hope that the respondents will provide correct and honest answers. It cannot be excluded that some of the respondents perceived the questions related to organisational culture and motivation different from the reality. In addition to this, the impact of COVID-19 has also influenced the opinion of the respondents.

Considering the future directions of the research, it would be a good idea to examine the opinion of the leaders of Slovak SMEs on motivation and organisational culture. The results could be compared with the result of the current research involving employees. Our future plans also include expanding the research on further countries. It is planned to examine to what extent the companies are considered learning organisations based on the opinion of employees of Slovak SMEs. Based on the statements related to learning organisations and organisational culture, we would like to introduce a completely new organisational categorisation with the help of clusters. In the future, it would be interesting to assess the sectoral aspect of employee attitudes too.

Acknowledgements

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