

# Factors Strengthening the Involvement of Employees and Their Role in Knowledge Management in an Enterprise: An Empirical Evidence from Polish Companies

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## Abstract

*Contemporary conditions in the business environment make increased efforts of companies in the search for the key sources of competitive advantage. One of them is to have employees, who are fully dedicated and committed to the objectives of a company. The degree and scope of this engagement determine the performance, social behaviors and relationships between co-workers, as well as they promote the growth of innovation and improving the financial condition of companies. Therefore, in managing modern enterprises it is important not only to use the appropriate external stimuli to motivate employees, but above all to create conditions that foster their inner motivation. The article attempts to systematize the knowledge of the theory of employee involvement and the factors determining its level as well as to analyze the issue of building the involvement of knowledge workers. The empirical study focused on the identification of instruments used to build employee engagement was applied to achieve the aforementioned research aim. The study involved 86 employees from 4 companies. The study identified a group of key conditions that, in the opinion of employees, significantly affect the degree of their involvement and contribute to the increase in the body of knowledge in the surveyed companies.*

**Keyword:** *employee involvement, knowledge management, knowledge workers.*

**JEL classification:** M12

## Introduction

Under the conditions of the knowledge based economy human capital is a key strategic resource for a company that underlies effectiveness of modern management. Various sources indicate that the financial compensation for an employee has a priority value for him/her while searching employment and making decision to take a job. However, the stimulating effect of the financial consideration is limited by a number of subjective factors (Armstrong 1996). In

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unstable conditions, when employees see their future uncertain, there is observed a decrease of motivation to work, and financial instruments incentives do not work sufficiently. In such a situation increases the importance of building employee involvement in raising the value of a company by enhancing their knowledge competencies and consequently building capacity of knowledge across an enterprise.

Currently observed rapid growth of interest in the topic of employee involvement in building the value of a company is the result of the positive impact of engagement on work performance, social behavior and building positive relationships, as well as an increase in innovation and improvement of financial condition of companies. At the same time the impact of employee engagement on the success of a company can point to the many still unresolved issues such as the measurement of engagement, correlation with work satisfaction and responsibility for the results, the impact of organizational conditions: organizational culture, organizational climate, the level of teamwork in the organization and others (Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter 2011; Neves, Caetano 2009; Albrecht 2010; Schaufeli, Taris, Bakker 2006).

The identification of workers with the values and the established goals of a company is the essence of organizational commitment. It manifests itself in the feeling of belongingness among employees who create innovative solutions with passion. These workers take actions to achieve the objectives of an enterprise, which is reflected in their attitudes, beliefs, and proceedings, and knowledge can be transformed into concrete financial result. So, this process of building the knowledge workers' engagement becomes the foundation of intellectual capital management in a company and a key source of competitive advantage. Building and maintaining a high level of employee engagement is often a difficult challenge for executives due to the fact that managers focus on priority areas for a company (mainly financial aspects), while in other fields they rely on their intuition and often make decisions without proper expertise and skills. Moreover, the nature of the involvement of employees and the variety of factors influencing it make the issue even more challenging.

### **1. The concept and types of knowledge workers**

Intellectual attributes are the driving force of innovation, contributing to the increase in the intensity of competition by providing new opportunities for competition, and thus they can provide a basis to build, maintain and / or strengthen competitive advantage by identifying its new sources. This ability is conditioned by the skills of running business in a flexible way by accelerating the introduction of new products / services to meet the changing needs and preferences of customers. The process of knowledge creation involves converting tacit knowledge in explicit and codified knowledge, available to others. This is achieved by the process of knowledge management, the effect of which is to improve the strategic characteristics of a company (value, intellectual potential, competitive

advantage). This applies to knowledge acquisition, to which competition has a difficult access, sharing it and preserving critical knowledge. As a result, a company gains an advantage in the market thanks to possessing and exploiting knowledge, that is lacked by market rivals. This is another reason for implementing knowledge management processes in the contemporary business.

The essence of knowledge management stems from the development of the current business landscape including: increase in the intensity of competition, shortening life cycles of products and saturation of company offers with information, a high turnover of staff, the ever-changing needs of customers or the development of technology and modern production methods. In such conditions, the essential role is played by information and knowledge capital, which in the competitive struggle have become as significant as traditional hard material resources.

The knowledge economy puts new demands on modern companies in the field of formulation and implementation of strategies conducive to gaining and maintaining a competitive position. Increasingly, businesses are forced to seek innovative solutions in a variety of functional areas: organizational, products, technical, informational, and others. To meet these demands, today's businesses should seek new ways to reach and acquire resources and capacities based on knowledge, which won't be accompanied by the risk of rapid aging. This is due to the fact that knowledge and ability to use it become prerequisites to build competitive advantage (Nanoka 2000). Among many sources of knowledge acquisition by a company, there can be identified external sources (eg. customers, suppliers, partner companies, institutions and others) and internal sources (eg. employees, communities, internal mergers and others). The consequence of the knowledge economy is the increased importance of knowledge workers for the company's success. P. Drucker (1999, p.37) defines them as employees who possess so specialized and unique knowledge that determine the success of an entire enterprise. Their actions require education, qualifications, possession of "soft" knowledge as well as the ability to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge in order to assess the suitability of a specific innovation (Morawski 2009; Grudzewski, Hejduk 2000). These are workers who have mastered and use symbols and concepts, use knowledge and information to work, unlike employees whose work is based on manual skills or physical strength (Elliman, Eatock & Spencer 2005). T.H. Davenport (2007) defines knowledge workers as those who have a high degree of expertise knowledge, education or experience. Their work is of an intellectual nature, and its main objective is the creation, distribution and implementation of knowledge (Davenport 2005). However, the processes related to knowledge management are recognized differently in the literature. A. Jashapara (2006, pp. 119-120) indicates the extraction, evaluation, dissemination, storing and organizing of knowledge. Other authors enumerate the following stages of this process: development, acquisition, locating, storing, use and sharing of knowledge and its dissemination (Probst, Raub & Romhardt 2004, p.46). Accordingly, it can be stated that a knowledge worker is a person with a high degree of autonomy,

whose work represents a high level of competence and specialist skills to effectively perform their tasks. Most often they are the employees of eg. research institutes, R & D departments, while taking as a criterion the field of knowledge or they represent professions which meet the criteria of knowledge workers such as: accountants, managers, engineers, computer scientists, geologists, specialists in the field of HR, doctors, teachers, lawyers, pharmacists, etc. (O'Donohue, Sheehan, Hecker & Holland 2007; Davenport 2007; Redpath, Hurst & Devine 2009; Guo, Xiao & Yang 2012).

Analyzing the definitions of a knowledge employee, we can conclude that the majority of today's employees are knowledge workers, due to the fact that under current conditions, in principle, every kind of work requires some knowledge. Knowledge workers have professional skills and intellectual powers, the use of which determines the added value for a company as regards used technology and developing product innovations (Skrzypek 2002). At the same time R. Maruta (2012) emphasizes that including all employees in the category of knowledge workers is too far simplification, because the work, which involves only the direct application of the knowledge does not meet the characteristics of the category of knowledge workers. To indicate that a worker is a knowledge employee, it is necessary that he/she meets simultaneously the three following criteria: an employee creates, distributes and implements knowledge. Numerous criteria for the classification of knowledge workers can be found in the literature. One of them is the assumption that workers employed in organizations based on knowledge are knowledge workers. Another criterion to define this category of workers is the use of appropriate characteristics, such as: level of education, high achievement motivation, activity, a strong sense of independence and awareness of the role, focusing on learning and innovation (Gurteen 2006; Stewart 2001, pp.58-59). It is challenging to point out a single, concise and precise definition of knowledge workers and including knowledge workers into one category makes it even more difficult to understand this phenomenon. It should be taken into account the fact that knowledge workers differ from other professions by the nature of work, level of resistance to stress and ability to influence others, as well as the diversity of the work environment (Davenport 2007). In fact knowledge workers should also include not only people with formal education, but also workers who, thanks to the possession of unique, specialized knowledge, resulting from tacit knowledge, are characterized by productivity, innovation and creativity in generating new solutions, improvements, and consequently they contribute to the increase in the added value for a company.

## **2. The nature and the scope of organizational commitment**

Wide interest in the issue of employee involvement includes also the analysis and description of the factors affecting the level of employee engagement and its measurement. The essence of this phenomenon shows that the key determinant of commitment is the ability to dispose by an employee resources

allocated to her/his in an independent manner, which in turn determines her/his innovation activities. It should be noted, however, that the scope of innovative activities extends beyond the boundaries of the product and its improvements, nowadays. Increasingly, it concerns processes, implemented concepts and other organizational changes that are conducive to improving a company. An employee who is engaged in work, identifies with the company, looks for challenges and seeks to realize their professional ambitions, comply with their obligations, thinks innovatively and takes actions that will contribute to improving the competitiveness of the entire organization. Experiencing such a state should be rewarded intrinsically (Antonich & Hisrich 2003; Robertson, Birch & Cooper 2012). Taking this into consideration, work engagement is a positive approach to responsibilities, full of interest and preoccupation, which is characterized by a dedication in the implementation of additional measures beyond the formally defined duties (Robertson, Birch & Cooper 2012; Armstrong 2009). A.B. Bakker (2009) argues that engaged employees experience more positive emotions and have better mental and physical health, which also translates into higher productivity at work and better results (Salanova, Agut & Peiro 2005; Wright & Cropanzano 2000). W. B. Schaufeli (2008) argues that the concept of commitment to a job emerged on the basis of research related to burnout, or lack of well-being (Schaufeli, Taris & van Rhenen 2008). G. Muller (2012) writes, however, that the condition for the involvement of employees in their work is primarily their involvement in their lives, because without this, all the tools of motivation (awards, training, development, etc.) will not change employee attitudes (Muller 2012). Furthermore, the involvement of employees requires departing from the dependency relationships that exist between an employer and an employee to peer relations where responsibility is bilateral in nature. Employee engagement has in fact rooted in positive attitudes to their superiors and a sense of responsibility for the results of their own work. It is now recognized that a person goes beyond the traditional understanding of the work, which is regarded not only as a source of income, but as a place to pursue their own development goals and aspirations, and a place where an employee can confirm his/her own value. This is facilitated by a deep revitalization of a company, which may be regarded as a key determinant of building staff commitment. It involves making strategic action at a general level, building a new corporate culture, innovative methods of communication, new values and creating the ground for employee initiatives (Burns 2005).

Other proposals treat the employee involvement as a very wide spectrum, as the overarching concept of containing different types of involvement, eg. involvement as a personal feature of an individual, commitment to work, attachment to a specific organization (Macey, Schneider, Barbera & Young 2009). Commitment is the attitude of an employee to work, organization, profession, which, regardless of other factors, has an impact on his/her actions (Herrbach 2006). It gives direction of employee behaviors and can lead to sustaining them, even in a situation of the conflict of motives and attitudes.

The nature and extent of staff involvement should be analyzed on the basis of the distinction between the general concept of commitment (employee engagement, job involvement) and organizational commitment. The first one involves the objective conditions which determine employee decision to remain in the workplace and conscientiously fulfill their obligations. It is linked to desire to maintain a job, fear of losing it, and too high costs of changes of employment. The second one i.e. organizational commitment is commonly understood in terms of personal identification with the goals and values of a company, readiness to make efforts for a company and desire to continue being a member of a company. It is a psychological force that connects employees with organizations and makes that leaving a job is perceived as less attractive (Johnson, Groff & Taing 2009). It is manifested in a certain action, which has both an emotional component (people generally feel positive emotions in relation to the subject of their involvement) and rational (the commitment is an act of choice, a decision, usually made with the conviction to fulfill the obligations arising from this commitment). However, due to the fact that the engagement requires efforts, most people take it with the expectation of reciprocity and the assumption that in return for their commitment, they will get something what is important for them (Vance 2006).

The above analysis shows that the scope and nature of the involvement of the staff may be characterized in various ways, depending on how it is perceived by a company and that takes priority over other activities of a company. There is also no consensus on the elements influencing employee engagement. Among the components of the involvement of the most common are: fit for the job, a variety of tasks, rewards and recognition, development opportunities (Crawford, LePine & Rich 2010), or top management commitment, leadership, team work, communication, training, gratitude, measurement. The involvement is a positive attitude of employees towards an organization and its values, manifested by the awareness of organizational situation and cooperation in order to improve results and for the benefit of an organization (Crawford, LePine & Rich 2010; Robinson, Perryman & Hayday 2004).

Simultaneously, the attention should be paid to the multidimensional character of this term, which in practice means the necessity of using specific categories, which make up the whole organizational commitment. In this sense, we can distinguish three major dimensions of commitment (Allen & Meyer 1990; Meyer & Herscovitch 2001):

- affective: emotional attachment to an organization, motivation, identification with it; the degree to which a person is psychologically associated with the employing organization by feelings of loyalty, sympathy, kindness, affiliation, sentiment, satisfaction, etc.; this commitment is related to the reluctance to incur additional costs of searching for a new employer;
- duration: awareness of the costs associated with leaving an organization; the degree to which a person is convinced about the necessity to remain in the organization because of the high cost of

living; this is related to the benefits which an employee receives as part of the work;

- normative: a sense of moral obligation to remain in a company; the degree to which a person is psychologically associated with the employing organization through internalization of objectives, values and mission.

It is important that these aspects be considered as components of engagement, since all these elements may also reflect the relationship between an employee and a supplier in varying degrees. The interest in the employee commitment is a result of the perceived consequences for organizations ranging from the behavior of employees (fluctuation, job satisfaction, and citizenship behavior) to the relationship between the level of employee engagement and company performance: increasing employee engagement leads to improved customer satisfaction, revenue growth or improvement competitive position (Roberts & Davenport 2002). Relationships characterized above lead to undertaking by an organization the activities that strengthen employee commitment and thus it becomes important to study the antecedents of this specific relationship between an employee and the company. Employee involvement in capacity building of the company can be an important source of competitive advantage of modern enterprises, thanks to the acquisition of new knowledge, both explicit (formal) and tacit (implicit).

### 3. Determinants of knowledge workers' commitment

Building an emotional bond with an employee is a bilateral relationship, hence an organization should go beyond waiting passively for a high degree of employee involvement, but it should actively shape the relationship, which consists of a set, sequence, or sequence of interactions manifested in the operations of both parties. There could be said that building employee engagement is conditional upon the knowledge of four groups of factors (Table 1).

**Table 1 Determinants of engagement building of knowledge employees**

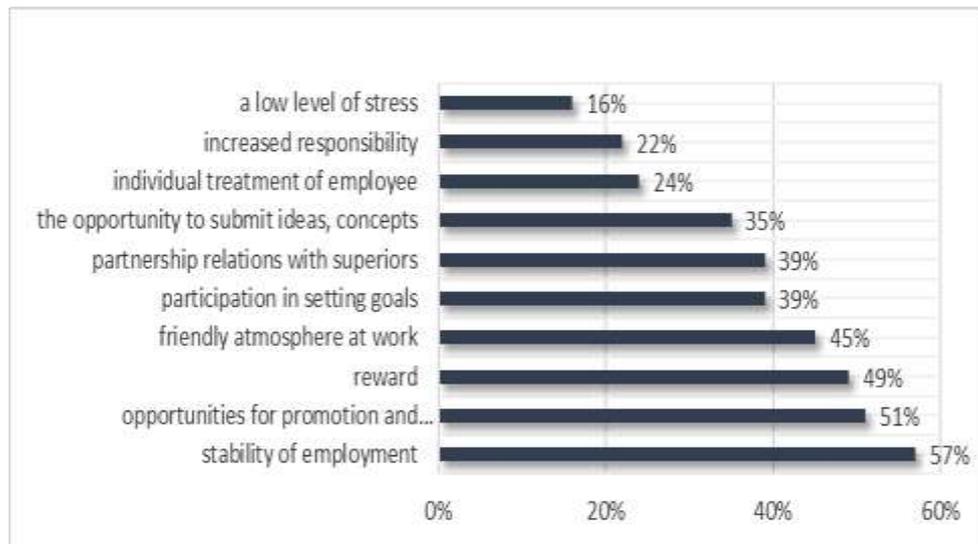
Factors	Characteristic
The objective conditions of action specific to the organization, the forms of employment, which consequently form the basis for the relationship between a knowledge employee and a company	The main subject of employee engagement relationships is an enterprise, which, due to its specific characteristics has a high complexity of work (virtual or network organizations, diversified forms of employment, organizational culture, etc.). Problems associated with commitment occur when employees fulfill at the same time their obligations to two or more entities using their knowledge and with the approval of these entities (the problem in defining the main subject of the commitment). There are three main approaches:

Factors	Characteristic
	<p>a) identification of possible subjects of employee involvement within the company (supervisor, colleagues, leadership, team) and outside (suppliers, customers, allies);</p> <p>b) the effects of multi-subjects commitment: conflict, difficulties with employee identification with their own organization, employee intrapersonal tensions, conflict of interest; this may lead to a reduction of organizational commitment;</p> <p>c) professional involvement (in the occupation), especially when working with clients across enterprise borders; it indicates a positive relationship between organizational commitment and professional commitment; many involvement items do not necessarily mean conflict, and even they can be compensatory in nature or create synergy (contract staff have a dual commitment: to their own employer and to the customers).</p> <p>The management of synergy/conflict arising from the interaction between different objects of involvement implies the need to pay more attention to the control by the management team and support to employees to make their organizational commitment and customer orientation more balanced.</p>
<p>Factors associated with stimulation of bottom-up innovation in the process of building employee engagement</p>	<p>Stimulating innovation of employees through their commitment requires the establishment of mechanisms for submitting ideas by employees, but also their implementation and appreciation of employees. Other determinants are: inclusion of employees in decision making processes, giving employees the possibility to define their own work, well-being of employees, collecting new ideas and managing them, promoting innovations among employees, creating conditions for sharing knowledge and ideas.</p>
<p>Factors associated with mutual expectations of knowledge workers and an organization and taking them into account in everyday relationships</p>	<p>Expectations of knowledge workers concern the freedom of choice, autonomy in deciding how to carry out the work, the use of organizational resources and scope of the organization's involvement in the development of knowledge. These include: the possibility of defining tasks, increased autonomy and accountability for results, commitment to innovation and the desire for permanent learning. This requires a much greater investment in education and training, as well as creating conditions that knowledge workers prefer. The second aspect of the relationship are the expectations of employers towards knowledge workers, which include: having the skills to</p>

Factors	Characteristic
	absorb and use knowledge, high cognitive abilities and the ability to abstract thinking as well as high self-motivation and the ability to make group collaboration and social skills, enabling knowledge workers to share knowledge.
Factors associated with a psychological state that shapes the level of employee engagement	<p>It is assumed that an employee defines his/her own level of engagement according to the conditions created in the company and provided resources. This commitment is based on a kind of psychological contract as a situation in which the exchange of benefits occurs between an employee and a company. In this context, there are three basic psychological states, shaping engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) a sense of reasonableness: the differentiation of competence, the importance of performed tasks, the identification with effects,</li> <li>b) knowledge about the results: feedback about the effects of performed tasks,</li> <li>c) independence: a sense of autonomy in decision-making and actions, responsibility.</li> </ul> <p>Among the conditions are: training, supervision (to facilitate understanding and implementing tasks), the opportunity to develop and acquire new competencies, participation in decision-making processes, fair wages, long-term job security, low fluctuation, career prospects.</p>

*Source:* adapted from: Kinnie & Swart (2012); McShane (2006); O'Donohue, Sheehan, Hecker & Holland (2007); Coyle-Shapiro & Conway (2005); Moosa & Panurach (2008); Redpath, Hurst & Devine (2009).

To achieve the objective of this paper empirical studies were conducted, which included 86 employees, working in 4 manufacturing companies. The aim of the study was to determine the instruments used to build employee engagement. The study was conducted using an anonymous questionnaire. It was assumed in the study that this group of employees had the greatest knowledge of the most effective factors used in the surveyed enterprises that supported their involvement. The study identified a group of key conditions that significantly influenced the building of the degree of employees involvement in the surveyed enterprises and contributed to enhancing the body of knowledge in the companies under the study. The findings are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Determinants of employee engagement - the results of own study**

*Source:* own study based on empirical research.

The study showed that the majority of respondents (57%) indicated the stability of employment and opportunities for development and promotion (51%) as key determinants of building their engagement in relation to the employer. There were also identified two additional key factors of employee involvement: reward (49%) and providing and maintaining a friendly atmosphere at work (45%). It should be noted that while the reward and the atmosphere at work are often listed among the stimuli to engage and motivate employees, the stability of employment is not very often indicated as a key determinant of creating employee involvement. This may be due with uncertainty of the economic situation, where in times of crisis employees are more interested in maintaining employment. In the second group of factors that determine building commitment there were indicated the possibility of the participation of employees in setting business objectives and the existence of partnership relations with superiors (enumerated by 39% of the respondents). This highlights the significance of peer relationship between employers and employees to increase employee involvement which means that the leadership features here are more important than management skills. The respondents also pointed to the importance of action which would enable them to raise their own ideas and improvements (35%). It applies to creating the conditions that make possible to stimulate grassroots innovativeness among employees. However, it is important to establish conditions to implement improvements recommended by employees. This applies to various kinds of changes including product, process and organizational innovations. To a lesser extent, the study indicated the role of an individual approach to an employee (24%) and increasing the responsibility of employees by delegation of responsibilities and authority

(22%). It seems, however, that these factors will play an increasingly important role in maintaining valuable employees in the organization due to working conditions, characterized by the increasing pressure of time and the multidimensionality of duties. At the same time it is assumed that the importance of increasing the responsibility of employees will grow as building a sense of awareness of employees about the impact on the functioning of the company and co-responsibility for its future have positive effects on integration and identification of employees with the company. Moreover, the respondents pointed out the activities that would reduced the level of stress at work (16%). It should be noted that a lot of tension and stress among employees is harmful to building their involvement in the creation of knowledge and innovation for a company.

A similar study, that were conducted in Poland (Samul & Szaczyńska-Sokół 2013) indicate that the instruments used by Polish companies to build the commitment of management's staff and ways to measure the commitment level in small businesses. The research shows that only 6% of small businesses do not take any action aimed at increasing the involvement of its managers. Furthermore, most of the surveyed companies (62%) offers its employees the stability of employment, slightly less (55%) growth opportunities and salary depending on the results achieved. Among the other instruments used to stimulate the managers engagement are: ensuring interesting work, in accordance with the competences of the employee (42%), creating a friendly atmosphere at work (40%) and the formation of partnership relations (19%). The vast majority of companies (71%) use only a few tools in the number from 2 to 4. One fifth of companies take more action, from 5 to 7 in order to improve employee engagement, and only a few companies affects the managers commitment in one way.

#### **4. Summary and further research directions**

Shaping the involvement of knowledge workers is one of the most important tasks of modern enterprises, being one of the key sources of competitive advantage. This specific, and simultaneously a positive resource of relationships between a company and a worker determines his/her efforts for the organization and high intrinsic motivation. Building commitment of knowledge workers needs to take into account objective factors relating to organizational conditions and the type of business a company operates in. The changes taking place in the organizational structure of enterprises, increasing employment flexibility, reorganization of companies result in the situation when an employee works for many organizations and, therefore, he or she engages in relationships with a number of employers. This may lead to a conflict of interests, which requires high competence from managers in the field of human capital management in order to maintain positive relationships and achieve the synergies from managing the knowledge workers' commitment.

Knowledge employees often determine the success of a company and often represent a significant source of its competitive advantage (especially in the fields

of advanced technologies). This is mainly due to the possession and sharing their hidden (implicit) knowledge. Therefore, nowadays, hiring knowledge workers is becoming a key determinant of the company success and the importance of such workers can be seen by the degree of ease or difficulty to replace them. It is extremely important to combine building employee engagement with factors related to employee career development, to create favorable opportunities for learning and acquiring new skills, which should lead to an increase in the possibility of introducing product, organizational and process innovations. This is the most important condition for organizational commitment of this group of employees.

It should be noted, however, that the list of factors determining the involvement of employees should not be closed. In fact, the process of shaping the commitment is continuous in nature with systematic and situational approach. It is characteristic for this process to take into account the incorporation of new elements that contribute to a higher level of employee engagement and stimulate their positive emotions associated with the workplace.

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