Mikro i mala preduzeća i očuvanje ljudskih resursa u uslovima pandemije

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Apstrakt: Mikro i mala preduzeća, naročito startapovi iz oblasti informacionih tehnologija, kao i mikro i mala porodična preduzeća koja se bave sofisticiranom proizvodnjom baziranom na informacionim tehnologijama i inovacijama, predstavljaju veoma značajan element privrede jedne zemlje. Međutim, u uslovima u kojima je vlasnik najčešće i menadžer preduzeća i kada ne postoji formiran sektor za upravljanje ljudskim resursima, ni posebna pozicija sa zaduženjima u oblasti upravljanja ljudskim resursima, sam proces upravljanja ljudima je uglavnom neformalan, ad hoc i podložan čestim promenama. Problemi upravljanja ljudskim resursima se naročito primećuju u kriznim situacijama kao što je pandemija virusa COVID-19. Ovaj rad se bavi istraživanjem stavova (u vidu intervjuja) menadžera i vlasnika malih preduzeća iz oblasti informacionih tehnologija i visokih tehnologija prema očuvanju zaposlenih u uslovima pandemije COVID-19 virusa u prvoj nedelji proglašenja vanrednog stanja u Republici Srbiji i u prvoj nedelji maja, kada je najavljeno ukidanje vanrednog stanja. Iako je uzorak mali, može se zaključiti da su mala preduzeća ovu krizu dočekala nespremno, ali da su u pogledu upravljanja ljudskim resursima, naročito kada su u pitanju očuvanje i nagrađivanje zaposlenih, mala preduzeća u oblasti informacionih tehnologija zbog prirode posla znatno lakše prevazišla krizu od preduzeća koja se bave proizvodnjom (iako su u pitanju visoke tehnologije).

Ključne reči: Mala preduzeća, upravljanje ljudskim resursima, pandemija.

Micro and small enterprises and human resources retention in a pandemic

Abstract: Micro and small businesses, especially information technology startups, as well as micro and small family businesses engaged in production using high technologies, and innovation, are a very important element of a country's economy. However, in conditions where the owner is usually the manager of the company and when there is no established human resources management sector or a designated position with responsibilities in the field of human resources management, the human management process itself is mostly informal, ad hoc, and subject to frequent changes. Human resource management problems are particularly noticeable in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 virus pandemic. This paper examines the attitudes (in the form of interviews) of managers and owners of small businesses in the field of information technology and high technologies towards the retention of employees in the COVID-19 virus pandemic in the first week of declaring a state of emergency in Serbia and in the first week of May, when the lifting of the state of emergency was announced. Although the sample is small, it can be concluded that small businesses were unprepared for this crisis, but that in terms of human resource management, especially when it comes to retention and rewarding employees, small businesses in the field of information technology have been able, because of the nature of their work, to overcome the crisis much easier than companies engaged in production (although they are utilizing high technologies),

Key Words: Micro and small enterprises, human resources management, pandemic.

Introduction

Micro and small enterprises are a very important element of the economy of every developed country, for example in the US more than half of the employees work for small companies (Dessler, 2013). Nonetheless, they are also becoming even more significant in the economy of developing countries (Druicā, *et al.* 2017), especially when it comes to micro and small enterprises that apply modern

technologies and innovations (Duplenko, 2013; Apanasovich, *et al.* 2017). Micro enterprises are defined by different authors as the ones with less than 10 or 20 employees and small enterprises are defined as the ones that employ between 10 (or 20) and 50 employees (Vukotić, Cvijanović, Aničić, 2014). In order for these companies to survive and thrive in the conditions of strong competition and globalization, one of the key elements are the people who bring added value with their knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to secure desired position in the market (Melo and Machado, 2013; Shafeek, 2016; Hitka, *et al.* 2018; Končar, *et al.* 2020). Various concepts of quality management state that human resources management is critical factor of any organization (Tomic, 2016), especially when it comes to small and medium enterprises (Cepel, *et al.* 2018), and some micro and small enterprises are starting to develop and implement human resources management policies and procedures (Melo and Machado, 2013).

Micro and small enterprises are prevalent in the Republic of Serbia (Bobera and Bjekić, 2016; USAID, 2017), nevertheless there is not enough extensive research on the implementation of human resources policies and practices in those companies in order to retain employees, or whether those policies and practices even exist, especially when it comes to the micro and small companies in the field of information technologies and high technologies.

Natural disasters and epidemics can cause disruption of various business processes and can be harmful to people's health and lives. The problems for human resource management are particularly noticeable in the situations such as the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Therefore, risk management strategies have to include plans for safety and protection of personnel. It is essential for micro and small enterprises, where absence of only one key employee can cause a serious damage to business processes. The effect of pandemic on the economy on macro level has been researched in some extent in the shape of reports, reviews and analyses (Sanchez-Duque, *et al.* 2020), nevertheless the effect, especially long-term, of the pandemics on micro and small enterprises has yet to be researched more extensively.

In this paper we shall examine the attitudes (in the form of interviews) of managers and owners of micro and small businesses in the field of information technology and high technologies. The participants have been interviewed soon after COVID-19 virus pandemic in March have started, namely the first week of declaring a state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia (Službeni glasnik, 2020) and in the first week of May, when the lifting of the state of emergency have been announced. The main focus has been given to retention and rewarding employees in pandemic.

1. Human Resources management in micro and small enterprises

Micro and small enterprises, especially in the field of information technologies and high technologies, depend heavily on the technology; nevertheless, new technological solutions can't function without the people (Jerônimo, 2013; Fejfarová and Urbancová, 2016), namely the individuals who have adequate knowledge, skills, abilities, other characteristics, and behaviours. Exceptional skills in human resources management in micro and small enterprises are the key for hiring and keeping the best talent. Almost typical, in these kinds of enterprises, the owner is often also a general manager, and CFO, but also a chief human resources manager. Therefore, it is necessary for some type of human resources management policies to be developed and implemented from the very beginning. A number of micro and small companies can opt for outsourcing this function (Dessler, 2013), or using HRM information systems (Wang, *et al.* 2016), however adopted policies and procedures have to be based on the company's mission and vision in order to be implementable.

It is not unusual for micro, small, and even medium enterprises not to have human resources management department or a separate function. Usually companies larger than one hundred employees tend to employ one person in a human resources function (Dessler, 2013). A research from Check republic has shown that only about 25% of small and about 50% of medium enterprises (Fejfarová and Urbancová, 2016) include some form of human resources function. Nevertheless, micro and small companies in the field of information technologies or high technologies tend to treat their employees as human capital, and not resources (Apanasovich, *et al.* 2017) because of their importance for the success of a company. Nevertheless, one of the often neglected aspects of human resources management in micro and small enterprises is health and wellbeing of the employees (Thrive at Work Wellbeing Programme Collaboration, 2019).

Micro and small enterprises in Serbia in most cases don't have a human resources function at all (Hanić, *et al.* 2016; Lazarević, *et al.* 2018), which is often essential for retaining the best employees. Significant decrease in official unemployment rate (10.4% for the 2019), according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2020), can be misleading, because it is very difficult to recruit and retain the professionals in the field of information technologies and high technologies who are the right fit for organization due to the brain drain and considerable opportunities for informal online employment, especially for the professionals in the field of information technologies (Culkin, Simmons 2018). Sometimes, start-ups are not able to provide the salary, bonuses, and overall working environment that can be attractive for the best candidates, the ones with the experience and interns alike.

2. Human resources management in pandemic

Even though pandemic incidences can't be anticipated, after SARS and H1N1 epidemics, same as epidemics of Ebola and Zika viruses, it is necessary to include policies and procedures for the possible epidemics and pandemics response into risk management and human resources management strategies (Caligiuri, *et al.* 2020). It is of the essence for those policies and guidelines to include the human resources management policies in order to retain talented individuals, because even though small scale epidemics may not be harmful for large enterprises' business processes, the absence of employees in micro and small enterprises, especially if the absent employees are holding key job positions that cover various responsibilities, can cause a serious damage to a company (Tan and Takakuwa, 2011).

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has been first diagnosed in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province in China and has become globally known from the beginning of January 2020. As the virus spread from China, across Japan, South Korea, and Singapore to US, Western, and Eastern Europe, the outbreak has affected more than one hundred countries along with the Republic of Serbia from the beginning of March 2020. World Health Organization (WHO) declared pandemic on March 11 (Lenzen, *et al.* 2020).

Besides the health issues, one of the main problems for the micro and small enterprises is loss of jobs in service and retail sector (da Silva Costa, 2020), because of widespread lockdowns in order to contain the epidemic (Musinguzi and Oppong, 2020) with serious consequences for the retention of employees for the companies involved in sophisticated production. Also, for these companies, the question of post-Covid economic survival is becoming of the essence (Baghiu, 2020; Caligiuri, *et al.* 2020).

Many countries have passed government led programs of aiding the most affected industries, especially through wage subsidies (Joo-Cheong, 2020). Similarly in the Republic of Serbia, Government (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2020) has issued a set of economic measures intended to help private sector coping with the financial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The package has included salary tax and social security contributions on salaries, salary compensations, and personal salaries of entrepreneurs (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2020), especially important for micro and small enterprises.

3. Research

The scope of study and data collection

Objectives

The aim of the empirical part of the paper is to analyze the attitudes of owners and top managers of micro and small enterprises in the field of information technologies and high technologies (sophisticated automated production) toward their ability to retain and reward the employees during (and immediately after) the Covid-19 pandemic.

The interviews have been held from 18th to 20th March (the beginning of the state of emergency) and from 7th to 8th May, 2020 when abolition of the state of emergency has been announced (Narodna skupština, 2020), through semi-structured phone interviews and the answers have been transcribed by the authors.

Survey design

The interviewees have been given two groups of statements with two possible answers (Yes/No) questions. The first group of statements has been developed to investigate whether a company has:

1. The business plan for the 2020 that includes human resources plan;
2. Human resources management function;
3. Human resources management position;
4. Human resources management policies, procedures, and plans;
5. Risk management policies, procedures, and plans;
6. A plan for emergency situations regarding the employees included in the risk management policies, procedures, and plans.

The second group of statements has been developed to investigate whether a company has:

1. The ability to continue the business plan for the 2020;
2. The ability to retain all the employees;
3. The ability to retain the bonuses for the employees
4. The ability to retain regular wages for the employees
5. The ability to retain essential (core) employees during/after pandemic
6. The ability for online business (core business)
7. The ability for enabling the employees to work online during/after the pandemic (administration and management)

Also, the participants have been able to state if their company would be willing to accept some kind of financial assistance from the government in order to retain employees (March) or if it has accepted financial government's aid package (May). Furthermore, the participants have been given the possibility to explain their willingness to accept governments's financial aid. The participants have also been given the ability to present additional remarks on the issues they have considered important, if willing.

Description of the sample

For the purpose of this study, nineteen owners/general managers/chief executive officers of various micro or small companies (fewer than 20 employees) in the field of information technologies and production (using high technologies) have been interviewed. The interviewees have been the owners of the companies that have been active from one to twenty years. Ten of the participants have been from the field of information technologies and nine from the field of high technologies. The demographical data of the sample are given at Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic variables (Source: authors)

Code Name	Field or sector	Position	Years active (business)	Number of employees
P1	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	10	7
P2	High technologies	Owner/General manager/Lead engineer	26	9
P3	High technologies	Owner/General manager	5	12
P4	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	5	6
P5	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	3	12
P6	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	4	11
P7	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	5	10
P8	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	4	8
P9	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	2	4
P10	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	2	11
P11	High technologies	Owner/General manager	1	6
P12	High technologies	Owner/General manager	8	16
P13	High technologies	Owner/General manager	7	18
P14	High technologies	Owner/General manager	10	11
P15	High technologies	Owner/General manager	5	8
P16	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	7	3
P17	Information technologies	Owner/General manager	2	4
P18	High technologies	Owner/General manager	6	15
P19	High technologies	Owner/General manager	3	8

4. Results

The first set of statements has been given only in the initial interviewing in March. In regard to business plans all of the interviewees have stated that their companies have a business plan developed for the year 2020. In IT industry most of the participants (80%) have stated that they have a human resources management function, but none has stated that they have a human resources management position.

It is similar for high technologies, where the most of the interviewees (66.7%) have stated that they have a human resources management function, but, again, none has stated that they have a human resources management position.

Most of the companies in the field of information technologies (70%) have written human resources policies, procedures and plans; nevertheless, the most of high technology companies (88.9) do not have written human resources plans, policies and procedures. The most of the companies in both fields don't have risk management plans, policies, and procedures or plans for emergency situations in regard to the employees (80% and 66.7% respectively), most probably because those plans have not been legally bound until recently. Nevertheless, it can be seen that more high technologies companies than information technologies companies include those plans, because of the nature of their business. The results can be seen at Table 2.

Table 2. Human resources and business policies and procedures (Source: authors)

Period		March	
Variables	Industry	Yes	No
My company has the business plan for the 2020 that includes human resources plan	IT	10	/
	HT	9	/
My company has human resources management function	IT	8	2
	HT	6	3
My company has human resources management position	IT	0	10
	HT	0	9
My company has written human resources management policies, procedures, and plans	IT	7	3
	HT	1	8
My company has risk management policies, procedures, and plans	IT	2	8
	HT	3	6
My company has a plan for emergency situations regarding the employees included in the risk management policies, procedures, and plans	IT	2	8
	HT	2	7

In regard to the ability to retain and reward the employees, all of the companies in the field of information technologies in both periods have stated that they have the ability to continue their business plans for 2020. Regarding the high technologies companies, the situation has been entirely different. Only 22.2% of the companies in March and only one company (11.1%) in May have believed in their ability to continue business plans for 2020.

In March, all companies in information technologies field have believed to be able to retain all the employees, with only one that changed the statement in May. In high technologies, 44.4% in March already have believed not to be able to retain all the employees and that percentage decreased even more in May (22.2%).

The most of the information technologies companies (80%) have believed in their ability to retain the bonuses with slight May decrease (70%). And the most of those companies have believed to be able to retain regular wages, namely 90% in May and 90% in May.

Completely different situation has been for high technologies field. Only one interviewee in March (11.1%) have believed that they would be able to retain the bonuses, and in May, all the participants from the field of high technologies have believed that they won't be able to retain bonuses. It is similar for regular wages, 22.2% of interviewees in March and only one in May have believed to be able to retain regular wages.

Understandably, the complete opposite attitudes have been expressed for the online (core) business possibilities, because none of the high technologies companies is able to have exclusively online core business, but all information technologies' companies are.

Similarly, in regard to possibility of management and administration to be able to function online there is a discrepancy. All of the information technologies' participants have believed that their companies are able to continue managerial and administrative functions completely online (both in March and May), it has been different for high technologies companies, where in March 44.4% of participants have stated that they would be able to continue managerial and administrative function online in March, and only one in May. Some of the participants have stated that that their administrative and managerial function requires a lot of physical presence.

The results can be seen at Table 3.

Table 3. the ability to retain and reward the employees (Source: authors)

Period		March		May	
Vriables	Industry	Yes	No	Yes	No
The ability to continue the business plan for the 2020	IT	10	0	10	0
	HT	2	7	1	8
The ability to retain all the employees	IT	10	0	9	1
	HT	4	5	2	7
The ability to retain the bonuses for the employees	IT	8	2	7	3
	HT	1	8	0	9
The ability to retain regular wages for the employees	IT	10	0	9	1
	HT	2	7	1	8
The ability to retain essential (core) employees during/after pandemic	IT	10	0	10	0
	HT	4	5	2	7
The ability for online business (core bussiness)	IT	10	0	10	0
	HT	0	9	0	9
The ability for enabling the employees to work online during/after the pandemic (administration and management)	IT	10	0	10	0
	HT	4	5	8	1

The attitudes toward the acceptance of possible financial governments' aid in March in May have not been changed. None of the participants have stated that they would apply (or has applied) or government's aid.

The results can be seen at Table 4.

Table 4. Government's financial aid acceptance

Period		March		May	
Vriables	Industry	Yes	No	Yes	No
My company will accept/has accepted financial government's assistance	IT	0	10	0	10
	HT	0	9	0	9

Because none of the participants have stated that they would be willing to accept the possible government aid, the reasons for that thinking have been further investigated in May interviews. There is a huge gap in the reasons for declining the government's aid package. Information industry representatives have stated that regarding the human resources they are quite capable to overcome the crisis. However, the representatives of high technologies have stated that the government's aid won't help them, because they wouldn't be able to continue even in those circumstances.

The results can be seen at Table 5.

Table 5. Some reasons for not accepting the government's aid

Information technologies companies	High technologies companies
We are able to reward our employees	Our supply chain is disrupted
We are even able to continue with the bonuses	Our market is significantly decreased
Our business has not been affected	We had to dismiss most of our employees
Other companies need more help	We are not able to honour the conditions of the government's aid package

5. Limitations and scope of further research

This research includes the sample that is small, further research is needed and this very important issue calls for larger sample, survey and operation of various statistical methods.

6. Conclusion

Most of the micro and small companies don't have organized human resources management sector or a designated position with responsibilities in the field of human resources management. Moreover, those companies also don't have risk management or human resources management plans that include retention of the employees in crisis situations such as a pandemic.

According to the owners and general managers of micro, and small businesses in the field of information technologies, there is different situation in coping with the retention of the employees between the two industries; even both are based on high end information technologies, high technologies, and innovation. Micro and small companies in the field of information technologies have been, because of the nature of their work, less affected by the disruptions caused by pandemic and the state of emergency, and the micro and small companies in the field of high technologies have not been able to cope with the effects of pandemic because of disruptions in supply chain and loss of a market.

Although the sample is small, it can be concluded that micro and small businesses have been unprepared for this crisis, but that in terms of human resource management, especially when it comes to retention and rewarding employees, micro and small businesses in the field of information technologies have are able to overcome crises much easier than companies engaged in production (although they are utilizing high technologies) and to retain and reward the best talent.

Further research is needed with much larger sample, surveys and statistical analysis to further analyse this important topic.

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