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Aneta PACHURA¹
Krystyna KMIOTEK²
Małgorzata SMOLAREK³
Joanna DZIĘDZIORA⁴
Agnieszka RZEPKA⁵
Jarmila DUHÁČEK ŠEBESTOVÁ⁶

WORK SATISFACTION IN SMES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED COUNTRIES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

This article is based on empirical research conducted in SMEs in several countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, and Poland. The basis for empirical recognition was the assumption that it is possible to develop a positive attitude among employees towards work. The research problem concerned the search for the characteristics of the organizational environments of SMEs in the context of achieving job satisfaction. The research question was, “How and with what mechanisms can the positive attitudes of employees towards their work be strengthened?” To measure employees’ attitudes toward work, quantitative research was carried out using a questionnaire on a sample of 590 respondents. The key dimensions of satisfaction in the workplace were analyzed; these included the quality of management processes, social communication, interpersonal relations, remuneration or self-realization, and fulfillment of competence potential. Summing up the results of the empirical research, it is worth emphasizing that SME employees noticed many different factors affecting, to a greater or lesser extent, their perceptions of professional satisfaction. Among these, they most often mentioned detailed elements of the general context of achieving satisfaction in relation to, for example, individual abilities and skills, interpersonal relationships, communication processes, and reward and motivation systems.

Keywords: job satisfaction, workplace, job satisfaction factors, SME, CEE.

¹ Aneta Pachura, Czestochowa University of Technology, Poland; e-mail: aneta.pachura@wz.pcz.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-3505-8934.

² Krystyna Kmiotek, Rzeszow University of Technology, Poland; e-mail: krysiakk@prz.edu.pl (corresponding author). ORCID: 0000-0002-0760-8380.

³ Małgorzata Smolarek, Humanitas University, Poland; e-mail: malgorzata.smolarek@humanitas.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-3766-8843.

⁴ Joanna Dzieńdziora, WSB University, Poland; e-mail: jdziendziora@wsb.edu.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-0498-656X.

⁵ Agnieszka Rzepka, Lublin University of Technology, Poland; e-mail: a.rzepka@pollub.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-4495-6066.

⁶ Jarmila Duháček Šebestová, Silesian University in Opava, Czech Republic; e-mail: sebestova@opf.slu.cz. ORCID: 0000-0002-7493-0759.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of job satisfaction is one of the key areas of theoretical and empirical research undertaken by social sciences (Wright, 2015). The broad interest in this subject is based not only on the context of theoretical description, but above all on the practice of creating a friendly organizational environment for business through development of new forms of working, improving social communication and establishing interpersonal relationships, as well as self-realization and using the potential of employees' competences. We are seeing a paradigm shift in understanding development as economic growth and social satisfaction as satisfaction with financial conditions toward economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Manioudis, Meramveliotakis, 2022; Tomislav, 2018). In this context, work satisfaction is considered a key and comprehensive challenge for organization management systems (Aziri, 2011).

Since 1969, there has been an increase in interest in research on job satisfaction. At the same time, it is emphasized that the research effort of theoreticians and practitioners still does not fully translate into a sufficient and satisfactory understanding of this issue from the point of view of business practice, which in turn is justified by the behavior of "correlation without explanation" (Locke, 1969). Undoubtedly, job satisfaction is a multi-faceted topic with many dimensions and meanings. After all, this issue is directly related to the psychological conditions of man, among others. Therefore, research in this area is often ambiguous and it becomes extremely difficult to build generalizations and universal theories (Waltz et al., 2020).

Many organizations choose business sustainability to meet environmental, social, and financial demands to ensure responsible and long-term success (Hellriegel et al., 1995). Corporate sustainability is an important and widely discussed topic of research and consideration in many academic streams and business practices. One approach to sustainability and business balancing is the issue of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework (Lange, 2009; Tomislav, 2018). Social issues related to job satisfaction are some expressions of the sustainability of business performance, this is important in both corporations and small and medium-sized enterprises. In countries with lower levels of institutional development and governance, socio-environmental sustainability of business especially needs to be responsible in small and medium-sized enterprises. This is also one of the reasons and objective for engaging in the research described in this article, which focuses on selected Eastern European countries and the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. Today's organisations show interest in employee development and job satisfaction (Dhamija et al., 2019; Gross-Gołacka et al., 2022; Soboleva, 2022; Smolarek, Dzieńdziora, 2022). Taking care of job satisfaction is part of this trend. In the global literature, the subject of job satisfaction is still in the center of interest of many theoreticians and practitioners conducting theoretical and empirical research on the recognition of detailed issues related to the functioning of employees in the social world of organizations.

Referring to surveys on the quality of life of EU residents (Quality of life in Europe, 2015), it can be observed that nearly 20% of employees admit to a low level of job satisfaction (19.4%) and less than 25% are highly satisfied (24.8%). By far the highest number of answers reflects an average level of job satisfaction. Taking into account the average rating of job satisfaction, a noticeable decrease in satisfaction was noted in five EU countries – Lithuania, Slovakia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Denmark – in 2018 compared to 2013. The highest levels of the indicator in 2018, significantly above the

average for EU countries, were recorded for Austria, Finland, Norway and Switzerland (Quality of life in Europe, 2015).

In the face of numerous theoretical and empirical studies conducted in various scientific fields and disciplines, as well as the results of analyses of job satisfaction in the EU countries, it can be assumed that further detailed exploration of the phenomenon of work transformation as one of the key aspects of human life is still valid and necessary. Job satisfaction surveys in social sciences are conducted, among others, in the area of human resources management, building and managing creative teams, developing unique competences of organizations, and so on. It seems interesting to look for different dimensions not only of the description of the problem of achieving job satisfaction, but above all ways to improve employee satisfaction.

The theoretical and empirical considerations undertaken in the paper were focused on the interpretation of the issue of job satisfaction from the point of view of the analysis of factors reflecting quality of management processes, social communication, interpersonal relationships, remuneration, self-realization, and the use of competence potential. The aim of the study is to identify factors determining the achievement of professional satisfaction with an indication of their importance for driving positive attitudes of employees towards their work. The research was conducted in an international environment, in a group of SMEs (EC definition) in selected countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The selected European countries are characterized by similar levels of economic development but most importantly have very similar cultural capital and historical trajectories (Lange, 2009). The paths of social, environmental, and economic transformation were very similar through a shared history of socialist period, deep transformation, accession to the European Union and current problems of structural adaptation.

Bearing in mind remote work, or digitalization of workspaces, an attempt to identify factors that are most important from the perspective of the level of job satisfaction seems all the more necessary. Currently, working from home is becoming a new research area. The development of teleworking and, thus, the search for opportunities to achieve satisfaction with this form of work, is currently a serious challenge for both the organizational environment and for private lives of employees. The fact is that remote work negatively affects the work-life balance (Bellmann, Hübler, 2020). In addition, another interesting research field is determined by the phenomenon of digitization of workspaces and its impact on achieving job satisfaction (Silic et al., 2020).

2. STATE OF THE ART ON JOB SATISFACTION – A LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the literature study authors present selected models for the interpretation of job satisfaction. The four examples of models have a cognitive function and each of them presents a different optics on the influence of elements affecting and driving the state and attitude of the employee towards work.

In the coupling model, the employee achieves a state of satisfaction with remuneration for work adequate to the expected level (Table 1). The value of remuneration and awards received is satisfactory and, what is important, fair and appropriate to the effort put into the performance of tasks and duties. The effort is commensurate with the result achieved, which increases the likelihood of professional success.

The perspective of the contextual approach allows you to capture satisfaction as a set of coexisting factors (Table 1):

- The context of work as an intellectual challenge and a source of achieving satisfactory results and a starting point for a satisfactory level of remuneration.
- The context of the objectives with an emphasis on the need to strive for consistency of own and the organization's goals with consent to autonomy in action and maintaining stability of employment.
- The context of physical working conditions satisfying the individual needs of the employee, resulting from the position held, the content of the work performed, etc.
- Interpersonal context where interpersonal relationships based on respect, understanding and negotiation enhance a positive attitude to work.

Table 1. Retrospection of selected models of interpretation of job satisfaction

Model	Detailed interpretation
“Feedback/coupling” model (Vroom, 1964)	Work satisfaction as a consequence of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The value of the expected and fair reward • The probability of achieving success • Effort commensurate with the result
“Contextual” model (Vlosky & Aguilar, 2009)	Job satisfaction as a resultant of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual challenges and results achieved • Consistency of own goals with general objectives (of the organization) • Physical working conditions in accordance with needs • Fair and adequate remuneration • Degree of autonomy and stability of employment • Working atmosphere: mutual respect and no conflicts • Attitudes of superiors towards achieved results
“System” model (Lumley et al., 2011)	Job satisfaction as a complex and multidimensional construct: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction with the amount of remuneration and the scale of growth • Satisfaction with additional benefits for employees, including awards • Satisfaction with personal development and social status • Satisfaction with social relations in the workplace (formal and informal) • Satisfaction with the applicable internal procedures
„Socially interactive” model (Davis, 2004; Vladimirova, 2008; Viviers, et al., 2015; Maulabakhsh, 2015; Basma, Fais & Yeoh, 2017; et al.)	Satisfaction as an impact of the social work environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and proper supervision of management • Identification of objectives, tasks and responsibilities • An unambiguous and fair system: assessment, remuneration and motivation • Training program adequate to the needs and capabilities • An atmosphere conducive to engagement and inclusivity • Participation in decision-making processes • Climate of creation, multiplication and use of knowledge • Culture of strengthening and using the potential of creativity • Culture of personal development and teamwork • Flexible working time • Transparency of rules and stability of employment, etc.

Source: Own study based on: (Vroom, 1964; Vlosky, Aguilar, 2009; Lumley et al., 2011; Weiss, 2002; Davis, 2004; Jun et al., 2006; Vladimirova, 2008; Raziq, Maulabakhsh, 2015; Viviers et al., 2015, Basma et al., 2017).

Job satisfaction as a complex and multidimensional construct identifies the architecture of the system in which interrelated elements can be distinguished. These elements constitute a whole that achieves the set goal, which is a positive attitude of the employee towards the work performed. Among them, the following stand out: Salary including bonuses and ancillary employee benefits, personal development and social status, social relations in the workplace and internal procedures applicable at the management level, and position held (Table 1). The “socially interactive” model reflects the state of social working conditions for achieving job satisfaction, position, tasks and job responsibilities performed, and career path (Table 1). Particularly noteworthy are: interpersonal capabilities as interpersonal relationships, participation, inclusivity, etc.; organizational capabilities, i.e. a set of goals, division of tasks and responsibilities, remuneration, motivation and evaluation of work; cognitive capabilities, i.e. training, transfer of knowledge and skills, creativity and so on.

Bearing in mind the theoretical considerations undertaken so far, aimed at the interpretation of satisfaction in the workplace, it seems reasonable to present the conclusions of empirical research carried out in the international environment at a later stage. Hence, the study covered key dimensions of satisfaction, such as: quality of management processes, social communication, interpersonal relationships, remuneration, self-fulfillment and use of competence potential.

There are three basic groups among satisfaction factors: organizational, social and personal (Gros, 2012). Organizational factors are directly related to work. These include the type of tasks performed by the employee (e.g. their level of difficulty), pay (it should be adequate to the employee’s obligations and his involvement), promotion prospects, work safety, organization’s functioning policy (taking care of employees and their needs) and policy of organization development (Rzepka et al., 2023). Social factors include determinants that refer to the following: organizational climate (an organization should create a good working climate), mutual respect (no criticism of people, listening to each other, respecting each others’ views), arrangements with superiors and colleagues (there should be a desire to bring help, mutual friendliness) and customer relations. In turn, personal factors involve workers’ individual characteristics that a company has no influence on. These include individual properties, such as age, gender, race, intelligence, use of skills and professional experience at work (Schultz and Schultz, 2008). For SMEs, the importance of a working environment in which employees are part of the overall decision-making process becomes particularly important. Flexible working hours, less workload, the right approach to teamwork and management support have a positive impact on the employee performance. This leads to a high level of employee satisfaction, thanks to which staff can become more involved in the company’s activities, more motivated to work harder and more willing to work more efficiently, which can bring benefits to their enterprises in the long run. Thus, job satisfaction in SMEs has a direct and positive impact on internal entrepreneurship (Schunoe et al., 2015).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Context of the study. Empirical studies of job satisfaction were conducted in accordance with the following research procedure: adoption of the research assumption and formulation of the research problem; definition of the purpose of the research and the research question; determination of the test sample and selection of the test method; implementation of the survey and interpretation.

The interview questionnaire was prepared by the authors within the framework of inter-institutional cooperation in the spring of 2022. The purpose was to methodically discuss the design of the interview questionnaire and the procedure for performing surveys to maintain the reliability of the research. The database of companies' (respondents') email addresses was assembled in July-August 2022 through a search by the authors for addresses posted on each company's website. The research was carried out from September to December 2022. A total of 1000 online questionnaire were sent to respondents and 590 valid questionnaire were returned. Therefore, the effectiveness of returning completed questionnaire was 59%. The authors of this article, with institutional support from their universities, were responsible for managing and administration the data as well as organizing the study procedure. All calculations were performed in SPSS Statistics 29.

Purpose of the study and research question. The basis for empirical recognition was the following research assumption: it is possible to develop a positive attitude of employees towards work. The research problem concerned the search for the characteristics of the organizational environment of SMEs in the context of achieving job satisfaction.

The aim of the research was to identify the factors to the greatest extent determining the achievement of professional satisfaction. The following research question was asked: "How and with what mechanisms can positive attitudes of employees towards their work be strengthened?"

To measure attitudes of employees to work, quantitative research was carried out using a questionnaire. The choice of the research tool was deliberate, and its legitimacy is expressed primarily by the possibility of conducting general and in-depth comparative analyses, systematizing the list of individual and subjective opinions of respondents and preparing rankings in percentage terms.

The key dimensions of workplace satisfaction were explored in the research process. The analysis covered both general attitudes of employees towards their work, relationships, communication, remuneration systems, motivation and employment in their organizations, as well as detailed elements describing the context of achieving satisfaction in relation to individual abilities and skills, interpersonal relationships, communication processes and reward and motivation systems.

Research sample. Empirical research was conducted for an international environment, among employees of SEMs in four countries of Central and Eastern Europe: Czechia, Slovakia, Lithuania and Poland. Detailed characteristics are shown in Table 2.

The selection of countries arose in an attempt to capture certain regularities and differences in geographic and historical areas associated with similar context of development trajectories. Central and Eastern European countries, such as, for example - Poland Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Lithuania, have experienced similar historical phenomena in recent decades. From the struggles for independence and socio-national identity at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the unbearable impact of World War II, the occupation of the Soviet Union (Lithuania was even part of the Soviet Union), to the breakthrough of freedom and joint entry into the European Union (2004).

Table 2. Characteristics of the research sample

research sample = 590 (100%)		
Characteristics describing respondents participating in the survey:		
AGE	up to 25 years old	13.9%
	26–35 years old	11.9%
	36–45 years old	37.8%
	46–55 years old	34.2%
	over 55 years old	2.2%
EDUCATION	Higher	45.6%
	Secondary	38.5%
	Vocational	15.9%
SENIORITY	up to 5 years	11.9%
	5–10 years	27.3%
	11–20 years	32.2%
	21–30 years	18.5%
	over 30 years	10.3%
POSITION HELD	Managerial	7.6%
	Employee	92.4%
Characteristics describing enterprises covered by the survey:		
company size by number of employees	micro-enterprise (0–9)	34.7%
	small enterprise (10–49)	51.0%
	medium enterprise (50–249)	14.2%
country of the company activity	Poland	33.7%
	Lithuania	21.0%
	The Czech Republic	23.1%
	Slovakia	22.2%

Source: Own study based on empirical research.

Therefore, it seems that research aimed at obtaining answers on the topic of similarities and dissimilarities in the perception of job satisfaction is sufficiently justified and contributes to filling the research gap. In addition, it should be mentioned that, like other countries, employment in the sphere of small and medium-sized enterprises (including micro enterprises) is dominant in these countries. At the same time, it should be noted that research on a sample of four (or less) countries and a similar group of interviewees, in the context of job satisfaction is not isolated (Kirkman, Shapiro, 2017; De Witte, Näswall, 2003; Eskildsen et al., 2004; Schlaegel et al., 2022).

4. RESULTS

The empirical research started with asking a question about the general attitude of employees towards their work. The survey shows that nearly 73% of the respondents were satisfied, including almost 6% who gave affirmative answers (and nearly 67% opted for a rather satisfactory attitude). Almost 4% of the respondents did not feel full professional satisfaction.

In the empirical studies there was a relationship between job satisfaction and country of residence. A vast majority of the respondents living in Slovakia considered their work

to be satisfactory (as evidenced by the sum of the percentages obtained for the “yes” and “rather yes” answers: 74.05% and 9.92%, respectively). Against this background, the Lithuanians took the second position. On the other hand, residents of Czechia turned out to be ones the most dissatisfied with their work (Table 3). The results are similar to those of the research carried out in previous years (more in Smolarek, Sułkowski, 2020).

Table 3. Declared attitudes towards work in the surveyed countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

Declared attitudes towards work	The Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland	Lithuania	OVERALL
	(data in %)				
Yes	16.9	9.9	7.5	7.3	10.2
Rather yes	48.5	74.0	68.3	71.8	65.8
Rather no	14.0	8.4	9.0	10.5	10.3
No	20.6	7.6	15.1	10.5	13.7
OVERALL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own study based on empirical research.

The level of satisfaction of the surveyed employees of enterprises in Slovakia was due to the existing relationships and communication. Not without significance was also the motivation system, where the lowest ratings were given by Slovaks (Table 4). In Lithuania, satisfaction was primarily a result of satisfaction with relationships. The least important factor was satisfaction with the motivation system. In Poland and Czechia, employees reported the highest degree of satisfaction with communication, and the lowest for remuneration.

Table 4. Satisfaction with individual factors driving the level of employee satisfaction in the surveyed countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

	The Czech Republic		Slovakia		Poland		Lithuania		Overall	
	Yes and rather yes	Rather not and not	Yes and rather yes	Rather not and not	Yes and rather yes	Rather not and not	Yes and rather yes	Rather not and not	Yes and rather yes	Rather not and not
	(data in %)									
Satisfaction with relations	56.6	43.4	80.9	19.1	61.8	38.2	73.4	26.6	67.3	32.7
Satisfaction with communication	60.3	39.7	74.0	26.0	76.4	23.6	55.6	44.4	67.8	32.2
Satisfaction with remuneration systems	38.2	61.8	62.6	37.4	49.2	50.8	58.9	41.1	51.7	48.3
Satisfaction with motivation systems	55.1	44.9	55.0	45.0	56.3	43.7	51.6	48.4	54.7	45.3

Source: Own study based on empirical research.

Analyzing the distribution of the responses in terms of the impact of the individual factors on the level of satisfaction, satisfaction with the relations prevailing in the company

was relatively best rated by Slovaks and worst by Czechs (Table 4). Satisfaction with communication in the organizational environment was most appreciated in Poland and the least by in Lithuania. The highest level of satisfaction with remuneration systems was achieved in Slovakia (and the lowest in Czechia). On the other hand, satisfaction with motivation systems was declared primarily by respondents from Poland.

In Slovakia, professional development (92.4%) and career in the work environment (77.1%) were among the most important factors influencing the level of satisfaction with the possibility of using abilities and skills in the work environment. On the other hand, facilities for participation in various scopes, ways and forms of improving professional qualifications were mentioned the least frequently (Table 5). Employees of Lithuanian SMEs identified knowledge of expectations in the workplace (76.6%) and career development opportunities (75.0%) in the first place. They paid the least attention to the correspondence between their position and their own vision of professional development (42.7%). The most important factors in Poland included clearly and comprehensibly defined responsibilities (76.4%) and professional development (71.4%). In turn, in the opinion of Czech employees, these were the opportunity for development and knowledge of expectations in the workplace (79.4% and 76.5% respectively).

Table 5. Factors influencing satisfaction with the possibility of using abilities and skills at in the surveyed countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

	The Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland	Lithuania
	(data in %)			
I know what I am expected to do at work	76.5	68.7	65.8	76.6
My tasks are clearly defined	57.4	70.2	66.3	65.3
My responsibilities are clearly defined	74.3	75.6	76.4	66.1
Professional development is important for me	59.6	92.4	71.4	72.6
My current position is consistent with my career vision	53.7	70.2	61.8	42.7
I know possible career paths in my workplace improvement to its employees	79.4	77.1	71.4	75.0
The company facilitates qualification	33.8	42.7	80.4	62.9
I participate in training financed by the company	40.4	51.1	64.8	45.2
I see my own career opportunities in the perspectives of development of the organization	50.0	59.5	56.8	74.2

Source: Own study based on empirical research.

Satisfaction with relations in the organizational environment of enterprises was most influenced by such factors as trust in the supervisor in Slovakia, the possibility of openly expressing one's own views and opinions in Lithuania and in Czechia, no anxiety about of talking to the supervisor about difficult matters in Poland (Table 6).

Table 6. Factors influencing satisfaction with relations in the organizational environment of enterprises in the surveyed countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

	The Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland	Lithuania
	(data in %)			
I like my supervisor's management style	41.2	63.4	61.8	56.5
I trust my supervisor	44.1	71.0	56.8	51.6
I get working support from my supervisor	43.4	58.8	62.8	54.8
My supervisor is open to new suggestions and ideas	49.3	64.9	60.8	54.0
There is a freedom of expressing one's views in the company	56.6	70.2	65.3	59.7
I may always talk to my supervisor about my work problems	51.5	66.4	63.8	43.5
I am not anxious to talk about difficult matters with my supervisor	53.7	64.9	69.8	44.4
My supervisor communicates me criticism without witnesses	45.6	68.7	51.8	57.3

Source: Own study based on empirical research.

The research on employee satisfaction factors in selected European countries applied a four-element model, with a primary focus on the remuneration system in the context of satisfaction as a complex and multidimensional construct.

When analyzing the answers given by the respondents on satisfaction with the remuneration system in enterprises, the answers focused on the following relations to the greatest extent (Table 7): 1. Between qualification level and salary (78.6% and 57.4% in Slovakia and Czechia, respectively). 2. Between performance at work and salary (63.7% and 67.3% in Lithuania and Poland respectively).

Table 7. Factors influencing satisfaction with the remuneration system in enterprises in the surveyed countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

	The Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland	Lithuania
	(data in %)			
My remuneration is adequate to my efforts	36.8	70.2	65.8	63.7
My results affect my remuneration	49.3	76.3	67.3	58.9
My qualification improvement is reflected in my remuneration	57.4	78.6	56.8	59.7

Source: Own study based on empirical research.

Not without significance was also the factor describing the employee's effort in the work performed, which had a direct reflection in remuneration. In three countries – Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia – more than 60% of the respondents declared that the remuneration received was commensurate with the effort and commitment. On the other

hand, a worryingly low rating was obtained in Czechia, where only 36.8% of the respondents saw such relationship.

The research confirms that the incentive system in enterprises in many cases satisfies employees of SMEs. The results of the assessment make it possible to identify the factors with the greatest impact. Among them were the following (Table 8):

- The system of praise of employees for the workdone (e.g. in Slovakia).
- Motivation by the immediate supervisor (e.g. in Slovakia).
- Recognizing the effort and commitment of the employee at work and, consequently, the opportunity to receive commendation (e.g. in Lithuania).
- The clearly defined and well-known incentive system completed by informal customs of activating and cheering employees on by their immediate superiors (e.g. in Poland) or giving commendation for the work done (e.g. in Czechia).

Table 8. Factors influencing satisfaction with the incentive system in enterprises in the surveyed countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

	The Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland	Lithuania
	(data in %)			
The motivation system is clearly defined	53.7	59.5	77.9	42.7
The motivation system rules are clear	63.2	59.5	75.4	41.9
My superior motivates me to work better	56.6	64.1	80.4	50.8
The company notices what I do	53.7	61.1	71.9	63.7
I am praised for good work	67.6	69.5	76.4	59.7

Source: Own study based on empirical research.

To give an employee satisfaction, work should provide him with the opportunity to develop, i.e. satisfy the need for self-fulfillment. This is an extremely difficult task for managers, as there are individual differences in the understanding of self-fulfillment by employees. However, the point is that work allows employees to use their potential and show initiative.

5. DISCUSSION

Satisfaction is an extremely complex topic describing a person's attitude to the work performed. In a sense, it reflects the degree of happiness felt by the employee while fulfilling their professional duties. It is a level of satisfaction that triggers a sense of success and joy in professional development, which in turn reinforces identification and a sense of belonging to the profession and workplace. Achieving satisfaction depends on many factors, such as the possibility of self-development, relations with colleagues and management, communication, remuneration and motivation systems. It is worth emphasizing that achieving satisfaction often determines the possibility of active involvement and real inclusion in the work environment, which in turn implies a positive attitude of the employee towards the position, duties performed, profession and company.

Already in studies conducted in the early 1970s, it turned out that the results regarding job satisfaction among industrial employees were not easy to interpret and, as Form (Form,

1973) notes, sometimes contradicted existing theories. Kirkman et al. (Kirkman, Shapiro, 2017) analyzes in his research the issues of cultural values in job satisfaction, referring to the classic division of cultures by Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980). However, it analyzes different cultural circles in four countries, in the case of this research we are dealing with a similar cultural circle, also in four countries (Central and Eastern Europe), so there are differences in the obtained research results divided into individual countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania) are not too large. Schlaegel et al. (Schlaegel et al., 2022) examine the links between job satisfaction and emotional intelligence in three countries, the results are inconclusive and indicate that different dimensions of emotional intelligence influence different aspects of job satisfaction. Eskildsen et al. (Eskildsen et al., 2004) report the results of their research in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland), which show that Danes are the most satisfied employees among the Nordic countries. At the same time, they point out that the obtained research results (Eskildsen et al., 2004) are not clear, and sometimes even contradictory. This confirms the observation of the authors of this article that very often the results of international job satisfaction surveys are difficult to interpret unambiguously and often defy simple explanations. De Witte and Näswall in their research conducted in four European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Sweden) on temporary work, job satisfaction and organizational commitment also do not obtain clear results (De Witte, Näswall, 2003). Although the results are more clear in terms of the negative aspects of temporary work on job satisfaction, discrepancies can be noticed in the case of other dimensions of job satisfaction in these four countries.

As Borooah notes „there was considerably greater inequality in the distribution of job satisfaction in East European, compared to West European, countries” (Borooah, 2009). Studies of central and eastern European countries indicate that culture and historical heritage and traditional values are somewhat more important in assessing job satisfaction than in western European countries (Fargher et al., 2008). Labor culture in East Central European countries is less entrenched than in stronger and older democracies. This is due to historical conditions involving the revolutionary entry into the liberal market area in the early 1990s. At that time, these countries were dominated by a system based on very Darwinist rules. Of course, since then, the system of work culture in these countries has strongly evolved however, all the time there are significant differences between the work culture of Western and East-Central European countries. One such very characteristic factor is the relatively low degree of interpersonal trust affecting, for example, teamwork and joint achievement of group results. At the same time, these countries are seeing major changes in relation to traditional values such as religion and family. It can be seen especially in Poland, Slovakia, traditionally Catholic societies are changing towards more open societies, which also applies to the perception of work and the ethos of the profession and work as more flexible and mobile.

Exploration of the issues of achieving and influencing the level of employee satisfaction with their work is a serious challenge in social sciences. The subject matter seems extremely interesting, but still, in the context of empirical inference, quite non-obvious and difficult to generalize. Most often, the issue of job satisfaction is addressed either in general, or by sector or profession, such as satisfaction in the hotel industry, construction services, or the work of teachers, medical personnel, etc. (MacIntosh, Doherty, 2010; Lee-Peng et al., 2021; Ghazi, Muzaffar, 2018; Sadeghi et al., 2013), much less are studies covering SMS specifically. The importance of organizational culture in job satisfaction at SMS is often pointed out (Ariani, 2023). This is most likely due to the fact that corporations

have the structural attribute of producing an organizational culture, a corporate culture, while SMS are often associated with a lack of culture or a culture shaped by the business practices (Pimentel, 2018) of the owner of a small or micro enterprise. Despite many limitations, these research results seem to increase the knowledge about the phenomenon of achieving job satisfaction in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. As noted, Lange (Lange, 2009) research of this type is not widespread enough and new knowledge is constantly needed, especially in the context of changing social, economic and ecological conditions.

6. SUMMARY

The job satisfaction surveys were conducted among SME employees in four selected CEE countries: Slovakia, Lithuania, Poland and Czechia. These are not all countries in this part of Europe, but it seems that the test is a good attempt to present new knowledge about job satisfaction in this region (Kirkman, Shapiro, 2017; De Witte, Näswall, 2003; Eskildsen et al., 2004; Schlaegel et al., 2022). The distribution of the research results shows geographic variation. A vast majority of respondents living in Slovakia perceived their work as satisfying. On the other hand, respondents from Czechia expressed their dissatisfaction, relative to other countries, which was reflected in the lowest percentage of professionally satisfied people. The high level of satisfaction in Slovakia was most influenced by satisfactory relations in the organizational environment and efficient and effective communication systems, although not without significance was also the subjective assessment of the forms and practices of principles and rules of motivation. In Lithuania, the high level of professional satisfaction mainly reflected the state of satisfaction with relationships. It was least conditioned by the attitude and by the perception of the incentive system. In the context of the assessment of the individual factors, the highest level of satisfaction with communication was observed in Poland and Czechia. The weakest link in the chain was the remuneration system, which was rated the worst. Despite the limitation of the research sample size ($n = 590$), it seems that the theoretical and empirical diagnosis may contribute to a detailed investigation into the issues of achieving and building professional satisfaction. It is true that observations and conclusions from the research in accordance with the research procedure has measured the levels of satisfaction in only four countries: Slovakia, Lithuania, Poland and Czechia. They may be taken as a kind of background for studying the premises and problems of wellbeing. Because it is hard not to agree that the subject of wellbeing corresponds to achieving a state of satisfaction, i.e. simply feeling satisfaction with the work performed and the effects achieved. However, it is worth emphasizing the significant impact of the environment, including workplace conditions, the atmosphere in the company, employee involvement, active and effective communication, support from leaders or the division of tasks according to qualifications, capabilities and abilities.

Summing up the results of the empirical research, it is worth emphasizing that SME employees notice many different factors affecting to a greater or lesser extent their perceptions of professional satisfaction. Among them, they most often mentioned detailed elements describing the general context of achieving satisfaction in relation to, for example, individual abilities and skills, interpersonal relationships, communication processes and reward and motivation systems. It is important not only to analyze the existing state but, above all, the possibility of improvement, development and reconfiguration as a manifestation of permanent investment in creating more friendly

conditions in the work environment. The basis is, among others, adaptation to the current and future needs of employees, intensification of activation, improvement of professional competences, etc. in response to contemporary characteristics of forms, ways and styles of performing business duties and achieving satisfaction with personal life. It is probably reasonable to assume that research on the issue of job satisfaction will continue in many research streams, especially with the increasing dominance of technology including artificial intelligence and emerging social projects like the basic income guarantee.

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