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Employees' dilemmas in the contemporary labor market

Dylematy pracowników na współczesnym rynku pracy

Introduction

The situation of employees in the contemporary labour market can be described by *change, confusion, understanding* and *reacting*. It is a logical cycle of events leading from a broadly understood change (technical, technological, social) to reacting to it, primarily in the individual, but also in the group dimension. In practice, the proposed four-element cycle may be limited to the relationship: change – confusion or change – confusion – understanding. Not all employees are ready to analyse their own situation in order to understand it or do not demonstrate the ability and motivation (energy) to react appropriately. It also happens that they do not notice changes or notice them with a long delay. From the market point of view, what is important is, of course, the reaction of employees to the changes taking place in their professional environment, which require, among others, support from employers, cooperation between employees and groups of employees, as well as openness to experience and

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high commitment of all people participating in a given area of professional activities (production, services, cooperation, transport, financial settlements).

Changes in the work environment

Changes occurring in the work environment are a permanent component of economic development, the result of progress in technology and techniques, methods of cooperation inside and outside enterprises, as well as competition and marketing. The progress in question may occur at different speeds and with different intensity. The changes we are currently witnessing have unprecedented dynamics, i.e. the speed and intensity mentioned, as well as the scope – they concern virtually all professions and job positions. The content of work is significantly modified due to the variability of professional tasks. Increasing automation and robotisation enriched with the possibilities offered by the increasingly common applications of artificial intelligence (AI) make it necessary to constantly supplement competences and acquire new qualifications (qualifications are understood as competences confirmed by appropriate certificates).

The competency requirements understood as sets of competences necessary “here and now” and, above all, sets of competences without which it is difficult to imagine the economic and social development, i.e., the competences of the future, can be considered using the following classification (Kwiatkowski, S. M., 2020, pp. 26–27):

- **general competences** acquired during formal education (the highest possible level of linguistic, mathematical, IT, social and civic competences);
- **general professional competences** (specific to formal education) common to groups of professions (designing, developing project implementation procedures, extensive use of IT tools, teamwork, creating teams and managing their work);
- **professional competences** resulting from the need to perform professional tasks (initially the domain of formal education, and later non-formal and informal education), having an area (industry) character;
- **specific professional competences** (developed primarily in the informal education process) related to:

- the possibility of transforming professional skills (along with technological changes),
- integration of knowledge and professional skills from various areas (industries);
- **general social competences** acquired in the course of informal education, during interactions with other participants of professional and social life (communication, self-presentation, conflict resolution, exerting social influence, negotiation, cooperation in a group, also multicultural, organization of own work, fulfilling various professional and social roles);
- **specific social competences** (based on informal education), such as:
 - empathy,
 - problem solving,
 - creativity,
 - flexibility of thinking,
 - emotional intelligence,
 - moral maturity, ethics,
 - courage,
 - openness to changes,
 - time management,
 - learning ability,
 - leadership.

As you can easily see, coping with changes in the work environment requires placing emphasis on non-formal and informal education. Until relatively recently, the basis for employees' education was formal education – school and university. There were times when the knowledge and skills acquired in schools and universities were sufficient to function effectively on the labour market for many years after graduation. Currently, we are dealing with a completely different situation. In many professions and specialties, new tasks, emerging rapidly, force a shift towards non-formal education (courses, training, workshops) and informal education. The core of the latter is the development of necessary competences during work, with the participation of more experienced employees who already have the necessary competences. This is a type of mentoring and reverse mentoring – mutual learning from each other, observing the work of other employees, drawing on their attitudes and behaviours while performing professional activities (from simple to complex).

Confusion

Confusion is a normal phenomenon in the face of high variability of the work environment. It is usually accompanied by anxiety related to concerns about one's own capabilities, primarily intellectual ones, in the process of implementing new professional tasks. A confused employee is a person full of anxiety, prone to low self-esteem. The excess of data that needs to be processed and structured and then used in practice is often paralysing for him or her. Lack of support from the employer and co-workers may lead to a feeling of loneliness and depression, and to a decrease in psychological well-being.

Confusion is usually accompanied by a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, which manifests itself in the lack of ideas for describing and explaining the changes taking place in the work environment. A confused employee cannot rationally diagnose the causes of the phenomena surrounding him or her and the problems they bring.

A specific type of helplessness is the learned helplessness, characterized by excessive pessimism towards oneself and the ability to overcome emerging difficulties (see: Mietzel, 2008, pp. 175–177). If an employee is convinced that the reason for feeling confused and then helpless is the level of his or her knowledge, skills and social competences that are difficult to improve, and he or she treats this triad as a constant (permanent cause), it means that he or she does not trust that he or she is able, due to self-education and all non-formal and informal education educational efforts, to move to a higher level of professional competences. However, he or she may try to achieve goals resulting from previously unknown conditions by working intensively on new professional tasks. Still, the making and success of this type of attempts is limited by the lack of confidence in one's own competences and excessive distance in relationships with other employees. And it is the contact with employees experiencing similar feelings that is an objectifying factor and gives hope to "come to terms with change".

Actions taken by the employer are important in the process of overcoming employee's confusion. Nothing prevents the employer from informing employees in advance about the need for changes, their essence and practical effects of their introduction, as well as about planned training and other forms of education. This type of information should be addressed to specific groups of employees and should have specific recipients. The employees will certainly

have a positive perception of all the employer's actions emphasizing his or her role in the transformation process, pointing to his or her subjectivity and indispensability for the company. This will help the employee gain confidence in his or her own professional potential and gradually overcome his or her confusion. This effect may also be strengthened by the exchange of experiences within employee organizations in a given industry and, obviously, by the support received from the closest people – family and friends.

Understanding

Understanding concerns both the employee's situation and the direction of changes in the work content. What is crucial for an employee's situation is the self-assessment of one's own strengths and weaknesses, considered in the context of individual knowledge, skills and social competences. On this basis, it becomes possible to conduct a competency assessment in the form of a comparison of one's own potential with the employer's expectations. Consultation with an educational and career advisor also seems advisable, as it could result in objectifying the situation in which the employee finds himself. The idea is to reduce the level of anxiety and help in reflective analysis of the employee's condition/position. It may lead to the conclusion that many employees of a given company are in a situation considered from an individual point of view. This facilitates a rational look at the changing role and place of the employee in the division of labour.

As already mentioned, educational and career advisors have an important role to play in understanding the employee's situation in the changing work environment. They have extensive knowledge about educational institutions and enterprises operating on the local and global labour market, and are also equipped with practical psychological skills – especially interpersonal ones. Thanks to this, they are able to help the employee identify his or her vocational personality type. This type is then compared to analogous types of work environment. Employee's self-awareness and self-knowledge – knowledge about one's own characteristics, interests, needs and value system – allows, with the support of a consultant, not only to identify the dominant type of vocational personality, but also to indicate the type of work environment corresponding to it. This is of fundamental importance in the process of understanding the specific conditions of the situation in which a given employee finds himself or

herself. It may turn out that the direction of changes introduced in the work environment is consistent with or close to the employee's vocational personality type, or that such compliance does not occur. In the first case, it will be easier for the employee to understand his or her situation and, above all, take action to adapt to the changes that await him or her as quickly as possible. It can be said that changes in the work environment aim to achieve compliance with the employee's vocational personality type. In the second case, we are dealing with a discrepancy between the employee's vocational personality type (identified together with the advisor) and the type of the changed work environment. Then, if we do not want to work in conditions of mental discomfort, there is nothing else to do, but to look for a different work environment, consistent with or similar to the vocational personality type represented by the employee.

If we want to understand the directions of changes in the content of work, we should make an effort to analyse the professions of the future, i.e., consider the professional tasks that will appear on the labour market in the near future. These tasks result not only from forecasts regarding the directions of development of the world economy, but also from predictable demographic changes, observed transformations of the social structure, immigration policy that is emerging before our eyes and the systematically improving quality of life. A synthetic approach to these changes allows us to distinguish professions that will undergo far-reaching modifications, as well as professions that are yet to be created. By limiting the considerations to technical professions, it is possible to indicate areas where there will probably be demand for knowledge and skills related to them in the coming years (Mydłowska, 2020, pp. 59–60).

Taking into account the directions set by Industry 4.0 and the idea of Society 5.0, we can try to identify new professional areas that require integrated digital competences from employees allowing the development of:

- Internet of Things, based on the automation and robotisation of production processes, as well as on the data exchange between machines connected in a network;
- Cloud computing, enabling access to shared resources;
- Smart Factories, supporting machines and employees, and facilitating the integration of various types of production resources;
- Cyber-Physical Systems (CPS), combining the computational layer with physical processes.

In all these areas, the study, experimental and partially implementation work is already being carried out, but this does not change the fact that a dynamic increase in jobs can only be expected in the future. It is difficult to predict what the names of the emerging professions will be. These are likely to be bioinformatics and biomedical engineers, cybersecurity specialists, artificial intelligence specialists, artificial intelligence ethics specialists, as well as specialists in renewable energy and climate change.

As shown by the above analyses, understanding the situation by an employee and determining the directions of changes in work content are not easy tasks. It is not easy to anticipate the future in conditions of uncertainty and lack of permanent reference points. Even a correct assessment of your own strengths and weaknesses does not guarantee that you will find your way in the ever-changing labour market.

Reacting

The last element of the analysed employee's situation on the labour market is the individually considered reaction to the changes. Let us note here that only the first element considered, i.e., change, is external to the employee. The vast majority of changes, occurring in the work environment, are either independent by the employee or are incidental in nature. This results from global tendencies to introduce changes and set their directions in specific areas of employees' professional activity. No single employee, or even large groups of employees associated in trade unions, is able to stop the changes occurring in the sphere of production and services – this applies not only to digitalization, automation and robotisation, but also to less spectacular technologies. In a market economy focused on profit, solutions that generate profit are sought. Scientists around the world are focusing their attention on new discoveries that are reaching the market from laboratories and design teams at an increasingly faster pace. High competition forces a constant pursuit of new solutions, technologies that enable the above-mentioned profit, but are also friendly to humans and the natural environment. The implementation of the universally accepted idea of sustainable development also influences its approach by the governments and economies of individual countries, creates new strategies for the production and exploitation of mine deposits, changes the perception of the natural environment importance, and, consequently, reduces gas emissions and expands the range of applications of alternative energy sources.

While emphasizing the externality of changes, it should be mentioned that there are certain groups of employees who influence the direction and depth of changes. These are the scientists and designers mentioned above, as well as organizers working at various levels of management. The future of the world depends largely on their knowledge and skills, enriched with creativity and responsibility, sometimes in a literal sense, if we take into account climate change and the research carried out to limit and control it. The remaining elements – confusion, understanding and reacting we are interested in at this moment – are the internal domain of the employee.

The way of reacting to changes depends on the set of individual characteristics of the employee, which make up his or her personality (Strelau, 2000, pp. 551–552; Zimbardo, Johnson and McCann, 2010, pp. 39–40). An employee with a high level of neuroticism will react differently to changes in the work environment than an employee with an equally high level of extroversion. The first one – a neurotic – will most likely not be willing to take any significant actions, but will rather withdraw into himself or herself and use a wait-and-see strategy, hoping that the situation will resolve itself and that the proposed change is reversible. What's worse, he or she will express his or her anger and show aggressive hostility towards co-workers who accept the changes, as well as employers who, in his or her opinion, are responsible for introducing changes – he or she will be embittered and frustrated. This attitude can be explained by a limited ability to cope with stress and make decisions in conditions of uncertainty (see: Kwiatkowski, S. T., 2018, pp. 193–196). Excessive self-criticism leading to a strong sense of inferiority in interactions with co-workers is also important. In turn, the latter – an extrovert – will welcome the change with open arms, as it is long overdue. He or she will hope that the new situation will allow him or her to present the full arsenal of his or her competences, will release his or her intellectual capital, previously imprisoned in the rigid and ossified framework of existing solutions, and will evoke positive emotions and creative excitement. His or her focus on gaining and developing social contacts, in correlation with cordiality, sociability and assertiveness, will result in effective involvement in various tasks resulting from the implementation of changes. In addition to the level of neuroticism and extroversion, openness to professional experiences has a significant impact on the attitude to change. An employee with a high level of this trait can be expected to have an equally high level of cognitive curiosity, high creativity

and creative imagination. Developed imagination allows him or her to realize the advantages of the changes introduced, anticipating their positive impact on increasing production and expanding the range of services offered. What is extremely important – employees who are open to experience are ready to take up new professional activities, value challenges more than routine work in accordance with well-known algorithms, and are able to contest the existing order and attempt to change it.

Only briefly discussed employee's characteristics (personality factors): neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience have a direct impact on synthetically understood reactions to the changes introduced. They manifest themselves in the following attitudes:

- negation (reluctance to change, finding flaws in the proposed solutions, discouraging co-workers, refusal to participate in projects aimed at change, looking for positions that do not require changes, in case of failure in the search – resignation from work);
- ambivalence (positive attitude towards some changes, negative attitude towards others, indecision in relation to all changes);
- acceptance (consent to changes, understanding the need to introduce them, cautious involvement in the process of making changes);
- affirmation (total and unconditional support for changes, motivating colleagues, leading changes).

The employee's reaction to changes also depends, in addition to the above-mentioned personality traits (factors), on the employer's attitude. It is the employer who decides on the pace and depth of changes, especially of an organizational nature, on the climate accompanying changes, and finally on educational support for employees. His tasks include shaping the atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration, conducive to the identification of employees with the company – this is important when implementing complex technological and organizational modifications. The sense of community facilitates going through a difficult period of transformation within the company and enables the reconstruction of cooperative ties with other enterprises. The employer can also stimulate and motivate employees to acquire new competences, necessary in the context of changes. In this regard, in-company training, courses in educational companies and internships in enterprises that have already implemented new technologies (identical or similar) play an important role. The employee should

feel that he or she is treated subjectively and that the employer appreciates his or her efforts to introduce changes. In practical terms, the employer should finance or at least co-finance (with the employee) training leaves, costs of training and courses, as well as part-time studies at schools and universities. Pre-emptive training, organized on the initiative of employers, is important for the pace of changes introduced / conducted several or even (in the case of complex implementation procedures) over a dozen months before the start of the implementation of new technologies. We encounter this situation very often in car manufacturing companies. Before starting the production or assembly of a new type of car in a domestic enterprise, employees are sent for training to enterprises that have sold appropriate licenses and, obviously, have more experience in the field in question.

There is no need to prove that the effectiveness of the changes introduced is largely determined by the level of employees' competences, primarily their knowledge and skills. As already mentioned, both knowledge and skills, as well as, to some extent, professional attitudes and behaviours, can be acquired and improved in non-formal and informal forms. Therefore, the thesis that the desired reaction to introduced or only planned changes is to undertake educational activities is justified. Among the various opportunities offered by the vocational education system in this area, it is worth paying attention to new institutions such as Industry Skills Centres (ISC).

The possibility of establishing Industry Skills Centres was indicated in the Act of August 30, 2023, amending the Education Law and certain other acts (Ustawa z dnia 30 sierpnia 2023 r. o zmianie ustawy *prawo oświatowe oraz niektórych innych ustaw*. Dz. U. poz. 2005). Article provision 117 concerns continuing education and introduces this type of institutions to the vocational and continuing education system. Their task is to integrate vocational and technical schools, existing continuing education institutions, vocational training centres, universities and other entities conducting educational activities in the field of vocational education and training, as well as to support cooperation with employers.

The basic functions of the ISC include:

- **educational and vocational** in the form of industry-specific vocational training, preparation of descriptions of new sector qualifications, preparatory courses and final professional examinations;

- **integrating and supporting** in the area of cooperation between schools, institutions and universities with employers;
- **innovation and development**, consisting in the dissemination of current knowledge, innovations and new technologies;
- **advisory and promotional** with activities, supporting the implementation of career counselling tasks for students and professional activation of students, doctoral students and graduates of all types of universities.

It is important that pupils, students, PhD students, teachers, lecturers and employees will be able to use the ISC program offer. As a result, we can expect integration of employers with continuing professional education institutions, as well as employees of various industries with students and research and teaching staff of universities. The integration in question may constitute an important component of informal education due to the exchange of experiences between groups diverse in terms of knowledge, skills and social competences. For the group of employees, we are interested in, dealing with changes in their workplaces, this type of integration, in addition to professional benefits, may result in psychological support and specific motivation resulting from inter-generational contacts. Employees with longer experience may be inspired by the enthusiasm of pupils and students, while employees with shorter experience may be inspired by the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills in the face of introduced and upcoming changes (Kwiatkowski, S. M., 2023).

Conclusions

The relationships between change, confusion, understanding and reaction, briefly indicated in this article, certainly require further theoretical analysis. It also seems necessary to undertake interdisciplinary research on the border of work pedagogy and work psychology. The presented issues are extremely important for the success of all economic and social reforms considered from the point of view of employees – the direct implementers of the introduced changes.

Abstract: The article concerns employees' situation on the contemporary labour market. In particular, the essence of changes in work environment and the competences necessary to carry them out were characterized. Subsequently, the attention was focused on the employees' confusion in the face of technological and organizational changes and on the conditions enabling the understanding of the goals and consequences of these changes. A separate place is devoted to the considerations on the ways of reacting to the changes occurring.

Keywords: change, confusion, understanding, reacting

Streszczenie: Artykuł jest poświęcony sytuacji pracowników na współczesnym rynku pracy. W szczególności scharakteryzowano istotę zmian w środowisku pracy oraz niezbędne do ich przeprowadzenia kompetencje. W dalszej kolejności skoncentrowano uwagę na zagubieniu pracowników w obliczu zmian technologicznych i organizacyjnych oraz na warunkach umożliwiających zrozumienie celów i konsekwencji tych zmian. Osobne miejsce zajmują rozważania na temat sposobów reakcji – zareagowania na występujące zmiany.

Słowa kluczowe: zmiana, zagubienie, zrozumienie, zareagowanie

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