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## **The Role of HR in the Crisis– HR Strategy of Today is the Success of Tomorrow**

### **1. Introduction**

In the last twenty years a lot of changes have taken place in our country's economy, and as a result enterprises have had to keep up with the changes in order to survive. The rapidly-changing economic environment and the inevitable influence of the global crisis has demanded continuous effort and readiness to adapt to radical changes. In the sector of large companies the role of the capital-intense foreign-owned companies is vastly important, and these foreign investments have brought fundamental changes not only in our country but all around the world; they have shaken the relations of property, production and employment structures.

The effectiveness and long-term survival of our domestic small and medium-sized companies depends unquestionably on an appropriate and well-structured human resources strategy. Structural changes and a new way of thinking are necessary to realize this. The goal is not only cost-effectiveness and technological re-orientation. The financial crisis, which started with the crisis in the American mortgage market and now has become global, shows its strong influence on the Hungarian job market. The wide economic effects of the instable financial situation can be manifold, and therefore it is worth taking into consideration the consequences of the events on the labor market and on strategies. What kind of challenges does this new situation bring for HR management ?

### **2. The role of human resources management in the activity of small and medium-sized companies**

In Hungary the most of the active enterprises are **small and medium-sized** companies. Nearly three quarters of all employees work in the sector of small and medium-sized companies, so the economic importance of this group can be well understood. The living standard and well-being of significant parts of the society consequently depend on the survival and performance of the companies in this sector.

The enterprises exist in an extraordinarily **dynamic environment**, and the challenges are the **changes** for which it is difficult for a company to be prepared. Thus rapid reaction is often necessary. Because of the changed market circumstances and challenges, the competitiveness of the domestic small and medium-sized companies is influenced to a great extent by the **human factor**, as without a well-trained and also sufficiently motivated workforce the company's performance goals cannot be realized.

In appropriate strategic thinking it is vitally important that employees in all layers of the company hierarchy are aware of the firm's mission and philosophy. The company's success factors, cost-effectiveness, size-effectiveness, capacity and profitability all rely on the human factors as well. Companies, in recognition of the value and significance of the human factor, make high demands on the employees. Nowadays employees are generally **expected** to be

sufficiently trained professionally, creative, performing, adaptive, motivated, and they should show interest and flexibility as well. In a parallel way the expectations of employees change toward their workplace, for they consider development and promotional possibilities, continuous learning and training, and self-expression extremely as vitally important.

Nowadays a company's most valuable asset is the **human being**, the only resource that can provide long-term competitiveness. Everything can be copied – products, services, infrastructure – except human beings. The **human resources strategy** has become one of the most determining strategies of the company, so this strategy has become critical to a company's competitiveness. However, many companies in our country have not yet understood the significance of this functional strategy. Most of the small and medium-sized companies follow the theory that success can be obtained first of all by cost-effectiveness, capacity management, and acceptable or maybe even excellent financial figures. Long-term and strategically-orientated thinking is largely missing from the philosophy of most of the managing directors of the small and medium-sized companies.

As experience shows, most of the companies do not even have a standard and homogenous idea regarding the expression **HR**. A lot of enterprises do not even have a nominated professional representative of the field. Most small and medium-sized companies in Hungary lack a well-elaborated personnel strategy well-adapted to their activity.

### **3. Who's task is Human Resources management ?**

A great number of activities belong to the subject of human resources management, and appropriate planning, introduction, and analyses of these are necessary so that it can fulfill its function in the company's organization.

Inside the organization most of the managing directors and company leaders participate actively in the realization of HR tasks. They make decisions concerning hiring and salary, they set up expectations toward the employees, they provide feedback about performance, and during work they contribute to the development of their employees and mentor their successors.

In the process of creating the outlines of the individual jobs and describing the corresponding tasks, the **persons who are responsible for each field** have to proceed in a very thoughtful and precise way, because later **the recruiting and selection of employees, the evaluation of their work, their motivation and remuneration** will all be based on these job descriptions.

In the case of domestic small companies it is the company leaders themselves who are fully responsible for this set of tasks; they do not employ a supporting professional. In the case of medium-sized companies there is generally an individual, independent job position – later a group – the role of which is precisely to perform these tasks, systematize them, support and follow them up. In the case of smaller organizations (10-49 employees) first a general HR position will be present, which is simultaneously responsible for all the diverse HR tasks. With large companies with several hundreds of employees, a number of diverse professional HR positions will already appear, which are independently responsible for the various areas (hiring, remuneration, training, etc.).

To the **basic functions** of human resource management belong the planning and auditing of human resources, the analyses, planning, and evaluation of job descriptions, securing the provision of the human resources, training of human resources, evaluation of performance, and motivation management. As a consequence of today's constantly-changing market conditions, these basic functions are complemented with **change management** – the results of which can be seen in the changing of corporate culture. Moreover, it must be performed with competitiveness and emotional intelligence, and with good communication. Working relationships and information technology support become highly important, and they become part of the basic functions.

Based on research it can be concluded that **in small enterprises certain aspects of a company's human resource strategy can be applied only within a limited scope**. In defining the need and demand of manpower and the supply of manpower it is the entrepreneur who makes decisions, and in the process he considers the opinion of his colleagues and proxies. In this decision-making a determining factor is the appropriate size and structure of the manpower, by the employment of which the company's activities and tasks can be undertaken.

#### **4. The reasons for differences between the small and medium-sized companies in Hungary and in the other European countries**

According to research, the situation facing small enterprises in Hungary is different in several respects from that prevailing in other European countries:

- In our country there are a lot of **enterprises created under pressure**, that is enterprises that came into being as secondary jobs, or as a complement to retirement revenues, or simply to improve the bargaining position in the labor market.
- More than half of small and medium-sized companies involve family members and **relatives**. This might facilitate harmonizing the goals, might help in decision-making, and the creation of organizational culture, but in most the cases the decisions regarding economy are determined rather by family relationships and not rationality.
- A great proportion of enterprises can be characterized by **short-term orientation**. It is very rare that a small company manages to grow to a medium-sized or large company. It is also a serious problem that domestic companies lack a model, either for the transmission of a family business through several generations, or for growth and development.
- Small companies are vulnerable, because of their size and their social indebtedness, they are very exposed to changes in the economy, legal system, and society.

## 5. The characteristics of HR practices in the small and medium-sized companies

The characteristics of HR in small companies can be summarized as follows:

- **There is no HR professional as an independent position.** Rather, it is the owner or managing director (later maybe some other field manager) who works on the tasks of HR, whereas in other fields (e.g. accounting ) most of the small companies employ professionals (partly of course because of the relevant laws ). In most of the cases in medium-sized companies there is already a HR professional who is responsible for all HR questions (usually one person), or, these companies engage outside professionals.
- **There are no established procedures,** written guidelines. The issues and urgent problems are treated mainly in an ad-hoc way, and decisions concerning personnel selection and pay raises are taken by one person. As a whole it can be said that HR activity is regarded as an administrative burden in small companies. Most of the medium-sized companies are already realize and acknowledge the importance of a formal system in the operational aspects as well.
- **The existing procedures are not integrated to the company strategy** in most cases. In small companies the company strategy must be re-thought and re-created accordingly; in medium-sized companies because of their size and number of employees it is inevitably important to integrate the HR goals and HR Management into the company strategy, in order to be able to fulfill the long-term goals and to remain competitive.
- The size of the organization often set **limits** to the possibilities for **job enrichment**, for authorization, and **for professional development and training**. Some of these limitations apply also to some medium-sized companies.
- The enterprise struggles mostly with a **lack of manpower**, the reason of which is due mainly to their uncompetitive ness with the large companies regarding salary and the benefits package. In addition, small enterprises do not have sufficient and appropriate resources (professionalism, time, energy ) to use all channels of recruitment.
- Especially for small companies, there can be characteristics of a family atmosphere, but also uncertainty, feeling of vulnerability, and tension all at the same time.

In the domestic small and medium-sized companies sector the **lack of well-trained manpower** is evident, and succession often remains as an unsolved problem. This conclusion is true in the sectors of construction and commerce; the supply of skilled workers and construction engineers presents a critical problem in the construction industry. Ireland and Russia greet Hungarian skilled construction workers and specialists with extremely high salaries. In Hungary **salaries are lower**. In Hungary, Austrian and German construction enterprises with well-trained manpower have significant advantages in competitiveness.

In the future of the sector's competitiveness as far as education is concerned, **re-training** of skilled manpower and **bringing unemployed workers back into the active labor force** - will play an important role.

## 6. The effects of the economic crisis

In the fall of 2008 we were literally attacked by the economic-financial crisis. All actors in the economy, the enterprises, the government and the employees, faced the crisis and the economic recession and its aftermath equally unprepared. The situation was aggravated by industrial and structural problems that were already present in small and medium sized companies before the crisis – which will from now on be referred to as the “SMC” sector. Even in the years before the outbreak of the economic crisis the lack of domestic demand, the tight financial resources, the inordinately heavy burden of administration, taxes, and costs of employee benefits made the micro-small and medium-sized companies’ daily activity extremely hard. As we know, the role of the SMC sector is extremely important in our country, for they provide **65-70 percent of Hungarian jobs.**

The **economic recession** caused by the economic crisis in Hungary since the fall of 2008 has been a continuous problem. **According to the latest data of GVI**, in 2009 the GDP fell by 6,2 per cent, consumption dropped by 6,7 %, and investments by 6,5 %, in parallel with a significant reduction of reserves. From the survey it is apparent that the volume of industrial production fell by 17,7 %, more than the European average of 14 %, and similar to that of Germany. Last year the production of the **construction industry decreased for the fourth consecutive year.** GDP in the commodity sector of the market dropped 14,4 %, and in the service sector 2,3 %. In the sector of small trade and commerce recession deepened in the second half of 2009.

In the SMC sectors the **problems that have existed for several decades can be summarized as follows:**

- Insufficient supply of capital, hence chronic underfinancing
- Low efficiency and productivity
- Lack of entrepreneurial skills is rather common
- Lack of channels of suppliers
- A significant dependence of domestic consumption
- Competition from the black-market economy

### 6.1. The HR consequences – the crisis demands a new HR strategy

The **changing focus of strategy** implies tremendous HR tasks: from the process of possibly down-sizing of employment to a new definition of job positions, to the re-establishing and re-harmonizing of performance-evaluation and of the remuneration system, anything can be reconsidered. The crisis demands the creation of an HR strategy that can be adjusted to a completely new, completely changed economic environment and to a corresponding business strategy by most companies. If we look at only the smaller questions instead of a completely changed strategy, then – beside the above-mentioned increasing selectivity – **the most important challenge** for the organization is expected to be **retaining talent** and **highly-trained professionals** who are involved in the basic business activities of the firm. The growth of manpower certainly will not be the same in all professional areas or across all levels of professional experience.

Regarding **retention of employees** the most important task is **to develop an appropriate picture of the situation:** who are the colleagues that are important to retain? Who are those, who are highly motivated and might “flirt” with other companies, and who are those who may be targeted by headhunters because of their professional potential? The question of diagnosis

can lead far: From simple satisfaction surveys all the way to the evaluation of individual psychological contracts, which are established as silent agreements between employers and employees, alongside the legal work contracts, and even a diagnosis of the complex organization can be possible.

Career management plays a highly important role in the life of enterprises. In the long term, if the goal is not only survival but also **maintaining steady growth**, the recruitment of talented specialists and professionals, and also identifying and preparing successors to the senior managers can mean further challenges.

### *An old challenge – with greater stakes*

It is easy to see that answers to these challenges can be found only at the cost of appropriate investments – intellectual and also direct material. Despite this, in a lot of organizations **it is still the field of HR that first suffers from cost reductions, which is a simplistic reaction to the crisis**. In the near timeframe the biggest task may become precisely to show and prove the field's presence and strategic importance, especially in this recession, and to win an role commensurate with its significance in securing the survival and further growth of the organizations.

### **6.2. The HR strategy – today's HR strategy is the success of the future**

Even before the stabilization of the economy the companies have to examine whether **their HR plans** – which involve recruitment of employees, remuneration, methods of keeping and not losing the employees, methods of incentives, training and retirement money – **are appropriate for the future as well**. For the **success or failure of HR strategies** will decide which organizations become the best employers in the coming decades. Due to the freezing of salaries and promotions, restricting recruitments, cutting back training and education budgets, because of changes in the system of the retirement funds, and because of poor communication within the company, the relationship and trust between many employers and employees have become problematic.

However, there are a few companies which try to do more than just cope, and further their employees' development in spite of the uncertain employment environment.

The test of the two strategies will be the period of growing, when HR decisions taken during the economic crisis start to show their long-term effects ; **in the battle** for the best-trained and most outstanding employees and professionals, **the winners and losers** will be visible. 2010 will be the year of transition, as companies endeavor to improve their competitiveness and prepare for the post-crisis period. A balance must be created between defensive measures and those that will actually lead to growth.

### **6.3. The challenges of HR strategy**

The role of HR is vitally important to the realization of a sound business strategy that will secure business success, and in certain cases the very survival of the company. A re-evaluation of the following **strategic priorities** is necessary when a company **changes and re-defines its HR functions**:

- ***Strategic manpower-planning***

The present uncertain business conditions and environment has brought to the front the definition of long-term business strategies within the companies. The business strategies that are developed generally take different and alternative scenarios into account – based on various prospects of the future business environment and on various company plans to adjust – each scenario presents a different labor demand and needs a different number and of employees and skills; and the problem of providing these cannot be solved overnight, and requires able strategic HR planning. ***The Challenge:*** HR must be capable of planning how manpower will be sourced, as well as securing and providing the manpower when these different scenarios become actual. HR can fulfill this task only if it actively takes part in the process of strategic planning and also in the subsequent decision-making that determine the business strategy. HR must also receive the necessary data in a timely manner; analyzing this information gives a continuous feed-back to the process of strategy making and development.

- ***To secure and increase employees' commitment***

A company's long-term ability to survive and succeed is strongly influenced by the commitment of its employees. Nowadays some extra personal professional investment nearly always is necessary for survival, some additional engagement – that “extra mile” – from each and every employee in their everyday work. ***The Challenge:*** since the employees' commitment is significantly influenced by business decisions (either as firing, salary reductions, or changing the basis of performance evaluation), the role of HR is mainly limited to support management decisions and to stimulate their effects, to show the decisions' influence on the employees' commitment and to communicate the decisions. In my opinion, for success HR has to build and operate a two-way, open and distortion-free communication channel, toward both the employees and the managers, through which previous suggestions can be evaluated and followed up, and through which at the same time decisions can be communicated.

- ***Development of managerial skills***

In the increased market competition induced by the crisis it has become critically important that managers on different levels of the organization possess the necessary managerial skills so that they can execute their tasks well, whether it is performance management, problem solving, motivating their staff, cooperating or communicating.. At the same time the general tightness of resources available for development sets a limit to the amount of training and development programs, For this reason skill-development initiatives with specific goals must be stressed, rather than general programs applicable to all employees. ***The Challenge:*** the success of the development of the workforce depends on the ability of HR to find and set up programs recognizing the most important development priorities that support the business strategy, that is, to determine who are the managers and leaders, and what kind of skill-development programs are most critical to carrying out the business strategy: where can the highest return on such investments be expected?

- ***Change Management***

The crisis made one thing clear for the company managers. Only **change is constant**. The crisis causes a number of planned and unplanned changes within the company, the tackling of which brings serious problems for many managers, who very often expect HR to find solutions to the problems generated by the crisis, and to provide methods for the managers to overcome these difficulties. ***The Challenge:*** nowadays the application of the

traditional methods and patterns are no longer enough to respond to the changes. Because of the continuous and often overlapping changes, HR has to endeavor rather to secure a framework in which change become part of the company's everyday life, and is no longer a singular challenge. To reach this goal, a refinement of the company culture, the development of a way of thinking, the attitude of both the managers and employees, and the creation of internal communication channels, may also be necessary.

To respond to the challenges even the HR managers and their organizations themselves have to change, and they need to adapt to the new conditions provoked by the crisis.

## **7. Signs of recovery**

**At the end of 2009 the Hungarian economy and the domestic small and medium-sized company sector overcame the worst.**

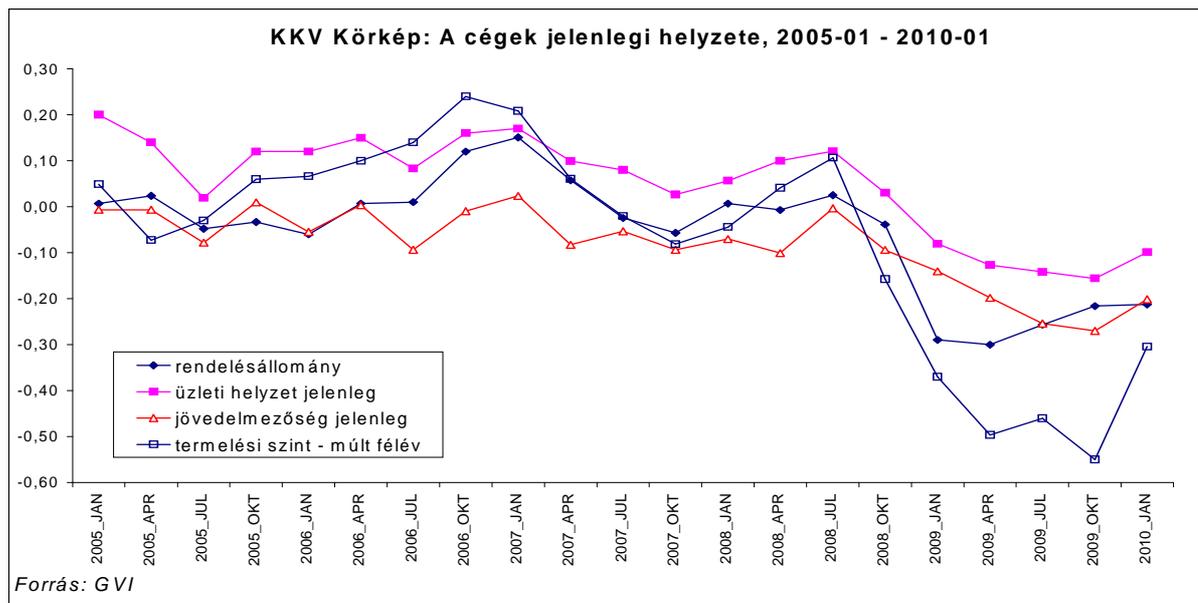
### *Positive facts:*

According to the latest survey in the research series (which has been running for five years) undertaken jointly by Figyel (*The Observer*), MKIK Gazdaság- és Vállalkozáselemző Intézet, and Volksbank Zrt., company managers are becoming **more optimistic**. In the last quarter of 2009 all the leading indicators that have improved, and the index of prosperity in the case of small and medium-sized companies has again reached its pre-crisis index level. Even though the positive prospects mainly concern bigger enterprises, exporters, and foreign-owned companies, the expectations reported by managers are surprisingly homogenous, with a not low confidence level.

### *Negative facts:*

At the same time capacity utilization continues to be low, as is the order books of small and medium sized companies. The situation in the construction industry, which was already in a very poor position, has further deteriorated. Making a general conclusion from the results of the survey in the small and medium-sized company sector, in the next half-year increased **hiring can be expected**. Firms in this sector have not increased prices, but rather calculate on some price reductions. Salaries cannot be expected to increase much in the sector either – generally increases of 1,6 % (last year: 1,9 %) are forecast. *The effect of economic crisis seems to be slowing* – already only approximately a quarter of company managers still express the opinion that the crisis will significantly influence the company's situation in the next half-year (3 months earlier some 44 % still thought so). It is mainly in the construction industry and in commerce where further negative events and effects are still expected; bigger companies are feeling less the aftermath and after-effects of the crisis less.

## **1. graph: Situation of companies from January 2005 until January 2010**



Source: GVI, 2010.

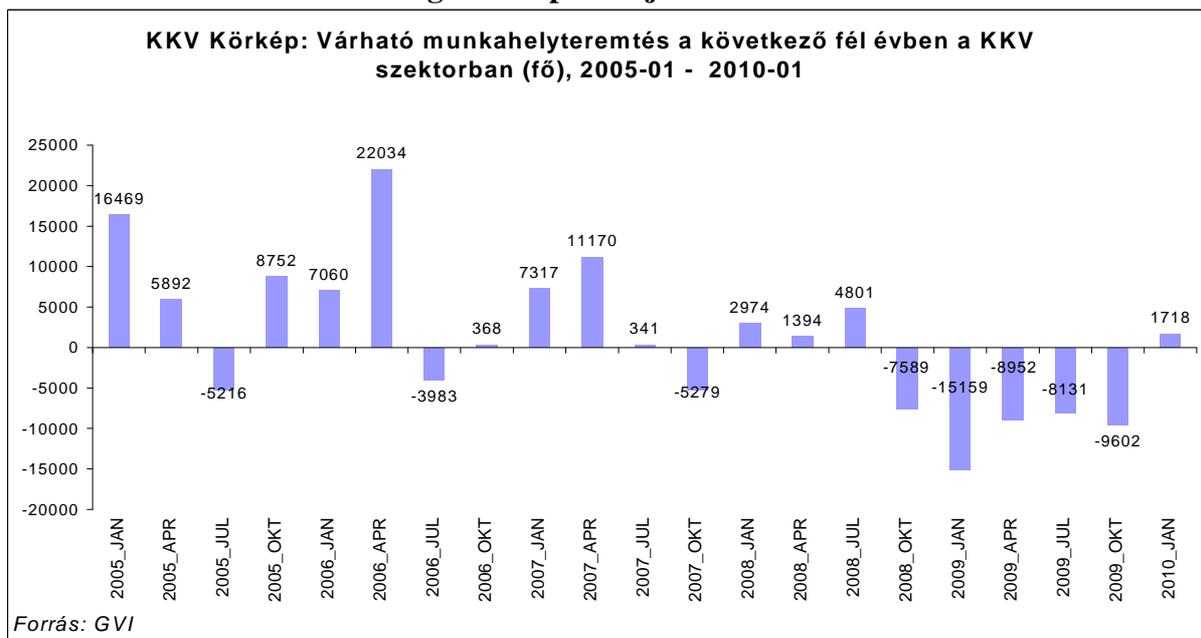
**Title in the box:**

Small and medium-sized company. A panorama.  
The present situation of companies, January 2005-Januar 2010

**In the small box:**

- Order book
- Current business situation
- Current profitability
- Level of production – most recent 6 months

**2. Diagram: expected job creation in 2010**



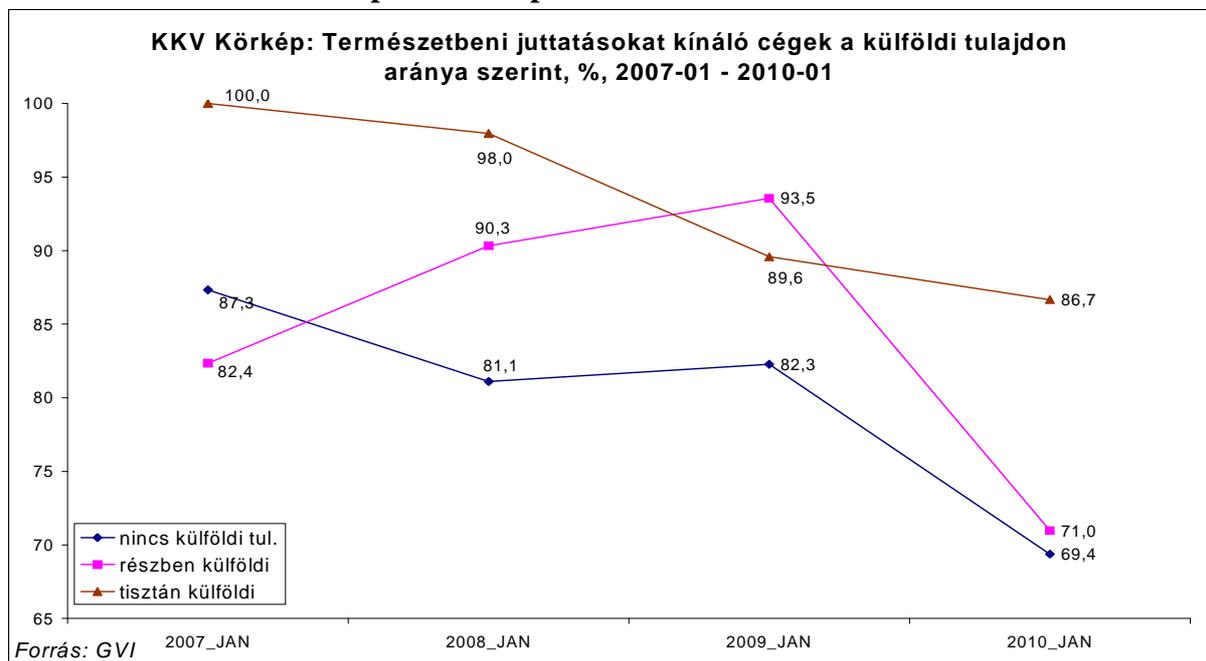
Source: GVI, 2010.

**Title in box:**

Small and medium-sized company general situation report: expected job creation in the next 6 months in the of small and medium-sized company sector (number of persons). January 2005 – January 2010

The increase of **gross salaries** was only around **2 %** last year, in the face of **more than 5 % inflation**. In 2010 an approximately 1,5 % increase of gross salaries is expected. In the fully Hungarians-owned companies the proportion of companies that provide their employees with remunerations in benefits **dropped by 13 percentage points**, in the case of foreign companies only **by 3 percentage points**, and in companies with mixed ownership **by 22 percentage points**.

### 3. Companies that provide remunerations in benefits



Source: GVI, 2010.

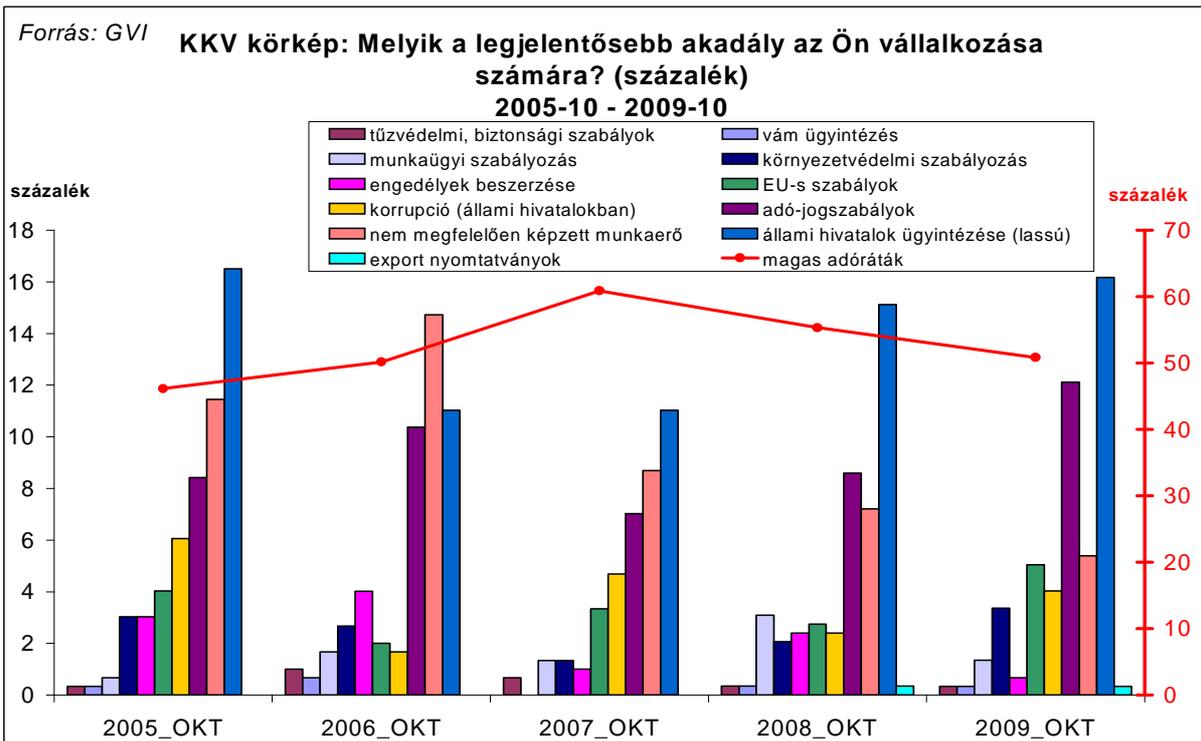
***Title in the box:***

Companies offering remunerations in benefits according to the proportion of foreign ownership , %, January 2007 – January 2010

***In small box:***

- No foreign ownership
- partly foreign ownership
- fully foreigners'-owned company

### 4. Diagram: obstacles that are felt as strongest in the last 5 year



Source: GVI, 2010.

**Title in box:** Which is the most significant obstacle for your enterprise ? (percentage)  
October 2005 – October 2009

**In small box:**

- regulations against fire, and other safety measures	- administration of customs
- employment laws, regulation	- environment protection measures
- obtaining various licenses	- EU regulations
- government corruption	- tax regulations
- lack of skilled manpower	- slow state administration
- export documentation requirements	- high tax rates

*Note:* the left axis of the diagram pertains to the columns of the diagram, and the right axis to the high tax rates that are marked with a line diagram

To summarize, the following **measures** are taken by company managers to handle the economic crisis:

- Re-evaluation and scrutiny of basic business processes
- Cost reduction
- Handling of liquidation
- Re-evaluation of contracts
- Re-evaluations of markets
- Cutting back the number of employees

It can be concluded that **cutting back the number of employees** is the solution most resorted to.

## 8. Conclusions, suggestions

In my opinion there is an increasing proportion of small and medium-sized companies which realize that underestimating the role of the human factor is a huge mistake, when in their efforts they prioritize rationalizing costs and gaining long-term competitive advantages in the market. The actors in the domestic small and medium companies sector try to tackle the effects of the significantly changed economic environment **by adapting to the new conditions**. We cannot enjoy the advantages gained by membership in the EU unless we recognize them and exploit them, whereas the disadvantages are harmful only if we do not take steps to avoid them. We can conclude that a significant proportion of the domestic small and medium-sized companies have not prepared in time to avoid the negative effects. Empirical research prove the seriousness of the problem, and that structural transformations and changes will also be necessary. In our country the competitive transformation of small and medium-sized companies is still in progress.

I think the real challenges are the changes that influence the structural environment of the companies and influence the field of HR. If the challenges are ignored and measures taken accordingly, only a few domestic companies will be able to compete for high-volume orders. In the ever-increasing competition, **competitiveness** of the organization **is the basic condition for their survival**.

On the side of employees expectations regarding the quality of work is continually growing, life-long education and training through the end of career is becoming natural, and flexible work policies will be widespread. The acceleration of changes presents a challenge for the managers also, because having an exclusively technological orientation is not sufficient to remain competitive. Numerous company leaders of the small and medium-sized companies still make decisions concerning employees and the future of the company **on the basis of their personal value systems**.

In shaping the international competitiveness of the Hungarian economy, the human factor has played an important part for two reasons: **Hungarian workers are well-skilled, eager to be trained or re-trained, and labor costs are low**. There is a **great difference** in the HR strategy of the foreign-owned and domestic companies. Domestic small and medium-sized companies are forced to give more and more significance to HR in order to increase their competitiveness, but **they are not convinced that these investments will be pay off**. The investments are very **costly**, and the companies have only very limited resources, so the proportion of employees who benefit from HR investments is very restricted. This **limits the competitiveness of small and medium-sized companies** and the role of these companies to absorb employees. This sector of companies in the development of their HR can rely only on the labor market, their relationship with the universities and schools is very weak. This can be caused also by the fact that **the management does not give** enough importance to this.

On the basis of research we can conclude that the theory that Hungarian-owned companies will **learn** the practices of foreign companies and will **apply** these practices **is false**. Most of the companies participating in the survey **were not able to outline concrete HR development goals and approaches**. They considered the increasing the proportion of younger employees, and the hiring employees for certain positions (e.g. marketing specialist) as most important, and gave them priority, even though these measures do not demand excessive investments.

In the foreign-owned companies the system of bonuses that complements salaries is wider and much more varied in comparison to Hungarian-owned companies. A fixed salary and a fixed salary increase provides much less incentive than a salary with performance-based bonuses.

**There is no sufficient relationship** between the Hungarian-owned small and medium-sized companies and their environment, **communication exchange is poor** within the company sphere, which **aggravates the difficulty of achieving and maintaining human resources**. In practice, enterprises do not give enough priority to the involvement of outside specialists and professionals or to taking advantage of the services of domestic and international consulting firms. It would be useful and important to learn, with the help of government initiatives, the HR methods of foreign-owned companies who possess developed techniques, and to provide managers with regular developmental training. It would be important to learn the corresponding EU regulations (workplaces standards, working conditions). The adaptation tasks that follow from joining the EU demand tremendous time and financial resources. Some of the domestic small and medium-sized companies have embarked upon on this path, but the execution is very hard.

**The creation of an effective and flexible HR company strategy has become an essential factor of long-term competitiveness.** No one now denies that an HR department is vitally important for all organizations, but even in the year of 2010, the channels through which HR can most influence results for the better have not yet been identified. In most cases it is also unclear what exactly are the roles and tasks of HR and of the company leaders and managers regarding organizational culture, increasing commitment, and management.

According to the managers however, HR does possess both sufficient professional

knowledge and the appropriate resources to accomplish their tasks, but they use these assets to maintain the operational functioning of HR systems. One of the most exciting result of research shows that the managers expect something else and something more. They are absolutely satisfied with the work of the HR departments, but at the same time they are they are unhappy that HR reacts only in a routine way. Managers expect and prefer that HR would learn the various business fields more deeply and thoroughly. They want them to establish personal relationship with the managers, to support them in difficult situations and in handling conflicts, and it should also propose helpful ideas and suggestions regarding the development of some staff members and organizational units.

One of the most important messages of the research is how HR can thrive under this expectation, how can it continue the build up relationships with managers, how it can become a real partner, and how can it come out of its present position, where some managers still look at the HR as a services group, as administrators, or as a squad of psychologists. In reality, well-prepared HR professionals are internal consultants who in cooperation with the management can contribute to the effectiveness and bottom line of the company.

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