

EXPLORING ASSOCIATION BETWEEN HR INDEPENDENCE IN ORGANIZING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND THE AVAILABILITY OF EDUCATIONAL AND TALENT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS IN THE COMPANIES FROM SERBIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA

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Abstract: *The aim of the study is to examine the association between HR independence in organizing educational programs and the availability of educational and talent management programs in the company. This study was conducted with the aim of demonstrating the importance of giving higher responsibility and independence to HR managers, especially in the field of education and training where they are undoubtedly experts. More recent articles were used, drawing conclusions from global practices on the topics of Human resource management and HR practices, Talent management, Management education, Development and training of employees, Labor market, Soft skills and hard skills of employees, Work environment, Organisational leadership, Performance management, Compensation strategies, Employee engagement, Employee motivation, and Organisational psychology. The study is part of the CEDEF (Central European Development Forum) research project, where 43 HR representatives answered structured in-depth telephone interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes. Hypotheses are tested with non-parametric tests: Mann-Whitney U test and Chi-square test. With higher HR independence in nominating candidates for educational programs and choosing the type of education, employees have greater chances for professional growth through different educational programs and more often have talent management programs. HR managers who have greater independence in choosing the type of educational programs, more often organize soft skill courses. In the future, we envisage a study that would encompass the availability of educational and talent management programs abroad.*

Keywords: *Human resources management, employee development, communications, competences, innovation.*

JEL classification: *L26, I25, O31*

INTRODUCTION

This is a truly challenging time that has an effect on both individual and company levels. Multinational companies are going through a transformation in order to overcome the most prominent challenges: growing uncertainty, employee turnover, flexibility, complexity and need for change (Purg, Braček Lalić, & Pope, 2018) (Saks, 2006) (Miao, Rhee, & Jun, 2020). On top of current challenges, COVID-19 increased environmental dynamism (unpredictability of change in the company environment), which reduced the likelihood of long-term sustainability (Jansen, Vera, & Crossan, 2009) (Jiao, Alon, Koo, & Cui, 2013).

Although academic researchers do not always see eye to eye with practitioners about the main focus of interest and practice-relevant research (Blackler & Shimmin, 1984) (Gillon, 2011). It seems that both sides have an agreement about competencies that employees and company should have in order to thrive in these turbulent times. Companies should be more flexible, agile and willing to think more strategically (Purg, Braček Lalić, & Pope, 2018) (Milovanović, Đervida, & Marković, 2021). At the same time, they need to reconsider “strategy-centric” perspective and revive the “employee-centric” view, where constant professional development of employees and their well-being is at the core of business (Sharma & Rao, 2020).

Employees need to develop a set of skills and competencies such as entrepreneurship, leadership, innovativeness, communication, creative thinking, problem-solving, information management, sales, and growth management in order to be a true asset to their firm (Purg, Braček Lalić, & Pope, 2018) (Brooks, 2007) (Bolli & Renold, 2015) (Sharma & Rao, 2020) (Bajić, Perić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2019) (Mamula, Perić, & Nećak, 2019) (Milovanović, Đervida, & Marković, 2021). Therefore, education, training mentoring, and coaching became a substantial part of every company. In that context, the role of HR and their professional contribution is essential when it comes to sustainability issues in highly dynamic environment (Dubois & Dubois, 2012) (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Shea, Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment, 2016).

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

“Employee-centricity” led to an orientation toward human capital investments, including investment in educational programs and training (Luo, 2020). The main purpose of these programs is to equip employees with knowledge and skills that will make them valuable and competitive assets of the company.

However, the effects of training and educational programs are multiple and far reaching. The “war for talent” is still one of the major challenges for companies (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). It is becoming harder to find that “hidden talent” and it is a really expensive process as well (Brooks, 2007). Instead of recruiting, which could be time consuming, cost-effective, and unsustainable way to handle the

issue, finding and developing talents from your own pool of employees turns out to bring faster revenue and profit growth to the firm (Bonneton, Schworm, Festing, & Muratbekova-Touron, 2019). Besides, training has a positive impact on engagement, productivity, innovation, retention, commitment, and speed of productivity for new recruits (Brooks, 2007) (Bonneton, Schworm, Festing, & Muratbekova-Touron, 2019) (Mamula, Perić, & Nećak, 2019).

Training and education are positively associated with one of the most important constructs for the sustainability of organizations - employee engagement (Bajić, Perić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2019) (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004) (Anitha, 2014) (Chandani, Mehta, Mall, & Khokhar, 2016). Theoretical explanations behind training and education suggest that employees tend to invest or “give back” to companies that invest in them by planning for their career development (Neeta, 2011). When it comes to benefits on individual level, although compensation schemes are high on the scales of impacting employee satisfaction and effectiveness (Kang & Lee, 2021). Research study shows that training have a positive impact on self-confidence, self-efficacy and employee satisfaction as well as their creative thinking, speed and manner of processing information and better adaptation to change (Bajić, Perić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2019). The importance of educational programs, training and talent management programs becomes even more prominent with the fact that formal education lags behind when it comes to equipping students with business-relevant skills and competencies (Bolli & Renold, 2015) (Bajić, Perić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2019) (Purg, Braček Lalić, & Pope, 2018). More specifically, schools are often blamed for putting too little emphasis on soft skill development, which is becoming increasingly important in the workplace (Jackson, 2014) (Hancock, Howieson, Kavanagh, Kent, Tempone, & Segal, 2009) (Bolli & Renold, 2015). However, the newest study shows that hard skills like business processes strategic management, human resource management, organization design, and project management are more suitable to be taught in school. On the other hand, the workplace is assessed to be more suitable place for developing soft skills than schools (Bolli & Renold, 2015).

The importance of soft skills can be shown through substantial literature that demonstrates the significance of good relationship between employees and supervisors for high employee engagement, high productivity, and low turnover (Kahn, 1990) (Wollard & Shuck, 2011) (Anitha, 2014) (Xu & Cooper-Thomas, 2011) (Chandani, Mehta, Mall, & Khokhar, 2016) (Mamula, Perić, & Bovan, 2020) (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). In the essence of good relationships and effective teamwork is effective communication. However, effective communication is recognized as a soft skill that requires to be continuously developed through training, coaching, and education in order to build and maintain good and productive relationships in the organization (Bajić, Perić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2019). This finding brings even greater importance of training organizations by HR managers, especially in the field of soft skills.

Transformation from a “strategy-centric” perspective to an “employee-centric” perspective influenced change in the HR sector as well. In a way, a new approach of “sustainable HR” should be compromised between these two polarizing views. Being aware of a harmful effect of strategic HRM on employees and their welfare, the main task is to modify the organization-centric perspective so that the company takes into account well-being and development of employee and their family, but without losing

on productivity (De Prins, Stuer, & Gielens, 2018) (Sharma & Rao, 2020). The mentioned transition was not without its difficulties. Many authors noted that instead of switching from one role to another, HR managers got “overloaded” with roles that are often conflicted by nature. In addition, studies show that complexity of HR managers’ roles increase with increasing level of internationalization of companies (Kohont & Brewster, 2014). In these instances, promoting and aligning central organizational cultures and values with employees were also a task of the HR professionals (Gelle-Jimenez & Aguilung, 2021). Overloaded and complex HR roles could bring confusion in the organization in terms of understanding what is the primary purpose of HR manager. In some companies, especially bureaucratized and hierarchically organized firms, this ambiguity could lead to a more rigid approach. They could deprive HR managers from independence in making professional decisions, like those related to educational programs and talent management (Lefkowitz, 2003) (Lourens, Van Vuuren, & Eiselen, 2012).

Another research conducted with 75 relevant company representatives in Serbia in the second half of 2020 shows that HR managers hire internal and/or external coaches for different purposes (Kralj, Kantar Kostić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2021). Coaching is a long-term process and investment in sustainability and growth: the strengthened cooperation between company representatives and professional coaches will contribute to a much better understanding of values, needs and employee satisfaction, on the organizational level, which will ultimately lead to a higher performance and shareholders expectations fulfillment. Results show that adaptation to requirements of the new position is evaluated as the most important aspect (91%), followed by team building and management (89%). Nevertheless, the role of coaches in Serbia are more likely to be hired in so-called crisis situations, as a means of “firefighters”. Typical circumstances for this would be: cases when employees lose motivation, issues that occur with a particular team member, situations in which managers show insufficient communication skills that cause conflicts, the challenges in teamwork or when the changes (transformation, reorganization) are expected on the organizational level and they are likely to lead to a potential crisis situation. It can be concluded that, currently and in the future, coaching methodology provides strong support to companies and employees in terms of well-being and retention, and the role of HR manager is significant in the overall process (Kralj, Kantar Kostić, & Mamula Nikolić, 2021).

Despite the importance of HR autonomy in strategic decision-making, many authors stressed out that internationalization and company transformation “blurred” the professional role of human resources and overloaded HR managers with several, often conflicting roles. As a consequence, HR managers would more often run operational tasks instead of contributing to the organization in a more meaningful way (Lawler, 2011) (Kohont & Brewster, 2014) (Ulrich, 2011). We know which factors will influence dominant HR role (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Shea, Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment, 2016) (Kohont & Brewster, 2014) what is the role of HR in leadership development (Maheshwari & Yadov, 2019) and how is autonomy at work associated with performance and satisfaction of HR managers (Mladenović & Petrović, 2015). What we do not know is the relationship between HR autonomy and contribution to their organization in terms of training and educational programs.

Research studies show that lack of autonomy could lead to lower job satisfaction and lower engagement at work (Mladenović & Petrović, 2015). Although CEDEF research project (2020) shows that multinational companies in Serbia have HR managers with great levels of independence (around 2/3 stated they have independence), positive results could be due to distorted samples.

The main goal of the research

Main aim of our study was to explore the relationship between autonomy of HRM in organizing educational programs and availability of educational and talent management programs in the company.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted on top performing multinational companies, while respondents were HR managers with 10+ years of experience. Although companies from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska evolved from their socialist phase, the liberal capitalistic practices that existed until the 1940's have returned fast in the 1990's, especially with the large and growing private sector. It is fair to assume that some local private companies hold a high degree of centralization and autocratic leadership that can deprive HR managers of their autonomy. In addition, study shows that autonomy deprivation is more often related to younger employees, while the CEDEF research was conducted among senior level managers (Mladenović & Petrović, 2015). For the mentioned reasons, we have grounds to suspect that lack of autonomy among HR managers is still present in the society. We wanted to understand what is the relationship between autonomy of HR managers and chances for the professional growth and talent management in the organization. Having in mind that lack of autonomy leads to lower job performance, we hypothesized that independence will be negatively associated with chances for professional growth through different educational programs and talent management program:

H1. Companies that provide employees with greater chances for professional growth through different educational programs, have HR managers with greater independence in nominating candidates for educational programs, choosing the type of education and determining budget for educational programs, than companies where HR have lower independence.

H2. Companies where HR managers/HR directors have the final word when it comes to education programs, more often have talent management programs and provide employees with greater chances for professional growth compared to companies where the CEO of the company has the final word.

Having in mind the emerging relevance of soft skills that can be developed only in work context, we wanted to check if HR managers with greater independence would be more prone to organizing soft skill training. If the hypothesis is true, the finding would confirm the expertise of HR managers and the importance of giving them autonomy to do what they are best and most competent at.

H3. Companies where HR managers have greater independence in choosing type of educational programs more often organize soft skill courses, while companies where HR managers have lower independence in choosing type of educational programs more often organize hard skill courses.

Sample and procedure

The current study is part of the CEDEF research project that had the aim to explore attitudes and behavior of successful companies in Serbia towards education and professional development of the employees. Research included several topics:

- Types of education programs
- Talent management and mentoring
- Attitudes and role of experts in education programs

It was used structured in-depth telephone interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes. The sample consisted of 43 HR representatives from the biggest companies in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, and the research was conducted in 2021.

Measures

Overall availability of educational programs - The scores on the four items were summed to form a composite measure. Composite measure consists of total number of organized education and talent management programs as well as the frequency of program organization for management and executive employees. Higher score indicates overall greater availability of educational programs, which means that company is providing employees with greater chances for professional growth. Reliability of the composite score is acceptable ($\alpha = .53$) having in mind small tested sample ($N=43$).

Besides, items included in the analysis were:

- Level of HR independence in nominating candidates for educational program (1-High independence, 2-Low independence)
- Level of HR independence in choosing the type of educational programs (1-High independence, 2-Low independence)
- Level of HR independence in determining the budget for educational programs (1-High independence, 2-Low independence)
- Person responsible for final decision when it comes to educational programs (1-CEO, 2-HR manager/HR director)
- Having talent management program (1-Yes, 2-No)
- The most common areas in which educational programs were organized (1-Hard skills, 2-Soft skills)

Method of analysis

Since the sample size was small, hypotheses were tested with non-parametric tests that are more robust compared to parametric methods. Mann-Whitney U test was used for testing the first hypothesis. Mann-Whitney U test and Chi-square test were conducted for testing the second hypothesis. Finally, Chi-square test was used for testing the third hypothesis.

RESULTS

The first hypothesis

For testing the first hypothesis, Mann-Whitney U test was conducted, with overall availability score as the dependent variable, and level of HR independence in nominating candidates, choosing the type of program and determining the budget as independent variables. While there was significant

difference in overall availability of educational programs, based on HR independence in nominating candidates ($U=114.50$, $z=-2,15$, $p=.032$), and choosing the education program ($U=38.50$, $z=-2,57$, $p=.008$), there was no difference in availability of educational program based on level of HR independence in determining the budget for educational program ($U=159.00$, $z=-.74$, $p=.478$).

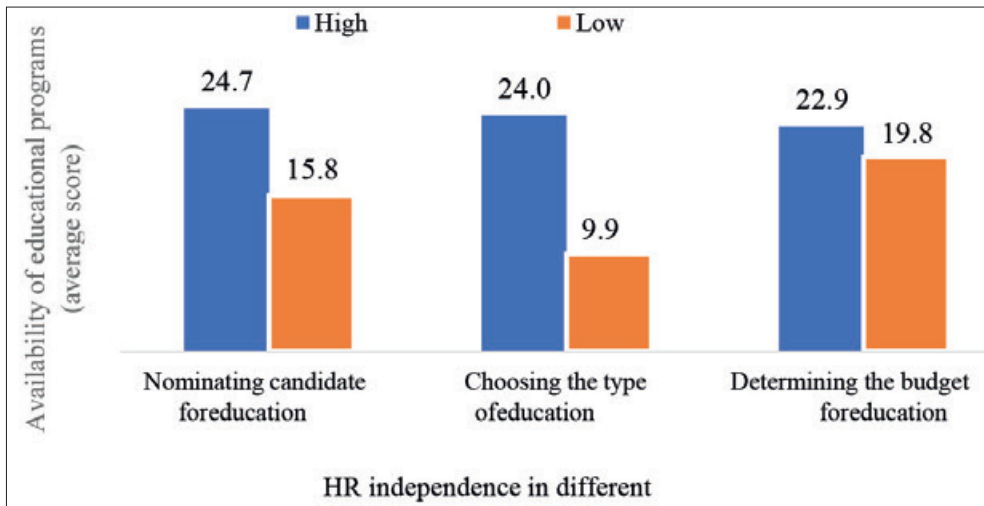


Figure 1. Average overall availability of educational programs by level of HR independence in different domains

Source: The authors, according to the research

As it can be seen in Figure 1., companies where HR representatives had higher independence to nominate candidates for education programs and choose the type of program, at the same time provided employees with greater chances of professional development in terms of available educational programs, as opposed to companies who had HR representatives with lower independence. But that was not the case when it came to independence in determining the educational budget. Therefore, it can be concluded that hypothesis was partially confirmed.

The second hypothesis

For testing the second hypothesis, Mann-Whitney U test was conducted, with overall availability of educational programs score as the dependent variable, and person responsible for final decisions related to educational programs (HR or CEO) as independent variable. There was significant difference in the availability of educational programs depending on who makes the final decisions regarding educational programs ($U=77.50$, $z=-2.31$, $p=.021$). Companies where HR managers or HR directors had the final word when it comes to educational programs, were at the same time companies with higher availability of educational programs compared to companies where the CEO was making the final decisions.

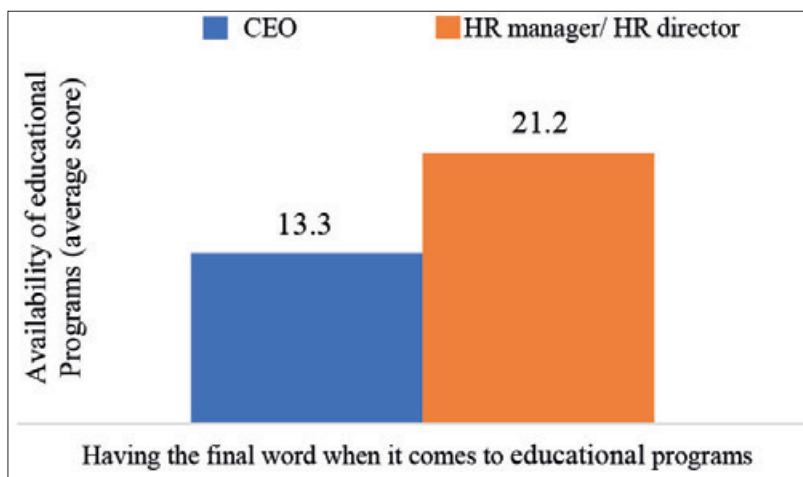


Figure 2. Average availability of educational programs by person responsible for the final decisions regarding educational program

Source: The authors, according to the research

For the second part of the hypothesis (to test whether the presence of a talent management program is associated with the person responsible for education programs), chi-square analysis was conducted. There was significant association between the type of person responsible for education program and the presence of the talent management program in the company ($\chi^2(1) = 9.80, p = .002$). Based on the odds ratio, the odds of a company having a talent management program are 13.3 times higher when HR is the responsible person compared to companies where the CEO is responsible for final decisions.

Table 1. Contingency table for association between talent management program and final decision maker for education programs

		Who makes the final decision regarding educational programs			
		CEO	HR manager/ HR director	Total	
Does company have talent management program	Yes	Count	6	16	22
		Expected Count	10.4	11.6	22.0
		Adjusted Residual	-3.1	3.1	
	No	Count	10	2	12
		Expected Count	5.6	6.4	12.0
		Adjusted Residual	3.1	-3.1	
Total	Count	16	18	34	
	% Of Total	47.1%	52.9%	100.0%	

Source: The authors, according to the research

We can conclude that the second hypothesis was confirmed. Table 1. Presents contingency table between talent management programs and final decision makers for educational programs.

The third hypothesis

The last hypothesis was tested with the assistance of Chi-square test. Two categorical variables included in the analysis were level of HR independency when it comes to choosing the type of educational program (high/low) and the most common areas in which educational programs were organized (Soft skills/Hard skills). Results showed significant association between level of HR independence in choosing the educational program and the most organized type of educational program ($\chi^2 (1) = 7.88, p = .005$). Based on the odds ratio, the odds of companies having predominantly courses oriented in soft skills are 15.0 times higher when the HR manager has higher independence in choosing the type of educational programs. On the other hand, companies where HR managers have lower independence tend to choose courses related to hard skills more often. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the third hypothesis was confirmed as well. Table 2. Presents contingency table between level of HR independency in choosing the type of educational programs and area in which the company provides most of the course.

Table 2. Contingency table for association between level of HR independency in choosing the type of program and area in which company provides most of the course

		Level of independence in choosing the type of program		Total	
		High	Low		
Area in which company provides most of the courses	Count	9	5	14	
	Technical knowledge (hard skills)	Expected Count	12.0	2.0	14.0
	Adjusted Residual	-2.8	2.8		
	Count	27	1	28	
	Business skills (soft skills)	Expected Count	24.0	4.0	28.0
	Adjusted Residual	2.8	-2.8		
	Total	Count	36	6	42
	% of Total	85.7%	14.3%	100.0%	

Source: The authors, according to the research

DISCUSSION

Main aim of the study was to explore the relationship between autonomy of HRM in organizing educational programs and availability of educational and talent management programs in the company. Results of our analysis showed that with higher independence in nominating candidates for educational programs and choosing the type of education, employees have greater chances for professional growth through different educational programs. Moreover, when HR managers/HR directors

have the final word about education, companies more often have talent management programs.

Results confirm a large body of literature that points out importance of giving HR managers greater responsibility and roles that are more focused on strategic decision making (Maheshwari & Yadov, 2019) (Brooks, 2007) (Mladenović & Petrović, 2015) (Sharma & Rao, 2020). Although previous studies showed that lack of autonomy leads to lower job satisfaction and job performance (Mladenović & Petrović, 2015) (Lefkowitz, 2003) (Lourens, Van Vuuren, & Eiselen, 2012) (Milovanović, Mamula Nikolić, & Perić, 2022) we demonstrated on the level of concrete activity (number of different educational programs and availability of talent management program), the impact of HR autonomy. Reasons behind negative associations between HR autonomy and availability of educational programs can be varied.

Lack of autonomy could be associated with the belief of senior management and CEO about HR managers. Studies show that sometimes top management has lack of confidence that HR managers are qualified to perform work related to strategic responsibilities, which could lead to lower independence (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Shea, Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment, 2016) (Kohont & Brewster, 2014). Lack of confidence can be a consequence of previous poor experience, lack of understanding about what HR is, or a leadership style. For the future research it would be recommendable to test the relationship between HR autonomy and attitudes of top management about HRM. Furthermore, by investigating source of potential disbelief in HR competencies, practitioners could be able to organize interventions for top management and other stakeholders. One of the possible ways to stop stereotypical beliefs about HR roles is open and transparent communication between HR managers and CEO/directors about what a working day of an HR manager looks like.

Studies have shown that when an HR manager is overloaded with tasks, and has somewhat conflicting roles, they can struggle to balance the demands of the various roles which can lead to losing credibility and influence among other employees (Ulrich, 2009). Therefore, it would be interesting to analyze the relationship between HR autonomy and work overloading, in the context of higher environmental dynamism (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Shea, Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment, 2016). Taking everything into consideration, we believe that all potential barriers (overloading with work, conflicting roles, lack of credibility and influence, hierarchical leadership style and organization) are deep-seated in conceptual confusion about what HR represents for a company. Although sustainable HR was supposed to be a compromising approach between “strategy-centric” and “employee-centric” perspective, HRM were left with lot of conflicting roles. Confusion is so high, that according to (Caldwell, 2003) up to 39% of personnel and HR managers were not able to determine what their main role is. Many authors point out that all employees need to develop shared understanding of the meaning of HRM (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Brooks, 2014) (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Shea, Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment, 2016). It would be interesting to explore the degree of shared meaning about HR roles between HR managers and other employees, and then to test the relationship between level of shared meaning and HR autonomy within the company.

On the other hand, there was no association between independence in determining budget for educational programs and number of available educational programs. When comparing three types of tested independencies (nominating candidates for educational programs, choosing the type of education, determining budget for educational programs), it seems that first two areas are related to the HR manager's field of expertise, while the budget is not the primary field of HR expertise. Studies show that negative impact on job satisfaction and performance happens with deprivation of professional autonomy (areas related to their expertise and independent decision-making). Since determining budget for educational programs is not HR's field of expertise, lack of economic autonomy does not influence HR managers as much as nominating candidates for educational programs and choosing type of education.

As a consequence, greater independence in nominating candidates and choosing type of education could positively influence job satisfaction and performance of HR managers which in turn results in a greater number of organized educational programs. On the other hand, determining budget for educational programs is not HR's field of expertise and does not influence their satisfaction and performance, which could be the reason why level of independence in determining the budget was not associated with the number of available educational programs (Lourens, Van Vuuren, & Eiselen, 2012). For future research it would be interesting to explore the mediating role of HR managers' performance and satisfaction between HR independence in training and education and number and type of organized educational programs. Having in mind increasing importance of soft skills, we wanted to find out if HR managers who have greater independence in choosing the type of educational program would more often organize soft skill courses. Confirmed hypotheses demonstrate that HR managers are experts in their field, and companies would profit if they give HR managers higher independence and responsibility. HRM understands which competencies are the highest priority for development, and recent findings confirm their approach (Bolli & Renold, 2015).

Finally, we need to address limitations of our research. Sample consisted of top 100 companies in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska ranked by total revenue, which means this was not a representative sample of companies. In addition, respondents were senior HR managers or directors and sample was small. However, if we get significant differences on the small sample and among senior managers, we can expect an even greater effect of autonomy on the bigger, more representative sample and among HR managers who have less working experience (Mladenović & Petrović, 2015).

CONCLUSION

With high environmental dynamism and need for sustainability companies need to constantly develop. Therefore, training, educational and talent management programs became inevitable part for the companies, while many authors point out the substantial role of HR in the era of sustainability (Dubois & Dubois, 2012) (Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, & Shea, Strategic implications of HR role management in a dynamic environment, 2016). However, it seems that overloading with conflicting roles, sometimes leads to confusion in the organization in terms of understanding what is the primary purpose of the HR manager. When they struggle to balance the demands of the various roles, HRM lose their credibility, influence and independence. While current

studies showed that lack of independence leads to lower satisfaction and performance, we wanted to investigate how lack of independence associated with availability of educational and talent management programs for the employees.

With the exception of independence in determining the budget for educational programs, higher independence in nominating candidates for educational programs and choosing the type of education is associated with a greater number of educational programs for professional growth. In addition, when HR managers/HR directors have the final word about education, organizations more often have talent management programs. Basically, companies where HR have greater autonomy at the same time have greater availability of educational and talent management programs. Furthermore, companies where HR has greater autonomy more often organize training and educational programs related to soft skills. Potential causes of such a relationship were discussed and we recommended directions for further research. This research study demonstrated the importance of giving HRM greater responsibility and independence, especially in the areas of their expertise like training and educational programs.

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