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# AN APPROACH TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF MOTIVATION PRACTICES FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN THE SOUTHERN TRANSDANUBIAN REGION

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**Abstract:** *The singularity of human resources and the complex interests in the world of work are a constant challenge for business executives and HR colleagues. While the difference between the performance of a motivated and an unmotivated employee can be up to twice as much at almost the same cost level, the motivation strategy is typically either absent from the business life, or operates on a reactive concept based on an unconscious design. Although the mere presence of motivation and its various levels are less quantifiable in exact terms with direct tools, a performance which is much weaker than possible is measurable in the short and long term, and its negative economic results are clear. The aim of the research is to examine the motivational practices of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in the Southern Transdanubian Region. Involving 300 businesses we evaluated the applied wage system, the role of money among the motivational tools, the extent and causes of fluctuation, the system of employee training, the way of performance evaluation, the reasons for underperformance, the importance of motivation, the company motivation strategy and the efforts to retain the key people. The employee motivation can be increase in several forms, but the priority of needs and claims is constantly changing. Updating this motivational matrix is a real leadership challenge, but this effort can pay off multiple times. According to the results it can be stated that the motivation strategy – as a key economic issue – is not given sufficient attention in business practices.*

**Keywords:** *small and medium-sized enterprises, performance evaluation, motivational tools, leaders, subordinates*  
(JEL code: M12, O15)

## INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a hidden performance enhancer in the organization which is often underestimated, and its positive impact on the economic output is hardly investigated (Ryan and Deci, 2000). While the technological improvements are often unreasonably undertaken by CEOs without prior impact studies, they are not counting with the obvious fact, that it is a huge luxury in a business to abandon the loss of revenue due to “poor motivation” of the available workforce or untapped motivation opportunities (Juhász, 2005; Kőműves,

Szabó Szentgróti and Bence, 2018). The extent, to which employees spend their energy on performance enhancement over time, and under what circumstances, depends primarily on their motivation (Berke and Kőműves, 2016). Motivating employees is an extremely various and complex task that is constantly changing due to the given economic, social and political environment (Kállay and Imreh, 2004; Pórá, Kőműves and Horváth 2017). If external motivation is constantly inadequate, even the most talented employees with a strong internal drive will perform poorly over time (Roóz and Heidrich, 2013).

There is an unprecedented attention nowadays on measuring HR at a strategic level and quantifying human capital. Most HR researches focus on how much an individual contributes to business performance, while changes in the quality of human capital are determinative (Effron, Gandossy and Goldsmith, 2004). Positions in the organization, responsibilities, gained experiences, changed privacy statuses, different goals and life situations induce internal forces, desires and needs of different intensity and composition, which interrelate and influence the significance of each aspect as a matrix. When one or more needs are met, the structure of the motivational priority changes. Continuous monitoring and updating the motivation matrix is (would be) an extremely complex task for a leader (Takács et al., 2012).

With more than 25 years of entrepreneurial history and active practice, we believe that this important topic should be studied in more depth and focus. The topic of our research is the examination of motivation strategies of human resources in enterprises of the Southern Transdanubian Region (Rechnitzer and Smahó, 2005). We assume that while some companies are – at least partially – consciously aware of the potential of motivation, others are completely or largely neglected to address this important issue. This is the reason that we looked at the attitude of SME managers to employee motivation in practice, the financial and non-financial motivational tools they use to help motivate them, and how they evaluate their own business motivation strategy and its elements.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this article, we have taken into account the specific facts and trends of the international and domestic HR function already identified by researches in economics and social sciences (Nawangari and Sutawidjaya, 2019). Based on which we have tried to identify and quantify the motivational practices that are experienced in the operation of SMEs or the processes that affect them.

The empirical study of the motivation practices of SMEs in the Southern Transdanubian Region (Malhotra, 2019) was carried out with 300 business surveys and in-depth interviews with 15 business executives. The large number of questionnaires provided the necessary data for quantitative research, while the in-depth interviews provided the information needed for qualitative research. The questionnaires used were the same, also the questionnaire sampling design regarding sample size, uniformity and procedure (Mitev, 2014). We tried to avoid significant differences in the proportion of the completed questionnaires in the three counties, so the difference in the scale did not disturb the examination. Because of our good relationships in Somogy County, of course it was slightly easier to raise the willingness to respond here, but it was perceptible all along that most executives were indifferent due to overload, and even open rejection was common.

The questionnaire used consisted of eight question blocks, and we formulated a total of 51 questions that focused solely on the opinions of managers and the leadership methods they represent in the topic of employee motivation.

The questions in the questionnaire were typically closed-ended (48 closed, 3 open), with two or more answers, along pre-recorded question lines. For open-ended questions and for some closed questions, under the “other” answer option the interviewee was given the opportunity to express his or her own opinion or to respond differently from the options given. For questions where a scale had to be applied, a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 was used. Accordingly, alternative, selective and scale-based rating could be provided within the closed questions.

One of the very important parts of the questionnaire was the address, where we explained the purpose of the survey and justified the importance of the partnership in order to ensure an accountable response and a good cooperation. As confidential information was included in the questionnaire, anonymity had to be guaranteed, along with the voluntary participation. In the formulation of the questions, we strived for clarity and conciseness.

The question block examined the following topics: type, levels, regional standard of the pay system; the composition of the workforce, the extent and reasons of fluctuation; employee training, performance evaluation methods, reasons for underperformance; importance of motivation; key person retention; company motivation strategy; background variables.

The basic information about the company and its profile was intended to enable comparisons from these aspects.

The questionnaires were processed with a mathematical-statistical program (SPSS 16.0). Frequency distributions were used to analyze the data, mean and standard deviation were typically calculated for the scale-like questions, and data were processed using cross tables. Significance analysis was used for percentage distributions using Chi-square test, and for multivariate statistical tests analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research included the study of wages of the examined enterprises, the result of which is presented in Table 1.

**Application of different wage systems at the small and medium-sized enterprises in the Southern Transdanubian Region, % (N=291)**

Wage systems	%
Basic salary + commission	41.2
Time wage	35.7
Individual performance-based pay	9.5
Group performance-based pay	1.7
Other	11.9

*Source: own calculation*

Table 1 shows that the majority of the companies investigated (41.2%) use a basic salary and a commission system. 35.7% of companies employ employees for time wages, while 11.9% choose other solutions. In the latter category, the basic salary with tip plus bonus was named. Individual performance wages appear in 9.5% of the responding firms, while group performance wages were

chosen by only 1.7% of the respondents.

The relationship between the salary system applied and the scope of activities of the company is strongly significant ( $p \leq 0.001$ ), which shows that the highest proportion (66.7%) of the basic salary and benefits is applied jointly by the companies of trade, transport and logistics. Time wage is the most frequent in the automotive industry and its supplier partners (69.2%). It is also a high rate with 61.3% for those in the construction and real estate industries. This method is least used in finance and accounting (20.8%) and none in the media (0.0%). Half of the companies (50.0%) who work in the media sector apply individual performance wages. In the automotive, food, wood and IT sectors no respondent has chosen this wage system. Group performance wages appear in 21.4% of woodworking enterprises and in hospitality (4.0%), and are not applied anywhere outside of these two areas.

There is also a significant relationship ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) between the number of employees in the company and the wage structure. According to this, 49.4% of companies with 2-9 employees and 35.4% of companies with 10-49 employees use the most popular basic salary and commission system.

There is also a close relationship between the organizational form of the company and the wage system applied ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). Organizations operating in the form of limited partnership ("Bt.") employ time wages in the highest proportion (39.6%), while those operating as a general partnership ("Kkt.") apply 50-50% of time wages and basic salary plus commission. The latter appears in the highest proportion in the case of the limited liability companies ("Kft."), on the other hand public limited companies ("Rt.") choose mostly the time wage system.

The subjective perception of the wages of employees and of middle and senior executives working in SMEs is shown in Table 2.

**The subjective perception of wages of SME employees from the point of view of company executives in the Southern Transdanubian Region, % (N=296)**

Subjective wage categories	Subordinates, %	Middle and senior executives, %
Significantly above average	3.4	5.9
Somewhat above average	27.4	24.2
Average	57.1	54.7
Somewhat under average	10.1	10.4
Significantly under average	2.0	4.8

*Source: own calculation*

The highest proportion of employees' wages (57.1%) is average based on the opinion of the responding company executives. 27.4% of executives surveyed say they are giving slightly above average salaries for their employees. 10.1% of respondents believe that they give slightly below average, 3.4% give significantly above average and only 2.0% believe that they give their employees significantly below average wages. Compared to the average level,

the rate of representatives of the two extreme cases is not significant. Executives and employees of companies operating in the same sector have relevant information about their rivals' wage practices and tacitly seek to keep salaries at an average level, thus avoiding self-motivating wage competition. Of course, this does not mean that there is no exception in justified cases.

The same issue was examined in relation to the salaries of middle and senior executives. According to company leaders, the highest rate of executive wages is at the average salary level (54.7%). On the other hand, 24.2% thinks middle and senior executive salaries are slightly above average. However the rate of salaries significantly above average in the examined management levels is higher than in the case of employees. Examining the organizational forms, it can be stated that 36.8% of middle and senior executives in public limited companies work for slightly higher than average income ( $p \leq 0.001$ ).

The research also covered the development of redundancies. According to the results, 32.4% of the companies surveyed had been made redundancies in recent years, where the main reason was the drop in turnover and the lack of expected profits. Examining the activities, it can be stated that the largest number of redundancies were among those working in the fields of marketing, advertising (66.9%), wood industry (64.3%), culture, art, entertainment (60.0%) ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). Companies with 10-49 employees had a higher rate of redundancies (45.2%) in recent years than the other companies surveyed ( $p \leq 0.01$ ).

The research also covered which workforce groups were affected by the redundancies. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Development of redundancies by workforce group in SMEs in the Southern Transdanubian Region, % (N=294)**

Workforce groups	%
Senior executives	1.7
Middle executives	3.7
Independent or subordinated experts	1.4
Sales / service network employees	7.8
Administration	10.9
Skilled labor	12.9
Trained workforce	5.8
Unskilled labor	8.5

*Source: own calculation*

The table shows that the highest proportion (12.9%) of redundancies was made by companies among the skilled labor. Middle and senior executives, as well as independent or subordinate experts, were the least likely to be displaced. There is a significant relationship between the size of the enterprise and which companies are firing skilled labor ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). It can be stated that most of the skilled workers were sent by companies with 10-49 employees (23.2%) compared to the others. This may be due to the fact that while a smaller company uses everyone's working time completely that there is no spare capacity



to take over each other's work, while in a larger company capacity is harder to predict and idling is more common.

In the following, we examined the main causes of labor migration. The results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Reasons of labor migration from the perspective of company executives in the Southern Transdanubian Region, % (N=234)**

Reasons of labor migration	%
Higher salaries elsewhere	25.6
Employees do not want to stay in a job for long	12.8
Changes in business conditions affecting the company	12.8
Family circumstances	11.1
Lack of promotion / career opportunities at the company	10.2
Bad relationship between employees	2.1
Change of owner or manager	0.8
Others	24.3

*Source: own calculation*

The results of the table show that the main reason for labor migration is higher salaries which are promised by competitors (25.6%). Both 12.8% and 12.8% believe that the reason for fluctuations is that employees do not want to stay in the job for a long time, and that changes in the business conditions affecting the company have led to leaving. Family circumstances are mentioned by 11.1% and for 10.2% the lack of promotion / career opportunities at the company is the main reason. Interviewees see only a little influence in the bad relationship between employees and the change of owner or manager in the migration decision, while one of the main topics of several studies and development trainings is to ensure a positive working environment. Employees' sense of job security is not only influenced by the company's stable economic and market position, but also by the constructive relationships within and between groups, which have a strong influence on employee loyalty and motivation (Arpaia et al., 2010). This is why it is surprising that the impact of changes in the status of managers / owners on employee loyalty is hardly treated as an important consideration by the responding company executives, while the importance of the topic is indisputable.

We find an interesting contradiction in the results when we consider that while 57.1% of executives rated their wages as average and 27.4% as slightly higher than average in their own company, most people cited higher pay as the main reason for labor migration. The result is significant in that the higher the number of employees in a company, the stronger the brain drain in the hope of higher salaries. While in companies with fewer than 10 employees up to 22.5% of the workforce leave for this reason, in the case of companies with 10-49 employees this proportion is 29.7%, and among those over 50 persons, 33.3% ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). This can be partially explained by the fact that smaller work communities may develop stronger ties and loyalty with both the employer and the

collective, which is more of a deterrent than the promise of slightly higher salaries (Johar et al. 2019).

Most companies (77.3%) place great emphasis on employee training and only 22.7% have not been educated or trained in the recent years. In addition to providing the training opportunities, it can be stated that, to a lesser extent, only 47.0% of the companies assess the needs of employees in the area of establishing further training. In our view, the extremely high rate (77.3%) of training is in vain if almost half of the companies do not align their employees' needs with the organizational development. Not only do they spend too much money on non-relevant knowledge, they also leave an important motivation tool unused.

Most executives surveyed (42.0%) report about the same labor productivity as in the years preceding the survey (Table 5). 33.8% of the respondents think this level is slightly higher, 14.3% think it is slightly lower than in the previous years. The ratio of much lower and much higher rates is less than 10%.

**Table 5. Workers' perceptions of labor productivity in the Southern Transdanubian Region, % (N=293)**

Change in labor productivity	%
Much higher	3.1
Somewhat higher	33.8
Same	42.0
Somewhat lower	14.3
Much lower	6.8

*Source: own calculation*

In the light of the data, two thirds of the companies have stagnating or declining productivity every year, which is a clear sign of backlog and, indirectly, lack of motivation or under-motivated workforce. Reviewing the companies' motivation strategy, or if absent, by designing, it would be the obvious way to put productivity back on the path of growth. It is primarily a matter of changing attitudes and innovative thinking, not raising costs.

The negative impact of unmotivated workforce is also reflected in our research about what business executives consider to be a significant disadvantage in the day-to-day work of employees. According to the answers, the lack of practical knowledge is the most common problem (56.6%) in the life of companies. In the second place (43.6%) – thus overtaking the lack of theoretical knowledge (39.9%) – inappropriate attitude and lack of motivation are listed. This is an excessively talkative and at the same time cautionary statement. Supplying the appropriate theoretical and practical knowledge with specific training, increasing motivation with effective leadership and HR work can be remedied with good results, however being aware of and at the same time resigning these shortcomings will not pay off.

Two thirds (75.2%) of the sampled companies evaluate (measure) employee performance. This evaluation and measurement is most often carried out (47.4%) by exam-

ining the work of employees, secondly through personal interviews (39.2%) and by tests or internal examination systems. The result that corporate executives see the main reason of under-performance at work in unmotivation (44.9%) is closely related to this issue. In the second place (22.5%) they mentioned inadequacy, in the third place laziness, followed by underperformance because of not understanding tasks. However, only 39.6% of the companies surveyed measure sales per employee.

Only 9.0% of the respondents work together with companies specializing in this topic to increase motivation. In addition, 42.0% of the respondents took steps to improve the workforce. Table 6 shows the steps of improvements.

**Table 6. Steps taken to improve the workforce in the Southern Transdanubian Region, % (N=296)**

Steps	%
Used more expensive labor recruitment	100.0
Offering higher income or other financial incentives	22.3
Task realignments between employees	16.6
Providing training opportunities for the less skilled	16.2
Contact with schools, colleges and universities	9.1
Recruitment of part-time employees	7.1
Lower admission requirements	0.7

*Source: own calculation*

100.0% of companies have already used more expensive labor recruitment tools, but only 22.3% have already offered higher income or other financial benefits as incentives, while 16.6% have realigned tasks and 16.2% provided training opportunities for the less skilled. The other steps taken to improve the workforce are so insignificant that it does not reach 10%. That is to say, that all the other studied tools that companies have done to improve the workforce have developed an insignificant rate, which unfortunately also underpins the assumption that the opportunities freely available to HR are used at a low level or even not used by the professionals who are responsible for maximizing the human resources available.

Table 7 shows the importance of corporate actions for workforce development. For this question, we asked executives to rate the workforce development areas on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 1 – not important at all, 5 – has a completely important meaning.

**Table 7. Perceptions of areas of workforce development (N=287)**

Development areas	Average	Std. Deviation
Improve the skills of colleagues	4.24	0.913
Increase employee motivation	4.11	1.125
Training of the workforce for the introduction of a new service or product	3.66	1.169
Training of the workforce for the introduction of a new technology	3.65	1.200
Training of the workforce in context of organizational changes	2.81	1.339

*Source: own calculation*

Expanding the skills of employees is the first (4.24) among the areas of employee development. This is followed by (4.11) increasing motivation, and then with an above-average result workforce training for the introduction of a new service or product (3.66) and continuing with workforce training for the introduction of new technology (3.65). Below-average value was given by executives to the importance of training for organizational changes (2.81).

77.4% of the respondents do not have any program prepared to retain key people, and only 22.6% have any planned program to retain their main workforce. These programs are typically based on direct financial motivation, but also include getting into the ownership of the company.

48.6% of the companies in the study have a motivation strategy and more than half (51.4%) of the companies do not have a consciously designed strategy that can be applied in this area. For those who have a strategy, it is a deliberately designed strategy, and in other cases it is based on the current situation. While designing the strategies, 55.3% of respondents consider the personality of the subordinates and 44.7% disregard this issue. The question arises as how conscious a motivational strategy can be when the most important aspect is an irrelevant factor. The fact that for most businesses it is not a cardinal issue or simply there is no motivational concept, justifies the idea of what they are expected to do to improve performance when they have run out of technological development or market expansion frameworks.

In the next question, we examined the role of money in regards of how much respondents agree that money is not a good motivator in a business life. The results are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8. Identifying money as a non-motivating tool, % (N=293)**

Level of agreement	%
Totally disagree	38.9
Rather disagree	32.1
Agree and disagree	18.8
Rather agree	7.5
Totally agree	2.7

*Source: own calculation*

38.9% of respondents think that money is a good way to increase motivation. If we consider the respondents who rather agree (32.1%) that money is a motivating tool, then it can be stated that for 70% of the surveyed companies money is the most important motivating tool. In the following, respondents were asked to determine the importance of financial and non-financial motivational tools in their company. Based on the answers, financial and non-financial motivational tools resulted 72.5% and 27.53% respectively. However the topic analyzes the importance of non-financial motivation tools and the right HR strategy, as well as the crucial importance of corporate leadership style, we agree with the result, with one

important condition: as long as the financial resources of the basic necessities are not satisfactorily provided to the employee, he / she will not exceed the necessary / sufficient level of performance, and in such cases, only money can really stimulate. The basic problems of everyday life cannot be forgotten by other tools of the motivation palette. If a stable financial background and a lasting sense of security are established, then money itself cannot motivate alone anymore in the long run. This is why a well-founded, diverse motivational strategy or motivational matrix is really necessary. For example, a minimum wage employee is not motivated by a wellness weekend bonus when they cannot even manage their savings for the trip. Well-paid employees are also not moved by this opportunity because they can do it on their own in their spare time, but personalized coaching would greatly increase their self-esteem and well-being, and to feel that the personal development is important in the company. Personal life situations, age, habitus, personality components, functions within the organization, current working conditions, management attitudes and expertise, current market position and potential future opportunities of the particular company – including but not limited to – influence the co-effect of countless aspects, which is constantly changing (Szabó-Szentgróti G. et al, 2019; Csapai et al, 2018). Recognizing this and hopefully managing it professionally in the future will be a major challenge for future CEOs and HR professionals.

Table 9 shows the evolution of positive feedback and praise from management to employees.

**Table 9. Positive feedback and praise for employees, % (N=293)**

Level of agreement	%
Always	22.9
Often	39.9
Sometimes	30.0
Rarely	7.2

*Source: own calculation*

The results of Table 9 show that 39.9% of respondents often give positive feedback or praise for their employees, 30.0% occasionally, 22.9% always and only 7.2% rarely expresses their satisfaction. Entrepreneurs who give positive feedback are with the highest proportion (100.0%) among family businesses, while limited partnership (“Bt.”) (39.6%) and limited liability companies (“Kft.”) (38.9%) give more feedback than in other organizations forms ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). The role of feedback is very important to encourage. if it is operated incorrectly, it may result in the formation of interpersonal conflicts (Szabó-Szentgróti and Gelencsér, 2018). It is noticeable that employees are receiving more intensive feedback in smaller, family-owned companies, though attention, good words and appreciation are available for free to all leaders, which will result in a savior consequence of a more motivated worker, performance enhancement and better economic performance.

## CONSEQUENCES

Overall, the management of a company’s role – as occupation, activity and responsibility – in practice is far from commensurate with its importance for the businesses we investigated. Research in the Southern Transdanubian Region shows that a wide range of business executives, partly because of the well-known economic history reasons, learn at their own expense from the often avoidable mistakes and test the processes empirically. Managing a business requires a high level of professional and material knowledge, organizational skills and psychological sensitivity. The business sector has huge hidden economic reserves, but this requires acceptance of the need for continuous tangible and intangible investment in human capital for sustainable development. In contrast, for economic reasons, business executives do not or barely sacrifice for the specific development of personal leadership competencies. They do not realize the multiple disadvantages of the “experiential journey” in business. The main problem with waiting for experience is that it is more suitable to draw the consequences of a past event than to judge the future success of a new method or technology. In the absence of relevant measurement methods, it is extremely difficult to assess the actual financial disadvantages in a company to acquire leadership and organizational development knowledge this way, but typically, the younger the business, the higher the “start-up tax”.

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