

Knowledge Transfer Among Young Mothers Going on Child-Care Leave (Based on Empirical Researches)

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Abstract— The purpose of our essay is to examine the knowledge transfer processes in the case of women on childcare leave as well as how much these women are motivated to share their knowledge. The professional literature contains a lot of writings concerning knowledge transfer processes; at the same time, our essay is only dealing with one specific situation: when the employee leaves the job only temporarily. Based on our research, many firms do not need and do not even have any protocol for this situation, and the employees themselves are not always interested in passing their knowledge either.

Keywords: knowledge management, child-care leave, motherhood, knowledge transfer, Hungarian practice, labour market

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the countries of the European Union, the length of parental leave is the longest in Hungary. Pregnant women can stay at home for up to 3 years after the birth of their child, which is a really long absence from the labour market. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the transfer and conservation of the knowledge of pregnant female workers is supposed to be the task of Hungarian organizations to an increasing degree, and new protocols must be developed to be incorporated and implemented in knowledge management processes. This activity system, however, is typically a two-way process: this means that both the employees, that is, the mothers, and their employers should be actively involved in the attempt to prevent the loss of knowledge during pregnancy, to actualize said knowledge and to enable it to assist the knowledge management processes of the organization.

In the past year, we initiated a comprehensive research in order to find out how domestic workers, as well as the companies are prepared to ensure that the knowledge transfer of their workers on child-care leave can become an active element of the knowledge processes of the company. To understand the current Hungarian situation, we conducted both a qualitative and quantitative research. The nature of our research was complex (qualitative and quantitative at the same time), so in this study, we could use the experience of the qualitative research to summarize some partial results of our quantitative examinations. Our aim was to prove the validity of the hypothesis we made in this essay.

II. SOME WORDS ON THE HUNGARIAN PRACTICE

Before we present our hypothesis and research in more detail, it is worth giving a brief summary of the general Hungarian practice in this area.

Child-care leave in Hungary is one of the longest in the European Union as mothers may stay at home with their children for as long as three years. Although there has been an EU directive about the available child-care leave since 1996, allowing all employees to take out at least three months of (unpaid) leave after the birth or adoption of the child, there is no unified EU practice concerning the length and entitlement of the child-care leave itself, be it paid or unpaid. In Belgium, Holland and Denmark, for example (OECD 2007-2008), such a leave is only one year, while in Hungary, the same leave can be up to three years per children.

The social studies made in the past few decades (Tóth, 1995, Pongráczné, 2001) have proven that Hungarian

mothers, owing to the rather conservative social views on gender roles, typically give priority to their family over their work. It is also true, however, that Pongrácz and S. Molnár mention in their later researches (2011) that the intensity of this conservative view has diminished somewhat lately.

This is also justified by Spéder (2009), whose research found that the Hungarian society would prefer the co-existence of modern and traditional gender roles in society. As Zsolt Spéder says (p. 224): “the homogenous structure and expectations, that is, the homage to purely traditional views, do appear, but only to a smaller degree.”

The fact still remains: Reizer (2011, referring to Köllő) claims that “the average time between leaving the job and returning from child-care leave was typically 4.7 years in Hungary between 1997 and 2005,” while the same time was even longer in the case of families with more children. This is extraordinary even within the international research material.

At the same time, Zsuzsa Blaskó (2011) also points out (p. 41), that the three years which mothers could spend at home with the children “are in many cases rather an ideal or an idea, which is constantly overwritten by the surroundings and possibilities.” The mother’s prolonged absence from work can be influenced by certain conditions in a positive or negative way. These conditions include the financial situation of the family, inadequate daytime child-care opportunities, the individual ambition of the mother, her difficulties in returning to the labour market etc.

In this last case, we can find that the mother's long absence from the labour market affects them negatively when returning to work, despite the fact that the Labour Code, which came into force last year, allows them to choose this option. The problem, among other things, is that due to her long absence, the mother may find that her previous workplace has either been changed, ceased to exist or the employer can no longer employ the mother (Bencsik-Juhász, 2008).

Although the Labour Code regulating employment ensures that mothers cannot be dismissed from their job during child-care leave, the same mothers often find that on returning to work from child care-leave, their previous employer cannot, or will not, provide more work for them. By law, however, the employer is obliged to offer them a new position, even if the previous position is no longer open, and the employee can only be dismissed if there is no more available work at the organization, or the mother refuses to work in the new position.

While a shorter child-care leave may enable women to lose less time in the labour market, a longer stay challenges both the companies and the employees. Although several – typically larger – Hungarian companies offer young mothers re-integration programmes the general aim of which is to assist these women in returning to the world of work, we still cannot talk about general practices in this respect. However, there are also initiatives made by the public which typically assist companies in handling the return of their employees by creating management programmes which can solve the employment of people with young children in a cost-effective and preventive way.

The fact also remains that the marketability of the knowledge of women returning from child-care is not ideal for the organizations. There was a quantitative research in 2008, involving 252 mothers with young children (Bencsik-Juhász, 2012) and it turned out that 46.7% of the respondents would have been able to start working right away, 54.6% felt they had up-to-date knowledge, 58% trained themselves at home, and only 13.3% would have been willing to do overtime work. 12.1% would have accepted a position involving travel, 16.2% could have taken part in weekend trainings and 46.9% would have been able to solve if their children had been ill. These answers strongly suggest that mothers have difficulties in harmonizing their family commitments – which are often influenced by outside factors – with the demands of their employers. At the same time, the in-depth interviews we conducted with young mothers wanting to return to the labour market indicated (Juhász, 2010) that the long absence of the mothers from their work affected the value of their professional knowledge, which in turn resulted in insecurity and self-assessment problems during their re-integration.

As women in Hungary can stay at home on child-care leave for a long time, this process may affect the knowledge management pursuits of the mothers and the companies alike.

However, knowledge is valuable, whether it comes from an individual or an organization. It is no wonder, then, that the question of knowledge management has become the focus point of researches in the past few decades, seeing as how knowledge is a key factor in the competitiveness and competitive advantages of organizations (Jasimuddin-Zhang, 2011). It is also true that knowledge management and HR are two complementary strategies which may enable the competitiveness of the company in concert (Dörhöfer, 2012).

At the same time not even the professional literature is united in whether organizational knowledge can be tied to individuals or not. The researchers also debate how knowledge exists as a complex thing and how it can be transferred and retained. It was, among other things, the question of individual knowledge which made us conduct a research last year to examine a special situation in life: that of an employee announcing her pregnancy at a company. We wanted to know how this announcement and the following period affect a company's knowledge management practices.

We would like to point out that we made our research in a specifically Hungarian environment. As we can see from the above, both women and their organizations are in a special position in this country regarding child-care leave. The results we will present in this essay are a part of a complex research aimed at women who had been either on child-care leave and were now returning to work. We wanted to see the tools, tasks and processes of knowledge management from the part of both the employee and her organization in a similar situation.

In this article, we are examining the knowledge transfer and the problems it involves in the case of employees going on child care leave. During changes in personnel, that is, when an employee leaves the firm even for a short period of time, the knowledge management processes of the organization will face a challenge. The basic question is how it is possible to replace the knowledge lost with the absence of the employee and how the knowledge of a new employee could be integrated into the organizational knowledge without losing any portion of it.

During these processes, the company must be able to identify the type of knowledge their pregnant employee possesses in the first place, then this knowledge has to be preserved and transferred over to the new employee.

The professional knowledge sees this knowledge transfer as spreading knowledge among individuals and groups within the organization (Argote and Ingram, 2000). This pursuit provides a basis for the development of corporate competitiveness. At the same time, organizations must face several challenges and difficulties when knowledge transfer occurs between their employees, especially when it comes to learning a new task (Letmathe-Schveitzer-Zielinsk, 2011). Ever since Polányi, it has been common knowledge that knowledge is versatile (explicit, tacit knowledge), and, in the case of tacit knowledge, it is especially difficult to transfer (Davenport and Prusak, 2000).

On the one hand, tacit knowledge exists primarily in the mind, and it is transferred through observation and perception: the recipients use their observations and

integrate it into their activities. On the other hand, explicit knowledge is rational and can be expressed easily (Schröder, 2003, Davenport and Porsak, 2000).

The question is how knowledge management can prepare for a situation when one of the company's employees becomes pregnant and leaves work for a longer period of time. Among other things, we are searching for answers from the point of view of the mothers: how the substitution of their person and the work they represent is done. Also, we want to know how knowledge is transferred, what tasks these mothers have in the process and what kind of knowledge loss their firms may look forward to.

III. INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

The problem organizations face is a more complex one because they have to make a decision about substituting their employee's work in a relatively short time: they have to make sure the already existing knowledge is transferred and her work is continued smoothly. The situation is further complicated by the fact that this will only be a temporary situation as present labour regulations state the firm has to provide employment for the mother as soon as she returns from child-care leave.

However, organizations typically do not know the exact date of the mother's return because the 3 years stipulated by the law is a long time, and both the company and the mother may face several complications. This may result in the mother returning to her work sooner, later or not at all.

To minimize certain factors (time, the optimal nature of substitution, the value of knowledge gained or lost), organizations usually have to prepare for their employee's lasting absence, and they have to strive to lose the smallest possible amount of knowledge.

In our essay, we primarily look at the period prior to childbirth when the mother works within the organization, but her knowledge has to be transferred to her substitute.

Our research was given the name "Knowledge Transfer and Maintenance among Young Mothers", and consists of two parts. The first part involved in-depth interviews where we asked both mothers and organizations what practice they used to retain and develop the mothers' knowledge before their childbirth, during child-care leave and, finally, on returning to work. On the other hand, we also conducted a quantitative research with both labour market participants to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying problems.

In our essay, we are examining the validity of the following hypothesis, primarily using quantitative

methods, but we are also using the experience we gained from qualitative research.

Hypothesis:

1. The women involved in our research played an active role during their pregnancy in the knowledge transfer processes.

2. Although the women could not transfer all knowledge related to their work, they are not even motivated to share all their knowledge on leaving on child-care because it would lower their chances in the labour market.

During the qualitative research, we asked 11 mothers and about 50 firms about the practice they could observe or experience. We were able to draw the following conclusions from the in-depth interviews made by the mothers:

In the case of the pregnant mothers, only those firms put an emphasis on knowledge transfer where knowledge management was an active part of the organizational culture. Several mothers felt that this question mainly depended on the management, and they gave support on an organizational level based on how important they felt the problem was.

Firms typically solved the temporary absence of the mother by internal re-organization or hiring new workforce.

Transferring knowledge was not a requirement at every firm, and so there were places where no steps were taken to transfer the necessary knowledge to the new colleague or substitute. At other firms, the nature of the work was such that it did not require knowledge transfer as the knowledge itself was well documented and was easy to acquire without special training.

Wherever firms paid attention to knowledge transfer, it was the colleague about to leave who trained her substitute. Regarding the general practice, she typically showed the various activities to the new colleague, and she provided supervision later on to check the execution. Sometimes documentation was made of the training process, which meant information was available to the new colleague later as well.

When the mother worked almost until childbirth, she could typically do it in two different ways. She could do her job on her own until she left, or she could act as a mentor and work with her substitute simultaneously.

Finally, most of the women we asked thought that no matter how thorough the knowledge transfer process is, it is impossible to share every bit of knowledge with new or substituting colleagues. The experience of the in-depth interviews, among other things, was that it is relatively

easy to transfer professional and the specific, well-documented, knowledge of the firm, but it is almost impossible to do the same with knowledge related to emotional intelligence and tacit knowledge. The knowledge lost during the transfer is mostly the result of this fact.

According to the mothers, this type of knowledge is typically person- and personality-specific, which means both the colleagues leaving and their substitutes possess values which are only theirs, and this personal trait gives the firm additional benefit or causes it losses as the person leaves.

Based on the result of the qualitative research, we launched our quantitative research at the end of last year by releasing an internet questionnaire. We asked both employers and employees in this survey. Regarding the employees, the questionnaire was filled in by mothers who had already returned to the world of work from child care leave and so they had experience before their childbirth, during child-care leave and their new employment.

Our respondents could fill in the questionnaire in a voluntary, anonym form through the Internet. The questionnaire typically contained closed questions, with only 3 open questions altogether. The analysis was made by mono- and multiple-variable statistical methods: among other things, we used cross-table analysis, ANOVA and cluster analysis, and we used the SPSS statistical program to evaluate the data.

In order to receive an overall picture of the Hungarian practice, we are presenting the results which could be linked to our hypothesis.

The online questionnaire was filled in by 263 women between September and December last year. 65.8% of our sample came from the Central Hungarian region, 20.2% from Northern Hungary, 6.1% from Western Transdanubia, 4.6% from the Northern Great Plains, while 3% came from the Southern Great Plains. Unfortunately, we were unable to properly involve the Southern Transdanubian region, and, consequently, only one sample came from that area.

70% of those filling in the questionnaire were married, 16% lived in a stable relationship, 8% were divorced, 5.3% were single and 0.8% mentioned some other form of family status. Regarding their age, 19.8% were in their 20s, 58.6% between 31 and 40 and 21.6% were over 40.

As for the number of children, 46.4% were raising one child, while 38% had two, 13.7% had three and 1.9% had more than three children.

When it came to the educational level of the respondents, 5.3% had no secondary degree, 35.7% had

only secondary-level qualification, 57.8% had a diploma and 1.2% even had a PhD degree. 76% of all the women worked as employees before their childbirth, 5.3%, 10.3% and 1.9% were low- mid- and top-level managers respectively, 3.8% had their own business and 2.7% did not work before they gave birth to their child. The first part of the questionnaire referred to the time before the mothers became pregnant. We wanted to know how they saw their opportunities and chances within the company and what factors affected their career.

As it turned out from the answers, about 54% of all women taking part in the research had career prospects at their firm. We examined whether there was any connection between qualification and career prospect. The Pearson Chi-square test indeed showed a significant connection (Pearson Chi-square: 28.936 df: 2, sign.: .000 $p < 0.05$). While 73.9% of those with a degree said they had further career chances, the same proportion was only 23.2% among those with only a secondary education and 2.8% among the ones with exclusively primary level qualification.

We checked whether the number of children affected women's career. We found that the feeling of career prospects was present among 49.2%, 56.0%, 69.4% and 20.0% of those women with one, two, three or more children respectively.

We also asked what kind of factors mothers felt played an important role in their career before their childbirth. The most important factor for them was professional knowledge (14.2%), which was followed by the willingness to work hard (10.4%), aptitude (10.3%), communicational skills (9.7%) and, finally, school education (9.3%).

Regarding the skills which set them apart from their colleagues, it is no coincidence that 11.3% of the respondents named their stamina, their professional knowledge (10.1%), and fortitude (10.3%).

63.1% of the respondents felt before their childbirth that their work required continuous studying.

We examined if there was any significant difference in career prospects regarding whether our respondents required continuous training for their job. The Pearson Chi-square test showed a significant connection (Pearson Chi-square: 15.539 df: 1, sign.: .000 $p < 0.05$). When the employees had to study continuously, 73.9% of them could hope for some future career at their organization, while only 26.1% of those who did not need to do continuous training could hope for further promotion.

We found similar connection between the education level and continuous training requirements (Pearson Chi-square: 28.8755 df: 2, sign.: .000 $p < 0.05$). This means that while 75.5% of the respondents with tertiary

education had to take part in regular professional training, only 48.9% of those with secondary education had to do the same, and this figure was only 21.4% among those without a secondary degree.

According to our responding employees, 69.6% of their employers were willing to cooperate in their training. There was a significant connection between the willingness of the employer and the qualification of the employee (Pearson Chi-square: 19.152 df: 2, sign.: .000 $p < 0.05$). 78.1% of the people with a tertiary degree could expect that their employers would help them bring their knowledge up-to-date, whereas the same figure was 61.7% and 28.6% among people with secondary and primary education respectively. We also found that women in management positions could receive training assistance from their companies more often than female employees with no rank (79-81% and 69% respectively).

Up-to-date knowledge is important for the organizations, and, as we could see, about 70% of the firms in our research actively helped their employees in their studies. The most often used methods were the following: professional courses (32.1%) professional periodicals (11.7%), professional databases (10.9%), conference opportunities (10.4%), language courses (8.7%), mentoring (7.7%) etc.

Approximately 39.9% of our respondents claimed that studies offered by their companies were more effective than self-education, while 29.3% thought there was no difference between the two types. 74.5% claimed that the knowledge gained through these trainings combined with the knowledge they already possessed was enough for their job.

In the next part of the questionnaire, we asked about the reaction of the employer on receiving the news that the employee was pregnant.

44.5% of the women we asked said their organizations were happy about the news, 37.6% reported indifference, while 17.9% claimed their organizations were not happy about their pregnancy. All employers had to take steps so that the activity and tasks of the pregnant employee did not fall behind the required schedule or hinder the operation of the organization in general.

The employers had several solutions to the substitution of their employee. Typically (58.2%), they hired a new colleague in place of their employee, 19% re-organized their workforce, some organization redistributed the tasks (18.3%), and in about 4.5% of the cases, they either discontinued that position or found some other alternative solution. These latter situations included the bankruptcy of the firm, selling the enterprise responsible for employment, the pregnant employee had

a fixed-time contract which was about to expire anyway etc.

Irrespective of how the employers solved the substitution of their workers, there was no unified way of transferring tasks and knowledge; this process depended on the pursuits of the organization, the health status of the young mother and the willingness to cooperate on the part of both the other and the organization.

In 56.7% of the cases, the firms tasked the young mothers to share their knowledge, 25.1% did not require the mother's assistance in knowledge transfer, 15.2% did not even try to transfer knowledge while in 1% of the cases, this problem was solved by an entirely different method. Some companies, for example, used a mixed version of the above methods, that is, the mother transferred knowledge in some areas, while the firm trained the substitute on its own in others.

11.7% of the women we asked claimed there was no knowledge they could not share with their substitute, while they named the following knowledge factors as the hardest to share with others: relationship network, task-solving abilities, emotional intelligence, communicative skills and professional knowledge. We can see that the knowledge elements closely related to personality are very hard or even impossible to share completely. We examined whether we could find any difference based on educational level and the types of knowledge which cannot be shared with new people. Of all the factors mentioned earlier, we could find significant difference in only one (Pearson Chi-square: 12.352 df: 2, sign.: .002 $p < 0.05$): that of the relationship network. Here, 54.8% of people with tertiary education thought that this is impossible to share, while the same idea was shared by 76.6% of people with secondary, and 71.4% of people with not even a secondary degree.

The question remains, however: how much willing are mothers to share their knowledge with their substitutes? To address this issue, we made statements which the mothers had to evaluate on a 5-point Likert-scale based on how much they agreed. 5 meant they completely agreed with the statement while 1 meant they completely disagreed. The chart below contains 3 results of these evaluations:

Table 1 Results Related to the Claims

Claims	Answers	Valid Percent	Mean	Std. Deviation
When a young mother goes on child-	Disagrees completely	27.8	2.57	1.308
	Disagrees	22.1		
	Agrees	25.5		

care leave, it is not advisable to share all her knowledge with her replacement.	and disagrees equally			
	Agrees	14.4		
	Agrees completely	10.3		
	Total	100.0		

Claims	Answers	Valid Percent	Mean	Std. Deviation
If a young mother shares all her knowledge with her substitute, she may not be able to return to her previous workplace after child-care leave.	Disagrees completely	18.3	2.95	1.314
	Disagrees	17.1		
	Agrees and disagrees equally	32.7		
	Agrees	15.2		
	Agrees completely	16.7		
	Total	100.0		

Claims	Answers	Valid Percent	Mean	Std. Deviation
When a young mother goes on child-care leave, it is advisable to ask her opinion about the person substituting her.	Disagrees completely	9.5	3.24	1.235
	Disagrees	20.2		
	Agrees and disagrees equally	25.5		
	Agrees	26.6		
	Agrees completely	18.3		
	Total	100.0		

Own source

As we can see from the results, approximately one quarter of the women agreed that complete knowledge sharing is not reasonable; moreover, a third of them believed their future chances of returning to work were in danger unless they possessed unique knowledge. These mothers were not motivated in seeing their company keep all their knowledge as they felt they would only hurt their own interests.

We examined whether we could find any connections on examining the claims based on education level and

career prospects. The ANOVA-test showed that while there was no significant difference regarding education, there was such a difference based on career chances: we examined the claim “If a young mother shares all her knowledge with her substitute, she may not be able to return to her previous workplace after child-care leave,” and the result was: Levene-test: .924 sign.: .337 $p > 0.05$, F: 7.635 sign.: .006 $p < 0.05$). This means that when women had further chances of career at the firm, the average figure was 2.75 while the same number was 3.19 in the opposite case, that is, these women found keeping their knowledge more reasonable.

We examined during our research whether we can segment our respondents based on the claims “When a young mother goes on child-care leave, it is not advisable to share all her knowledge with her replacement” and “If a young mother shares all her knowledge with her substitute, she may not be able to return to her previous workplace after child-care leave.” We used a hierarchical cluster process for the research (K-central method), which yielded the following final cluster centres.

Table 2 Final Clusters and the Number of Elements Results in the Clusters Related to the Claims

Final Cluster Centres		
Claims	Cluster	
	1	2
When a young mother goes on child-care leave, it is not advisable to transfer all knowledge to her surrogate.	2	4
When a young mother transfers all knowledge to her surrogate, it is not guaranteed that she would be able to return to her work after the child-care leave.	2	4

Number of Cases in Each Cluster		
Cluster	1	135.000
	2	128.000
Valid		263.000
Missing		.000

Own source

The data of the chart clearly shows that one cluster contains the women who typically refuse not to share knowledge, and see no danger to their further employment. The other group, on the other hand, is very sceptical about this question, and prefers the opposite approach instead.

Finally, we examined in our research what was typical of a given cluster. There was no significant difference regarding position and qualification, unlike the chances of further career (Pearson Chi-square: 5.085 df: 1, sign.: .000 $p < 0.05$). 57.7% of those women belonging to the first cluster claimed that they have further chances of advancement at their company, while the same figure in the second cluster was 42.3%. This means that there were less career chances among those who were more “reluctant to share knowledge.”

IV. CONCLUSION

In our essay, we have presented some partial results of our research last year, which was dealing with a situation where a pregnant employee temporarily leaves her job and shares her knowledge with the people who substitute her. We were only able to partially accept the hypothesis we made at the beginning of this paper.

The various organizations do not seem to involve or even require the young mothers’ active participation in knowledge transfer, although this may lead to loss of knowledge, which primarily ensues from the various knowledge elements specifically tied to the given individual. The first hypothesis could thus not be accepted. At the same time, we also found that young mothers are not so motivated to share all their knowledge with the people who were hired in their stead.

Our research indicates that the above situation is more frequent among mothers who had no career chance before their pregnancy. This result validated our second hypothesis.

The question remains, however: how can women be motivated to share these hidden knowledge elements with their organization, and what kind of precious knowledge elements are they going to bring with them to their child-care leave?

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