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survey results**



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# Competitiveness and sustainability of HRM activities in Croatia – CRANET survey results\*

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**Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to assess whether HRM practices in Croatia, as the newest European Union (EU) member country with only cca 20 years of free market economy which implies the change in the HRM philosophy, is heading towards more competitive or more sustainable HRM. In the theoretical part of the paper the characteristics of competitive HRM and sustainable HRM are provided. In the empirical part of the paper, using CRANET methodology, the survey of HRM practices in Croatia has been conducted in order to explore both competitiveness and sustainability of Croatian organizations' HRM practices, coupled with a comparative analysis using CRANET survey 2011 results for EU countries.

**Key words**

competitive HRM, sustainable HRM, CRANET, Croatia

**JEL classification**

M12, M14, M5

## INTRODUCTION

In a time of global war for talents (Nagy, 2010), when managing talent is a priority for HR people globally in response to a shortage of labor (Krinks & Strack, 2008), it is important to develop the employer brand which implies that an organization outperforms its competition in attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining people with business-required talents (e.g., Clarke, 2001; Sutherland, Torricelli & Karg, 2002).

There are many advantages that accrue to employers of choice, such as a wider pool of applicants and therefore higher quality employees, reduced turnover resulting in stability and knowledge staying within the organization which enables an organization becoming more attractive to investors and customers, and enhanced employee loyalty, productivity, and consequently a higher level of profitability and future success (e.g., Herman & Gioia, 2001; Cable & Turban, 2003 from App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012). Employers therefore concentrate on communicating that image to prospective and current employees (e.g., Sutherland, Torricelli & Karg, 2002), but as well customers, investors and a wider environment. They try to express the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, in other words what the organizations, as an employer, represents (e.g., Ambler & Barrow, 1996 from App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012; App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012).

The dominant employer branding strategy organizations used to differentiate themselves from their competitors in the last decades was competitive human resource management (HRM). The competitive HRM is the one ensuring the competitive advantage of an organization on the highly competitive markets by offering employees job positions and incentives which enable fast career advancement and earning money. Such a practice corresponds to a neoliberal way of doing business which is profit and short-term oriented. However, experts believe that employers that want to position themselves as attractive employers in an economy in which resources are limited and depleted, and labor markets are tight, should consider using sustainable HRM practices (e.g., App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012; Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Lis, 2013). Sustainable HRM indicates that organizations take a long-term view that includes employee stakeholders (Becker, 2011), which enables maintaining a healthy and productive workforce (Ehnert, 2009 from Ehnert & Harry, 2012).

As one of the ex-transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and a newest European Union (EU) member country, Croatia has only cca 20 years of capitalistic way of doing business and year and a half of free flow of labor across borders. This implies that there is a change in a way HRM practices are being conducted. It is therefore interesting to explore which HRM strategies Croatian organizations apply to attract and bond competent employees to themselves – do they develop their employer brands by using short-term competitive HRM principles aligned with the transition to the market economy or by long-term sustainable HRM principles aligned both with an overall sustainable development in societies across the globe and a socialistic heritage.

In the theoretical part of the paper the characteristics of competitive HRM and sustainable HRM, the later one being a relatively unknown, scarcely researched and often marginally involved or neglected area of the corporate sustainability perspective (Fenwick & Bierema, 2008; App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012; Ehnert & Harry, 2012), are provided. The empirical part, by using CRANET methodology, explores competitiveness and sustainability of Croatian organizations' HRM practices. For determining the level of Croatian practice, comparative analysis using Cranet 2011 results for EU countries was conducted.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPETITIVE AND SUSTAINABLE HRM

**Competitive HRM** cherishes high-performance and high-potential employees which assure profitability, growth and competitive advantage of an organization on today's highly competitive markets. This implies a short-term, profit-orientation in designing HRM activities, such as challenging jobs with fast advancement opportunities, stimulative compensations through good salaries, many bonuses, financial participation and flexible benefits, as well as a marginalization of trade unions. In the same time, organizations with competitive HRM principles demand from their employees to always do their best and over-achieve in order to add maximal value to their employers. Some authors believe that such a "neoliberal HRM" contributed to the global financial crisis bubble through "rewards given for short term illusions of performance which turned out to not reflect the reality of value creation and for plundering pension resources of current and former employees" (Ehnert & Harry, 2012: 222).

However, because of the ecological, social and economic sustainability being one of the most important challenges for organizations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as scarcity of high-quality employees on the global market, greater diversity of the world labor force<sup>1</sup>, and increasing strains on employees which could result in work-related health problems (e.g., performance and time pressures, stress levels, work-life imbalances), many authors believe that fostering the sustainability of the HRM system itself becomes a 'survival strategy' for organizations (e.g., Zaugg, 2009 from Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Darcy et al., 2012 from App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012; Ehnert & Harry, 2012; App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012; Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2013). **Sustainable HRM** implies dealing with people in organizations as internal stakeholders in a sustainable way (e.g., Ehnert & Harry, 2012), without compromising the ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well (e.g., Dyllick & Hockerst, 2002). This entails investing in the long-term availability and viability of employees in order to ensure a high-quality workforce for the future (App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012: 265), using general and specific principles/practices described in the table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Dominant diversity trends on the global labor market are ageing population, more women in the workplace, and global migrations bringing different racial and cultural backgrounds.

Table 1: General and specific sustainable HRM principles/practices

Principle/practice	Description
<b>General principles/practices</b>	
Substance orientation	There should be a balance between the consumption and the ‘reproduction’ (i.e., regeneration, development) of human resources (e.g., App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012; Stankeviciute & Savaneviciene, 2013).
Treating people fairly	Employee policies and practices must take equity, reciprocity and impartiality into consideration (Treviño & Nelson, 2010 from Becker, 2011), as this sends a powerful message that employees are not commodities or costs but are valued as important investments and stakeholders in the organization (e.g., Cascio, 2010; Becker, 2011), which increases organizational performance through employee satisfaction and engagement.
Diversity management	Programs that highlight affirmative actions and diversity policies, such as encouragement of older employees and women in leadership positions, are important as today’s workforce is more diverse than ever (e.g., Wright et al., 1995; Lis, 2013).
<b>Specific principles/practices</b>	
Humane and socially responsible job design	Employment needs to be designed so that people are not exploited (or exploit themselves) but instead are supported in fostering a healthy work practices and lifestyle (Ehnert & Harry, 2012: 235). As well, more and more candidates, especially younger ones are searching for jobs with social significance (e.g., Yeaton, 2008; Lieber, 2010; Ehnert & Harry, 2012), as they want to be part of an organization that is doing significant things beyond making money (Becker, 2011: 20).
Internal sourcing	Bringing in people from outside the company can backfire when internal promotion channels appear to be blocker and valued employees leave in frustration (Becker, 2011).
Reasonable but fair compensations	Compensations should reflect the reality of value creation and should not plunder pension resources of current and former employees (Ehnert & Harry, 2012: 222). Furthermore, paying employees a fairly and good wage, as well as generous benefits such as corporate kindergartens and fitness centers, creates a more sustainable organization (e.g., Cascio, 2006; Becker, 2011; Lis, 2013). Finally, a financial participation of employees (e.g., profit-sharing, stock ownership) portrays a caring, socially responsible enterprise and a good employer, and improves collaboration and harmony between employees and management (e.g., O’Toole & Lawler, 2006 from Becker, 2011; Lavelle et al., 2012).
Constant investments in training and development	Investments in the human resource base (e.g., Becker, 2011; App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012) with the purpose of securing workers’ employability (not job security), because “the economic benefits of training outweigh the cost of employee turnover” (Becker, 2011: 21). Organizations should as well invest in the ‘origin’ of human resources (e.g., universities, education systems, labor markets, families) (e.g., Becker, 2011; App, Merk & Büttgen, 2012 using Ehnert, 2009, 2010), and could support each other by coordinating apprenticeship and internship programs (Becker, 2011: 21).
Work-life balance	The compatibility of job and family contributes to the employee well-being (e.g., Ehnert & Harry, 2012; Lis, 2013), and therefore both emotional and physical health.
Human employee relations	Democratic elements or human and employee rights should be visible in employee/labor relations (e.g., Becker, 2011; Ehnert & Harry, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

**Research instrument.** The quality of HRM was assessed using CRANET methodology. A highly-structured questionnaire used consisted of seven groups of questions in the following areas: (1) human capital and organization of HRM department, (2) work design, (3) recruitment and selection, (4) performance appraisal and employee development, (5) compensations and benefits, (6) trade union position, and (7) organizational characteristics.

**Sample.** All Croatian organizations with more than 500 employees<sup>2</sup> were contacted to participate in the survey. Out of 173 organizations<sup>3</sup>, 41 returned a properly fulfilled questionnaire, which makes the response rate of 23.7. As the profile of the research sample presented in the table 2 depicts, organizations which participated in the survey are heterogeneous by their industry, size and ownership, which implies no response bias.

Table 2: Profile of organizations in the sample

Indicator	Percentage of organizations
Main organization activity	agriculture and food industry – 5.0%; mining – 2.5%; manufacturing – 45.0%; water supply – 2.5%; construction – 5.0%; wholesale and retail – 12.5%; transport, distribution and storage – 2.5%; communications – 2.5%; financial services – 10.0%; art, entertainment and recreation – 2.5%; other services – 10.0%
Size of organization (no. of employees)	500 to 1,000 employees – 48.8%; 1,000 to 2,000 employees – 19.5%; more than 2,000 employees – 31.7%
Ownership	private sector – 70.7%; public sector – 19.5%; mixed sector – 9.8%

**Data collection and analysis.** Questionnaires were sent by e-mail personally to HR directors, together with a brief covering letter explaining the purpose and importance of the research. HR directors, as most knowledgeable and informed people regarding HR evaluation in their organizations, were responsible for questionnaires' fulfillment as representatives of their organizations. Respondents had the opportunity to stay anonymous by returning questionnaires through mail. However, they all returned fulfilled questionnaires by e-mail. Descriptive statistics (absolute frequencies, relative frequencies, average values), using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), was used for the data analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the total of HRM indicators collected, 82 indicators (25 indicators of competitive HRM and 57 indicators of sustainable HRM) applicable as proxies for determining the competitiveness or sustainability of Croatian organizations' HRM practices according the literature review, were assessed.

Table 3 reveals that on average HRM practice of Croatian organizations could not be labeled competitive, as all 25 analyzed indicators reveal that Croatian organizations on average are not attractive places to work for competitive, results oriented employees.

<sup>2</sup> In Croatia only organizations with more than 500 employees have HRM practices developed enough to be evaluated (Pološki Vokić & Vidović, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The list of Croatian organizations with more than 500 employees was obtained from the Croatian Chamber of Economy web database.

Table 3: Competitive HRM indicators in Croatia 2012

HRM indicator		Value
Percentage of employees with the university degree		21.1
Performance appraisal for (% of organizations)	managers	46.3
	professionals	51.2
	clerical staff	36.6
	manual workers	36.6
Percentage of employees within the formal performance appraisal schemes	managers	71.3
	professionals	59.9
	clerical staff	75.8
	manual workers	71.8
Performance related pay (% of organizations)	managers	43.9
	professionals	48.8
	clerical staff	53.7
	manual workers	48.8
	AVERAGE	48.8
Bonus based on individual goals	managers	56.1
	professionals	51.2
	clerical staff	31.7
	manual workers	24.4
	AVERAGE	40.9
Bonus based on team goals	managers	48.8
	professionals	43.9
	clerical staff	24.4
	manual workers	22.0
	AVERAGE	34.8
Performance appraisal to inform decisions about career moves		53.7
Formal career plans*		1.85
Succession plans*		1.89
Talent management programs*		1.38

Note: \* Evaluated on the scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent).

Precisely, percentage of employees with the university degree signifies that Croatian organizations are not crediting this group of potential highest-achievers, especially when having in mind that the percentage of adults with the equivalent of a college degree in more developed countries rose to more than 30% in 2010 (OECD, 2012), while more than 40% of 25-34 year-olds in most OECD and partner countries in 2012 have tertiary education (OECD, 2014). The percentage of organizations with the formal performance appraisal systems is not in line with the performance- and profit-oriented philosophy of competitive HRM, particularly when comparing with the 87.07% benchmark of top performers (Huselid, Becker & Beatty, 2005). The presence of performance related pay and bonuses on individual/team goals does not imply simulative compensation systems needed to keep materially motivated top-talents attached to a company. Compared to their counterparts in EU, Croatian employees are not motivated to over-achieve, as according to Cranet (2011) in EU countries on average 53.5% of organizations offer performance related pay, 63.0% bonuses based on individual goals, and 46.2% bonuses based on team goals. Finally, Croatian organizations do not have a competitive HRM approach of career management, as they do not invest much in managing their employees' careers. On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent) they are below 2 in devising formal career plans, succession plans and talent management programs for their employees, which is lower even than the moderate use of career development techniques provided by EU countries (the average of 1.29 on a 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much) scale) (Cranet, 2011).

However, not only that Croatian HRM practices are not competitive, they are neither sustainable. Indicators of sustainability of HRM practices in Croatia presented in table 4 do not support the



sustainability hypothesis as only 18 (marked grey) out of 57 indicators (31.6%) imply socially responsible practices from the employee perspective.

Table 4: Sustainable HRM indicators in Croatia 2012

HRM indicator		Value
Average age		43
Male vs. female employees		60 : 40
Percentage of employees younger than 35		29
Percentage of employees older than 45		41
Annual absenteeism (number of days per employee)		12.35
Annual turnover rate		7.67
Percentage of organizations with the ethical codex		75.6
Percentage of organizations with the corporate social responsibility statement		58.5
Percentage of organizations with the diversity statement		41.5
Flexible work arrangements (% of organizations)	Weekend work	87.5
	Overtime	92.7
	Part-time work	48.8
	Job sharing	15.0
	Flexi-time	52.5
	Home-based work (without IT connection)	0.0
	Teleworking (with IT connection)	15.0
	Compressed working week	7.3
Internal recruitment of (% of organizations)	managers	75.6
	professionals	87.8
	clerical staff	80.5
	manual workers	68.3
Profit-sharing	managers	31.7
	professionals	14.6
	clerical staff	14.6
	manual workers	14.6
	AVERAGE	18.9
Share-sharing	managers	22.0
	professionals	17.1
	clerical staff	17.1
	manual workers	22.0
	AVERAGE	19.6
Flexible benefits	managers	22.0
	professionals	9.8
	clerical staff	2.4
	manual workers	2.4
	AVERAGE	9.2
Annual payroll costs spent on training (%)		1.86
Annual training days per employee	managers	6.44
	professionals	6.00
	clerical staff	3.26
	manual workers	2.64
	AVERAGE	4.58
Training & development methods*	On-the-job training	2.55
	Formal education	2.55
	Mentoring	2.35
	Coaching	1.15
	Teamwork	3.05
	Job rotation	1.83
	Job enlargement	2.20
	Job enrichment	1.13
	E-learning	2.00
Work-life related benefits (% of organizations)	Daycare center at work	2.4
	Sabbaticals	26.8

	Educational leave	61.0
Percentage of organizations without trade unions		4.9
Percentage of employees in trade unions (weighted average)		50.7
Trade union influence*		3.5
Change in the trade union influence in the last 3 years (% of organizations)	Increased	15.4
	Same	74.3
	Decreased	15.4

Note: \* Evaluated on the scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (to a very great extent).

Sustainable elements are visible when looking at the average employee age and percentage of younger and older employees' groups, as a mixed workforce suggests discrimination- and bias-free working environment, which is also in line with many organizations from the sample having an ethical codex. The average presence of part-time work and flexi-time are only practices implying flexible working arrangements, and the sole work-life related benefit considerably provided is educational leave. Nevertheless, the first two indicators are not close to the EU average where 78.88% of organizations offer employees to work part-time and 62.47% flexi-time, while only the third indicator is comparable with the EU average of 52.71% organizations providing educational leave (Cranet, 2011). The presence of internal sourcing in many organizations implies that employees are offered a future in their organizations, which is consistent with the sustainability perspective. Finally, the area in which sustainability is especially noticeable is the position of trade unions, as fighters for employee/human rights in general. Trade unions are considerably present and influential, particularly when weighted against the majority of organizations in CEE countries not having union membership at all (from 56 to 73% of organizations according to Cranet (2011) results).<sup>4</sup>

Although it was expected that the socialistic heritage from the ex-regime would still be influential in determining HRM practices and would therefore make organizations more socially responsible, the majority of analyzed sustainability indicators do not prove that. Women are not equally represented in the workforce, which implies both the presence of inequality and a lack of awareness that organizations wanting to be successful in the contemporary society have to value competitive potentials of both sexes (Heim & Golant, 1993). Absenteeism and turnover rates, as well as weekend work and overtime should be lower, while the presence of social responsibility and diversity statements, as well as flexible job sharing, home-based and teleworking should be higher to indicate the true concern for employees and their well-being. For example, in EU countries a considerably greater percentage of organizations offer their employees to work from home both without (18.18%) and with IT connection (27.06%). Especially alarming indicators are indicators of financial participation, presence of flexible benefits, and training and development activities, as they indicate the lack of long-term relationship with employees. Those numbers for EU countries are higher, with 35.3% of organizations offering profit-sharing, 21.4% share-sharing and 35.8% flexible benefits, while organizations' expenditures on training and development are located in a band between 2 to 5% of annual payroll cost in most EU countries, with the average of 3.72% (Cranet, 2011). Furthermore, training days per year per employee are in EU on average 7.20 days for managers, 7.88 days for professionals, 4.71 for clerical workers and 4.14 days for manual workers, with the total average of 5.98 (Cranet, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> However, although trade unions exert the lowest impact on organizations in East European countries, in most West European countries they affect organizations at least to some or even to a great extent (Cranet, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

According to the collected HRM indicators, Croatian organizations are not pursuing any of the two approaches of developing an organization's attractiveness as a unique employer presented in the paper. They are neither competitive in attracting and retaining top talents, nor integrating sustainable HRM practices into the employee value proposition. This implies that both further development and positioning of the HRM area, either as enabling winning (competitive HRM) or supporting sustainability (sustainable HRM), in Croatia is needed. However, because the sustainability is treated as the next step in the HRM evolution (Freitas, Jabbour & Santos, 2011), this is the route Croatian organizations should probably take.

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