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Working conditions as one of the areas for implementing the concept of corporate social responsibility

1. Introduction

Contemporary challenges faced by entrepreneurs in the second decade of the 21st century have far transcended the traditional problems of providing quality goods and services under the rigour of economic rationality. Among the modern challenges is the need to take responsibility to company stakeholders (Sokołowska 2013, p. 9). As put by M. Crozier (1993, p. 20), one can no longer disregard the realities of life, such as the need to cater for the interest of individuals (stakeholders), the most important interest group for any company. Professional literature (Gableta 2012, p. 20) accentuates the notion that the results of this attitudinal shift of interest are particularly evident in the recent interest in the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on the part of company managers, as a concept based on the primacy of ethical business operation.

In theory, the CSR concept is nothing new. However, the conscious and purposeful application of its main premises in specific areas of company operation still raises considerable debates and controversies – particularly among tom management

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representatives. It seems that one of the reasons for such controversial reception of this concept is the multitude of disparate definitions of CSR in professional literature¹.

The European Commission is one of the many organizations actively promoting their definition of CSR. In the EC definition, corporate social responsibility is associated with voluntary decisions of companies to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment. At the same time, the EC emphasizes the need for companies to manage their relationships with a variety of stakeholders who can have a real influence on their licence to operate (European Commission 2001, p. 5). These include both external stakeholders (suppliers, consumers, representatives of financial institutions, insurance companies, local administration), but also – or particularly – the internal stakeholders (company owners, hired management of various levels, production and office workers). In this context, responsibility before employees should be expressed in such areas as the realization of fundamental expectations towards work, especially in responsible management of both material and immaterial conditions of work².

Working conditions and the related area of work safety and hygiene are subject to precise regulations in the form of international norms and standards. On the one hand, these standards and norms constitute a ‘roadmap’ for activities and decisions made in relation to the CSR concept. On the other hand, they may be utilized as measures for gauging the effectiveness of CSR implementation through the assorted set of normalization standards and reporting tools. Examples of such norms include the PN-ISO 26000:2012 (PN-ISO 26000:2012 *Social responsibility guidelines*), the SAI SA8000:2008 (SAI SA8000:2008 *Social responsibility – Requirements*), and the OHSAS 18001:2007 (OHSAS 18001:2007 *Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements*).

This paper aims to present the approach to the interpretation of the corporate social responsibility concept, as expressed in the aforementioned international norms and standards. The main focus is placed on the relationship between

1 For an overview of the many definitions, see, e.g.: Sokółowska (2013, pp. 30-39).

2 Working conditions are generally perceived as the sum of all factors in company environment which relate to the character of work and to workplace environment (Pocztowski 1998, p. 261ff). These typically include material (workplace equipment, lighting, climatic conditions, noise, etc.) and immaterial factors (working time, social activities, work relations, interpersonal relations, etc.). The term *occupational health and safety* in this context serves to unify these two areas with the purpose of defining a set of working conditions designed to ensure productivity while eliminating gratuitous risk of accidents, occupational diseases, physical exertion or stress (cf. Koradecka 2000, p. 21).

the CSR concept and the requirement of providing a healthy and safe working environment for company employees, as postulated by the normative documents. With respect to the above, and based on the results of pilot empirical studies conducted in ten companies, the authors identified the contexts of management activities aimed towards improving the working conditions, as undertaken by the respondent organizations. The cases under study were subject to critical evaluation, designed to determine whether the attempted improvements in the sphere of occupational health and safety were in any way related to the intentional application of the CSR concept in those companies.

The pilot study involved 10 companies operating in the sectors of printing, metalwork, automotive production, insulation production, training, consulting, and catering, representing a wide range of employment structure, from 9 employees (micro-entities) to more than 250 employees (large companies, with dominant representation of companies operating in the Lower Silesia region of Poland. The study targeted regular employees and management personnel of all levels, using free-form interview and observation methods, and analysed in the wider context of these authors' professional experience and business practice.

2. Working conditions as one of the areas of CSR implementation, in the light of international standards and norms

The significance of the CSR concept is emphasized not only in professional literature, but also in the letter of international standards, norms and other regulations. Some of the regulations are devoted solely to the concept of corporate social responsibility – with precise delineation of the central notions of the concept, and areas of application. Others make references to selected aspects (areas) of the concept. These include both the standard aspects of SCR application – the market, the competition, the society, the environment and its protection – and other areas, such as business ethics and management practices, including job creation. In the latter context, the regulations specify, among other things, the recommended workplace practices, such as the provision of healthy and safe workplace conditions.

The norms and standards vary with respect to their certification aptitude³

3 In this context, the certification process represents a procedural confirmation of guaranties issued by an independent institution to attest that a given management system conforms to the regulations of a given norm or standard. The process typically involves external auditing (certification auditing). The certificate document issued at the end of the procedure is a formal and objective confirmation of the implemented system's conformance with the operating principles and requirements of the standard in question.

(Łunarski 2006, p. 125). One of the most important premises for regarding them fit for certification purposes is their provision of precise requirements or recommendations in the subject area. Based on the above, it must be noted that only those norms and standards⁴ which provide verbatim requirements are considered fit for certification purposes (cf. OHSAS 18001:2007 *Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements.*, p. 6). Proper certification of the successful implementation in a given area of CSR application, issued by the independent certification body – for example, a certification in the area of occupational health and safety – should be regarded as an important argument in supporting the company’s claims of being a responsible organization in the eyes of the company stakeholders, while at the same time attesting to the company’s intent of being an active partner in the social dialogue.

Based on the above observations, it seems that, in the context of this study on the concept of corporate social responsibility and its correlations with the process of shaping proper working conditions, the most important normative documents include the following:

- the SAI SA8000:2008 standard(SAI SA8000:2008 *Social responsibility – Requirements*),
- the OHSAS 18001:2007 standard(OHSAS 18001:2007 *Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements.*),
- the PN-ISO 26000:2012 norm(PN-ISO 26000:2012 *Social responsibility guidelines*).

The SAI SA8000: regulates social responsibility of companies with respect to sustainable management of human resources. The standard’s requirements target nine areas of SCR application, namely: child labour, forced and compulsory labour, health and safety, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, discrimination, disciplinary practices, working hours, remuneration, and management systems. From this study’s perspective, the most important areas are those related to working conditions. These include norms on workplace health and safety, and working hours norms. In this context, the principal aim of the SAI SA8000:2008 standard is to promote employee rights, while providing the employer with the potential of implementing a systemic approach to managing proper working conditions for the employees. In particular, the standard includes normative elements based on national laws, international human rights norms, and the associated

4 For the purpose of this dissertation, the terms *norm* and *standard* are assumed to be one and the same, and used interchangeably.

norms of occupational health and safety (SAI SA8000:2008 *Social responsibility – Requirements*, p. 4).

Companies willing to subject themselves to the requirements for social accountability as defined in the SAI SA8000:2008 standard with respect to working conditions should, first and foremost, demonstrate their provision of safe and healthy work environment to all employees. Furthermore, they are expected to appoint a member of senior management personnel to be accountable for shaping the material and immaterial elements of working conditions, in line with the occupational health and safety regulations. Moreover, the company is expected to take effective steps to prevent potential accidents and injury to workers' health by minimizing the causes of hazards inherent in the workplace environment. In addition, the standard emphasizes the requirement to provide, on a regular basis, effective health and safety instructions, as well as appropriate personal protective equipment to its personnel, including unrestricted access to sanitary facilities (www.pracodawcyrp.pl/.../gfx/.../pracodawcy_rp_norma_sa_8000.pdf, accessed on 28.12.2013).

Certified SA 8000 companies in Poland include, among others, such large companies as: Elektrownia Opole S.A., Nord Sp. z o.o., PKE S.A. Elektrownia „Łaziska” and Avon Poland (www.iso.org/pl/sa-8000, accessed on: 28.12.2013).

Another normative document of interest in the context of this study is the OHSAS 18001:2007 standard (OHSAS 18001:2007 *Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements*). This standard presents requirements with respect to the normalized approach to the management of occupational health and safety procedures, targeting mainly the material aspects of working conditions. The standard intends to promote the culture of workplace health and safety as well as recommend adjustments of company organizational structure to ensure close monitoring of potential workplace hazards and manage the risks through continued improvement, i.e. steady and continued elimination of occupational hazards.

It may appear that the standard in question does not directly relate to the central concept of this study, i.e. the concept of corporate social responsibility. However, it should be noted that the premises behind the decision to implement this standard may result both from internal convictions of the senior management personnel, and from external factors. For example, the decision to implement the standard may be a result of pressures or requirements on the part of large contractors within the structures of the so-called sustainable supply chains, thus being directly influenced by the implementation of the SCR concept (cf. Zięba 2013, p. 156).

One of the most comprehensive documents to address the concept of corporate social responsibility comes in the form of the PN-ISO 26000:2012 norm (PN-ISO 26000:2012 *Guidance for Social Responsibility*). PN-ISO 26000 is one of the three documents recommended by the European Commission to European companies. The recommendation was presented in a recent communication from the EC to governing bodies of the EU outlining a renewed strategy for corporate social responsibility in the EU from 2011 to 2014. The norm, a voluntary guidance, was not intended to be used for certification purposes. It was designed to facilitate and support companies in their implementation of CSR concept, which was regarded as an important challenge for societies worldwide, rather than a matter of voluntary choice (www.pkn.pl/iso-26000, accessed on: 29.12.2013).

The PN-ISO 26000:2012 standard emphasizes the multi-faceted character of the CSR concept. Consequently, the standard only enumerates some key areas of implementation. From the viewpoint of this study, the most important of these is the sphere of workplace practices, comprising such aspects as employment and workplace relations, working conditions and social security, social communication, occupational health and safety, as well as employee development and workplace training. Incorporation of these elements in the process of managing the work potential of the company helps and facilitates the implementation of the SCR concept in business practice (PN-ISO 26000:2012 *Guidance for Social Responsibility*, pp. 46-54).

As attested by the provisions of the aforementioned standards and norms, the sphere of working conditions and the associated sphere of workplace health and safety are addressed in a fairly vague manner. The most significant observation is the lack of specific guidelines to be followed by employers in their task of managing the individual elements of material and immaterial working conditions. However, the analysis of provisions of the above documents shows that the improvement of healthy and safe working conditions should be, in the intention of the regulators, based on attaining and maintaining the highest possible level of physical, mental and social effectiveness of employees. At the same time, it should form a base for identification and realization the employee interests insofar as they relate to work and working conditions. To this effect, the documents emphasize, as already mentioned, measures designed to limit the occupational risks at workplace, such as regular health and safety instructions, raising the awareness of health and safety problems and risk prevention procedures, as well as the provision of appropriate personal protective equipment to personnel.

Transformations of material and immaterial working conditions – such as those resulting from the implementation of modern solutions in production and

technology – require not only continuous improvement of employee competences, but also increased awareness of new risks brought about by these changes. At the same time, the increased expectations towards employees tend to generate new behaviours and expectations on their part, such as the need to minimize health and safety risks in work-related activities. In this context, it comes as no surprise that the issues related to the impact of modern changes upon individuals and their well-being are greatly emphasized by all the standards and normative regulations in the areas of corporate social responsibility.

The success of postulated activities in the sphere of working conditions, as related to the concept of corporate social responsibility, will largely depend on the employers, particularly on their belief in viability and usefulness of application. It seems that the most important aspect of this process is the identification of attitudes that influence the improvements of working conditions in companies. In this context – based on careful analysis of opinions gathered among both employees and employers – it seems essential to determine whether the adopted approaches to working conditions represent a conscious attempt at implementation of the CSR concept.

3. Manifestations and premises for working conditions improvements – results of empirical studies

The pilot study on correlations between the adopted approaches to reorganization of working conditions and the practical realization of the CSR concept involved ten companies – both in production and services sphere – of varied size, employment structure and location. It was assumed that the formulation of safe and healthy working conditions is of particular importance in production entities, due to their employees' increased exposure to workplace risks and hazards⁵, as related to the use of advanced machinery and equipment. For this reason, the study targeted seven production companies, while the remaining three represented the sector of services.

In the course of empirical studies, the authors found that the issues related to occupational health and safety were adequately represented in management processes. Practical implementations varied among respondent companies, as

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5 Risks and hazards represent factors which may directly contribute to harm. Harm, in this context, is one of the preconditions – along with work-related impact, suddenness, and the external character of factors involved – for legal recognition of a given incident as industrial accident.

did the instruments used for the purpose and the premises behind the decisions to implement such changes.

Two of the large production companies targeted by the pilot study represented the approach that occupational health and safety is of utmost importance in their business operation. The managers of those two companies expressed their strong belief that building a risk- and hazard-free workplace should be at the top of the structure of organizational values. They also emphasized their belief that this task is best addressed by the implementation of occupational health and safety management systems, in line with the OHSAS 18001 requirements. The adoption of a systemic approach to the management of workplace conditions, based on the use of instruments recommended in normative documents, results in improvements in many areas related to working conditions. One of such areas is the occupational risk assessment process. This approach was manifested in the form of regular meetings of an interdisciplinary risk-assessment team, with sufficient representation of not only middle-level management, but also production specialists (e.g. logistics, supply, process specialists) and – most importantly, from the viewpoint of CRS implementation – a good representation of blue-collar employees. In this context, it is worth noting that this particular manifestation of employee representation (empowerment) is by itself a clear element of the practical implementation of the CSR concept in company environment. Worker participation in the process of regulating the working conditions is postulated not only in respective legal obligations⁶, but also in normative regulations expressed in the OHSAS 18001 norm as one of the formal requirements of the system. This issue is also addressed in the ISO 26000 standard, with its recommendation that the occupational health and safety systems be based, among other things, on sufficient worker participation (cf. Cierniak-Emerych 2012, p. 156). Consequently, it must be noted that the use of occupational health and safety systems in accordance with the OHSAS 18001 standard contributes not only to the mandatory implementation of statutory regulations and norms, but also to the implementation of the CSR concept (cf. Pawłowska 2009, p. 20). However, it should also be noted that the incorporation of the standard requirements was not perceived by the management of respondent

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6 In accordance with art. 237^{1a} § 1 pt 2 of the Act of June 26, 1974, the Labour Code (Off.J. 1998 No. 21 pos. 94, with amendments) the employer is obligated to consult with employees on any and all decisions related to occupational health and safety, particularly with respect to vocational risk assessment of individual work assignments and proper dissemination of information on risks and hazards involved.

companies as an intentional effort at implementation of the CSR concept. Thus, the study revealed not only the lack of awareness, but the lack of adequate knowledge of the correlation between those two areas.

In another company (out of the seven production companies represented in the pilot study), the focus on proper health and safety procedures was found to be the main catalyst of changes in company organizational culture, which – in this case – took the form of a safety culture of sorts (Milczarek 2000, p. 18). In practice, this attitude has led to the implementation of an intentional system of risk evaluation and measurement, based on the Bradley curve benchmarking (www.kulturabezpieczenstwa.pl, accessed on: 29.12.2013).

This particular approach involves benchmarking of the safety culture from the perspective of individual employees, by relating the relative culture strength to the frequency of workplace accidents. In order to stabilize the benchmark index at the lowest possible value, the company in question adopted the Lock-Out Tag-Out method (www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3120.pdf, accessed on: 30.12.2013). This method is based on a system of safety lock-out mechanisms, resulting in a significant reduction of occupational risk involved in equipment maintenance and servicing procedures. The method is based on a simple procedure of powering off the electric devices and appliances during maintenance, to (*ex definitione*) eliminate the hazard of accidents.

It must be noted at this point that, in the practice of Polish companies, this method is regarded as voluntary and perceived as extra precaution, while other countries (for example, the United States) emphasize it as an obligatory requirement sanctioned by law.

Another production company under study, in their search for methods of effective monitoring and elimination of occupational risks, introduced a system for recording potentially hazardous practices, going beyond the scope of their statutory obligations⁷. This approach has led to formulation of a comprehensive system for storing information on places and situations burdened with excessive risk and accident-prone behaviours, since the stored information can be subsequently used in the process of designing, implementing and periodic evaluation of risk areas for accident prevention purposes (cf. Dudka 2005, p. 12).

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7 The term *potentially hazardous practices* refers to incidents which, for some reason, cannot be legally classified as industrial accidents, since one or more of the required preconditions were not met, for example – no harm resulted from the incident. Polish standard defines them as dangerous, work-related incidents with no apparent injury or health deterioration consequences (PN-N-18001:2004 *Occupational health and safety management systems – Requirements*).

The realization of such a voluntary project, well beyond the scope of obligatory precautions, is in line with the recommendations stated in the ISO 26000 standard (PN-ISO 26000:2012 *Guidance for Social Responsibility*, p. 52). However, in the case of this particular company, the process was a result of intuitive and subconscious insight into safety measures and practices. As such, it not only attests to the aforementioned lack of knowledge of the CSR concept, but also to the low awareness of the fundamental assumptions of the above standard.

The remaining companies of the production sphere – four out of seven entities under evaluation – adopted the minimum plan of adhering to only the obligatory regulations expressed in the labour code and the applicable health and safety regulations. No attempts were identified in these four companies to improve the working conditions beyond the scope of statutory obligations binding under the Polish legal system, as expressed, among others, in the labour code and in other normative acts, such as the statutory acts and ministerial decisions with respect to occupational health and safety or, more generally, with respect to working conditions. However, it must be noted that, just as in the case of corporate culture of workplace safety, the CSR concept is characterised by a staged approach, representing various levels of practical application. The main assumptions of the concept, presented by R. W. Griffin (1998), also attest to the staged approach to corporate social responsibility on the part of individual companies. One of such stages is the ‘social obligation’ stage (or level), manifested in the realization of only those tasks which are expressed verbatim in the applicable regulations of the law (Griffin 1998, pp. 151-154). This is in line with the provisions of the ISO 26000 standard, as stated in the recommendation to implement the principle of corporate social responsibility by means of adhering to applicable legal norms.

Of the three service sector companies under evaluation, only one implemented changes in their management structure by adjusting it to the requirements of the SAISA8000:2008 standard through incorporation of sustainable human resources management system. In this case, apart from activities centred on realization of human and employee rights, the authors also identified commendable efforts at increasing the social involvement of the company suppliers and subcontractors (i.e. external stakeholders), as well as concerted activities intent on improving the working conditions of employees (cf. Zięba 2013, p. 157).

With respect to the most important premises for the implementation of health and safety improvements, the representatives of senior management of the companies under study declared their intent on forming a friendly workplace environment for the purpose of building a favourable company image, in the eyes of the employees and/or customers. This approach, in a sense, can be seen

as attesting to the need for taking up socially responsible attitudes. However, the study also revealed the intuitive (rather than intentional) character of these activities. Neither the employees of the companies under study, nor the employers saw these efforts in the context of the practical implementation of the CSR concept. Even more alarmingly, the authors found that company stakeholders were largely unaware of the fact that the adopted practices might be perceived as practical implementations of the recommendations presented in the aforementioned standards and norms, both with respect to working conditions and CSR.

4. Conclusions

In theoretical perspective, the perception of working conditions as an important area of the corporate social responsibility concept implementation is greatly enhanced by their inclusion in the normative texts of international standards and norms formulated with reference to the CSR concept.

At the same time, results of pilot empirical studies may suggest that the respondent companies, in their efforts to improve the working conditions, were in no way directly influenced by conscious intent to implement the CSR concept, despite the fact that most of those activities were, in fact, closely related to standards and norms based on the CSR concept. This particular paradox may be the result of the lack of comprehensive approach to the multi-dimensional qualities of the CSR concept, as identified among the representatives of management personnel in companies under study. It seems that another important factor in this context is the identified lack of knowledge and/or awareness of the fact that CSR may be an effective way to increase the company competitive advantage, provided that the concept is perceived in all its dimensions, i.e. in the context of economic, moral, ethical, legal and philanthropic activities, rather than in the narrow perspective of adherence to applicable norms and standards.

The above deliberations surely do not exhaust the broad context of correlations between CSR and company working conditions, but they may form a good base for further analyses and research in this area.

Summary

Working conditions as one of the areas for implementing the concept of corporate social responsibility

Implementation of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept is presented, as it applies to the practice of companies.

The authors focus on an isolated area of CSR implementation, namely the improvement of working conditions, in the context of selected international standards and norms directly referencing the CSR concept. Circumstances of practical implementations in this area are presented, based on results of pilot empirical studies. The context of the implementations is analysed, as well as their correlations with the task of practical realization of the CSR concept.

Keywords: *CSR concept, working conditions, occupational health and safety.*

Streszczenie

Warunki pracy jako obszar urzeczywistniania koncepcji społecznej odpowiedzialności w przedsiębiorstwie

W artykule przedstawiono problem urzeczywistniania koncepcji społecznej odpowiedzialności (CSR) w przedsiębiorstwach. Skupiono się na jednym z jej obszarów, tj. kształtowaniu warunków pracy, odnosząc się przy tym przede wszystkim do określonych standardów oraz norm międzynarodowych dotyczących CSR. Ukazano okoliczności podejmowania w przedsiębiorstwach działań zorientowanych na doskonalenie warunków pracy i związku tych działań z urealnianiem CSR.

Słowa

kluczowe: *konceptcja CSR, warunki pracy, bezpieczeństwo i higiena pracy.*

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