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Analysis of Practices to Increase the Workforce Agility and to Develop a Sustainable and Competitive Business

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Abstract: The current business environment is volatile and complex. Companies must constantly identify creative and environmentally friendly solutions. The emphasis on employees and workforce agility has become an attribute of sustainable and competitive organizations simultaneously. The purpose of our study is to validate the hypothesis that there is a direct positive relationship between ranking as important top position of human resources in a company and the extent to which specific practices to increase workforce agility were adopted. Our survey is based on an original questionnaire, with a 92% response rate. We focused on large, independent decision-making companies from Western Romania, for which the implementation of sustainable principles is more difficult than for multinationals. The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS23 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The results indicate an average extent of the adoption of management practices aiming to increase workforce agility (45%) and a ranking of human resources in first place as the most important resource (31.7%). Using the Pearson Chi-Square Test, the hypothesis was confirmed (significance = 0.026). Our main conclusion is that if managers intend to develop a sustainable and competitive business, they should attribute a strategic role to employees and adopt practices to increase their agility.

Keywords: agility; organizational agility; agile workforce; agile practices; human resources; competitive advantage; sustainable development; sustainable business

1. Introduction

Over time, organizations have faced various challenges and opportunities. However, the current business environment changes at a faster rate than ever, and organizations must constantly adapt to new conditions.

With the approval by United Nations member states of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, in 2015, each organization has a responsibility to contribute “meaningfully and constructively to our common future” [1]. It is essential for companies to exhibit proactive behavior and to intensify their actions to support the achievement of a “sustainable future” [1].

At this time, “the private sector plays a critical role in providing solutions that can contribute to solving these challenges, while also generating new business opportunities” [2]. By adopting different measures to support sustainable development, “businesses can reap benefits for themselves and for the markets they depend upon” [2].

Sustainable organizations are those that have adhered to the policies and principles of sustainable development, adopting and implementing concrete measures to diminish negative impacts on the environment and to amplify positive effects on the environment, and at the same time becoming more efficient and competitive [3].

The process of transforming industrial organizations into sustainable and simultaneously competitive organizations is complex and difficult. Decision-makers have been aware that in most of these situations failure is not caused by improper management of financial resources, as was long believed, but mainly by an incorrect appreciation and involvement of human resources in this process [4]. “Embedding sustainability involves changing the entire orientation of the company” [1], including the human resources approach.

In this context, human resources have been valued very differently, with their role and importance in an organization changing radically. Although employees were traditionally considered to be mere elements of company expenses, they have become the most valuable asset for organizations, especially for high-performing and sustainable organizations [5].

Evolution can be observed also at the level of nomenclature: “personnel”, “human resources”, “human capital”, “intellectual capital”, and others [6]. We can identify differences between the various names, for example between human resources and human capital. Thus, while human resources are people with a strict role in the labor process, human capital denotes someone who, either individually or at the team level, provides all the knowledge, abilities, skills, and experiences available to the organization to contribute specifically to the achievement its objectives [7]. It is quite obvious that greater human capital leads to a sustainable competitive advantage through being able to identify superior solutions for improving performance and carrying out the eco-innovative activities of the business, as it has a high level of education and qualification [8,9].

Therefore, by becoming key resources in the development of high-performing organizations, employees should be a major concern for any business [10]. Creating a true culture of employee development and organizational efficiency has already become a common practice for sustainable organizations, which thus become more competitive, more productive, and more profitable [8]. The main points for the organizations that intend to become sustainable involve the development and retention of the best employees within the organization and attracting others who have required capabilities [11]. We also recommend implementing talent management methods [11].

With the evolution of human resources, the entire Human Resources Department has gone through a transition from “a predominantly functional role, to a strategic one, with an emphasis on developing and maintaining a dynamic, knowledgeable, and progressive career-oriented staff” [12]. Today more than ever, in sustainable organizations attention is focused on two aspects: human resources and the Human Resources Department.

The current business environment has become volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA), with numerous opportunities and threats, presenting itself as a network of organizations that constantly appear, develop, or disappear. The challenge for today’s organizations is to continually adapt to their customers, to meet their needs quickly and uniquely, to identify opportunities before competitors, to rapidly formulate and implement creative strategic initiatives, and the permanent concern to minimize negative impacts on the environment and resources. The innovation drive, knowledge, and skills of employees, supported by high technology and digitalization, represent the strengths of an organization that aims to incorporate more and more sustainable development policies into their business strategy.

Agility could be a solution for organizations that are oriented towards sustainable development to meet these challenges [13]. In the context of sustainable business dynamics, organizational agility is

regarded as an important business capability, contributing to success in a changing and competitive environment [14,15].

In the process of transforming an organization into an agile and sustainable organization, its managers must realize that agility can only be achieved through employees, it being an exclusive attribute of them [16]. It is known that an agile and flexible strategy can be an asset in the implementation of sustainable policies. However, it has been found that the process of implementation does not reside only through sophisticated technology, as was assumed in the past, but much more in the workforce of the organization [17]. The orientation towards human resources is a priority for setting goals or strategies, and their agility is the most important factor for survival and achieving a competitive advantage [18].

Agile workforces are the only ones able to handle the multitude of unexpected and dynamic changes in an uncertain and volatile business environment and can proactively identify viable solutions [19]. Being “an organized and dynamic talent”, they can adapt “quickly and easily” to capitalize on new opportunities and market circumstances, providing organizations with the most appropriate skills and knowledge at the right time [13,20]. Because of this, employees are considered the intellectual capital of an organization and the “hidden value of organizations” [21].

Thus, with the awareness of their usefulness and their importance within organizations, their role has changed considerably in the last years. As it has been proven that employees make a decisive contribution to the success of an organization, they can be considered as real strategic resources.

In this context, managers are paying “more attention to human resources policies and applications to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and high performance in business operations” [22]. It was concluded that, to benefit from the skills and potential of employees, and for them to be able to contribute to the success of the organization, it is necessary to adopt “personnel management far from rules and bureaucracy” [22].

It is important to see how a favorable environment, a culture of agility for human resources in organizations, can be created and developed. “A variety of approaches have been proposed in the literature for creating or cultivating workforce agility: staffing, training, coordination, collaboration, incentives and empowerment” [23]. Others refer to “organizational learning and training, compensation, involvement, teamwork and IS” [19].

The main characteristics of workers who have the potential to become agile are the following: “learning and self-development, problem-solving ability, being comfortable with change, new ideas and new technologies” [18]. Therefore, it must be taken into account that workers’ agility springs from the “level of knowledge, the orientation towards learning and the development of activities that support the organization” [24].

The current paper is based on our research, by which we identified which resources respondents perceived to be the most important in the activity of the organizations to which they belong.

In this study, carried out on large and independent decision-making companies in Romania, the results showed a positioning of human resources at the top of the most important resources of organizations, followed, at a small difference, by financial resources [25].

We set out to focus on identifying the practical relevance of this aspect. The objectives pursued by our study are the following:

- O1: to present the most important three resources in independent decision-making organizations;
- O2: to identify the extent to which specific practices have been adopted to increase workforce agility in independent decision-making organizations;
- O3: to identify the relationship between the most important resources in independent decision-making organizations’ activities and the extent to which the adoption of practices that support the increase of workforce agility contribute to this.

In our opinion, if human resources are ranked as the most important organizational resource, then they positively influence the extent to which practices to increase workforce agility have been adopted in organizations. We consider this to be the main hypothesis of our study.

We consider that the interest in the strategic use of human resources, in increasing their agility, can only be identified in those organizations that ranked human resources as the most important resource in their activities. Organizations that placed other types of resources in the role of strategic resources, as well as those that placed human resources in a leading position only at a declaratory level, are less likely to adopt practices to enhance employees' agile ability, or to offer them the freedom to act creatively, responsibly, and in real-time to clients' needs and requirements.

In our opinion, once this step has been completed, the companies that oriented towards sustainable development gained a strong and lasting advantage in the whole transformational process, and the chances of being competitive and sustainable were greatly increased.

We intend to find answers to the following research questions: "Are human resources properly valued in companies?" "Which practices have been adopted to increase workforce agility and simultaneously competitiveness and sustainability?" Thus, our study will present the reality of the investigated companies; the steps taken by them to become agile, sustainable, and competitive; and identify examples of good practices for increasing workforce agility. The study may represent for some of the participating companies an opportunity to raise awareness of the new reality and to improve their current performance. Also, it may represent a model and a starting point for other participating companies. We aim to bring to the attention of decision-makers the crucial fact that the future of their companies depends on the adequate valorization of human resources, on the need to consider them as strategic partners, and on the execution of the transformation process of their companies in this respect, pointing them towards a large array of best practices to improve the agility of their workforce.

The results obtained, as well as their analysis, will subsequently be presented in detail.

2. Methodology

To obtain the information referred to in the practical part of our research, we used a survey based on a questionnaire, the research instrument being an original questionnaire designed considering the information gleaned from our critical literature analysis. Once the basic research method had been established, all the necessary steps were followed for its successful execution, namely: the preliminary or pre-survey stage, the choice of techniques, and the drafting of the questionnaire (stage I); conducting the actual research (stage II); data processing, analysis, data interpretation, and the writing and communication of the report (stage III).

The investigation universe consists of companies bigger than 250 employees from the Western Region of Romania, regardless of the capital origin (foreign, Romanian, mixed), ownership (private, public), or sector of activity (manufacturing, services, construction). We selected the companies that are decision-making independent companies and are not a subsidiary of a multinational company, and where sustainable development policies are incorporated in their business strategy, being adopted at the group level and successfully implemented at the subsidiary level. Our idea was to focus on companies that are oriented towards sustainable development and have to manage independently the whole process of adopting in their activity some solutions such as energy efficiency, the efficient consumption of resources, the reduction of emissions, the use of biodegradable materials, the reduction of defects, waste recycling, and others. As has been recognized, the process of sustainable development for such organizations is a much more difficult one. To be sustainable, the organizations identified by us must first establish a sustainable development strategy. This is necessary, but not enough. The most difficult step is surely its implementation, and success depends to a large extent on the involvement of human resources.

Even the decision to focus upon the Western Region (comprising four counties: Arad, Timis, Caras-Severin and Hunedoara) of Romania is not accidental. This is one of the most developed regions of the country, with a prosperous and competitive business environment. Several factors have contributed to this, among which perhaps the most important is the immediate vicinity of the border with Hungary, the gateway to Europe. Thus, this region is at the top of the preferences of investors, both Romanian and foreign.

The database containing the searched companies was obtained from the Doing Business site and the website of the Ministry of Public Finance [26,27]. Initially, we identified 37 large organizations in Arad county, 9 in Caras-Severin county, 24 in Hunedoara county, and 67 in Timis county; 137 in total. By eliminating the subsidiaries of multinational companies (72 in total), the final sample for our study was reduced to 65 companies (47% of the initial sample). This research focused only on respondents who were well informed about the human-resources-specific activities of their organization, namely the head of the Human Resources Department. Therefore, the questionnaire was distributed exclusively to them, one for each participating company, in most cases by face-to-face meetings, and, in only a few instances, by e-mail. Out of a total of the 65 identified companies, we received answers from 60 companies, representing 92% of the total sample. Thus, we consider this study to be statistically representative.

In the case of the analyzed variables, the respondents had the opportunity to give open answers when they were ranking the most important three resources in the activity of the company that they were representing. Their perception regarding the adoption of 23 practices to increase workforce agility was expressed by using the Likert evaluation scale, with five response level (not at all = 0, to a small extent = 1, to an average extent = 2, to a large extent = 3, to a full extent = 4). For the statistical analysis of the data, we used SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 23, and to study the distribution of relative frequencies of several classes, we did the crosstab operation. Next, to test the validity of the stated hypothesis and to get statistically significant results, the nature of the variables involved were considered using the Chi-Square Test. The alpha significance threshold was assigned the value of 0.05.

3. Results

3.1. Ranking of the Three Most Important Categories of Resources in the Activity of Organizations

Since in our current research we consider that the extent to which practices to increase workforce agility have been adopted in organizations are influenced by perceptions of the importance of human resources in the organization's activity, we believe that was necessary to present the obtained results for both variables involved and then to test our hypothesis.

We wanted to find out which three categories of resources are considered to be the most important in the activity of the company because we aimed to obtain more detailed information and to be able to carry out a more in-depth and complete further analysis. We also decided to consider situations in which human resources would be placed in a different position than first. Later, we wanted to find whether this aspect would materialize in the practices of companies by not adopting or implementing, to a small extent, some practices that would support the increasing agility of the workforce.

So, firstly, we asked respondents to indicate the first three most important categories of resources in the activity of their organization.

Our study has shown that in the opinion of the respondents, the first position in the top three of the most important resources in the activity of the company belongs to human resources (31.7%) [25]. In our opinion, the results do not demonstrate the existence of some categorical answers, since financial resources are positioned at very short distance (30.0%), followed by technological resources (18.3%), material resources (13.3%) and then informational resources (6.7%) [25]. Thus, one notices the persistence of an older belief among some respondents from the analyzed organizations, according to which financial resources play the most important role in the activity carried out by an organization. The results obtained for the first, second, and third positions are presented in Table 1. Regarding the resources considered to be in the second position of importance, the values obtained again indicate a close competition between financial (35.0%) and human resources (28.3%). The results for the third place are technological resources (35.0%) in first place, followed by financial (26.7%) and human resources (18.3%).

Table 1. Distribution of answers regarding the most important resources in the activity of the organization.

Resources	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulate Percent
First Place				
Human resources	19	31.7	31.7	31.7
Financial resources	18	30.0	30.0	61.7
Technological resources	11	18.3	18.3	80.0
Material resources	8	13.3	13.3	93.3
Informational resources	4	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0	
Second Place				
Financial resources	21	35.0	35.0	35.0
Human resources	17	28.3	28.3	63.3
Material resources	8	13.3	13.3	76.7
Technological resources	8	13.3	13.3	90.0
Informational resources	6	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0	
Third Place				
Technological resources	21	35.0	35.0	35.0
Financial resources	16	26.7	26.7	61.7
Human resources	11	18.3	18.3	80.0
Material resources	10	16.7	16.7	96.7
Informational resources	2	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

3.2. The Extent to Which Specific Practices to Increase Workforce Agility in Organizations Have Been Adopted

Another question in the survey involved indicating the extent of the adoption of a series of 23 management practices that could be used to increase simultaneously workforce agility and the sustainability and competitiveness of organizations. We have identified the following practices:

1. selective recruitment, selection, and testing techniques (procedures so that candidates whose skills are perfectly suited to the needs of the company are correctly identified);
2. use by employees of specialized software for different activities;
3. programs to attract the best candidates to the firm;
4. retention programs for the best performing employees within the company;
5. talent management;
6. ensuring opportunities to develop professional skills at the workplace;
7. continuous improvement for innovation;
8. knowledge management;
9. formal systems for evaluating professional performance and providing feedback;
10. benefits and incentives for the recognition of professional merits;
11. loyalty programs;
12. health insurance programs;
13. programs to ensure the safety and security of work;
14. fair pay and reward programs;
15. performance management system;
16. providing opportunities for promotion;
17. providing the opportunity for the flexible organization of work;
18. employee involvement in decision-making;
19. easy access of subordinates to direct hierarchical superior;

20. delegation of authority;
21. work autonomy;
22. teamwork;
23. quality circles.

The results are presented in Table 2, and the practices that received the highest results (that were adopted to a large extent or fully) are indicated in Table 3.

Table 2. Distribution of answers and the central tendency regarding the practices adopted to increase workforce agility in organizations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Fully	25	9	6	9	5	9	10	8	11	12	12	11	15	14	13	14	10	3	17	4	5	19	7
Large Extent	20	20	14	10	11	23	20	7	25	17	15	9	22	18	12	13	13	9	22	23	26	22	10
Average Extent	10	17	9	18	18	22	11	20	10	16	12	23	13	15	16	18	19	22	16	25	15	14	18
Small Extent	4	13	23	20	19	2	12	17	12	12	13	11	6	11	13	11	9	18	2	4	7	3	13
Not At All	1	1	8	3	7	4	7	8	2	3	8	6	4	2	6	4	9	8	3	4	7	2	12
N	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
Valid	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Median	3.000	2.000	1.000	2.000	2.000	3.000	2.500	2.000	3.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	3.000	3.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	2.000	3.000	2.000	3.000	3.000	2.000
Mode	4.0	3.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	3.0	3.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	2.0
General Median	2.000																						
General Mode	2.0																						

Table 3. Ranking of practices based on the sum of answers for “fully” and “to a large extent”.

Practice Number	Full + Large Extent	Percentage of Total Companies	Small + Not at All	Percentage of Total Companies
1	45	75.00%	5	8.33%
22	41	68.33%	5	8.33%
19	39	65.00%	5	8.33%
13	37	61.67%	10	16.67%
9	36	60.00%	14	23.33%
6	32	53.33%	6	10.00%
14	32	53.33%	13	21.67%
21	31	51.67%	14	23.33%
7	30	50.00%	19	31.67%
2	29	48.33%	14	23.33%
10	29	48.33%	15	25.00%
11	27	45.00%	21	35.00%
16	27	45.00%	15	25.00%
20	27	45.00%	8	13.33%
15	25	41.67%	19	31.67%
17	23	38.33%	18	30.00%
3	20	33.33%	31	51.67%
12	20	33.33%	17	28.33%
4	19	31.67%	23	38.33%
23	17	28.33%	25	41.67%
5	16	26.67%	26	43.33%
8	15	25.00%	25	41.67%
18	12	20.00%	26	43.33%

Analyzing the existing data in Table 3, we observed three quartiles of companies (Q1 = 15 companies, Q2 = 30 companies, and Q3 = 45 companies).

In the interval of the lowest quartile, there was no practice, meaning that no practice was adopted to a large or full extent by more than 45 of the 60 participating companies. In our opinion, this situation shows that the investigated companies are progressing towards developing the agility of their workforce and towards being sustainable and competitive.

In the second quartile, eight practices are increasing workforce agility: practice number 1 (selective recruitment, selection, and testing techniques, 45 companies); practice number 22 (teamwork, 41 companies); practice number 19 (easy access of subordinates to direct hierarchical manager,

39 companies); practice number 13 (programs to ensure safety and security of work, 37 companies); practice number 9 (formal systems for evaluating professional performance and providing feedback, 36 companies); practice number 6 (ensuring opportunities to develop professional skills at the workplace, 32 companies); practice number 14 (fair pay and reward programs, 32 companies); and practice number 21 (work autonomy, 31 companies).

It is necessary to specify that we consider that practices number 1, 6, 9, 13 and 14 are human resources management practices, and practices number 19, 21, and 22 are practices of the collaborative management style of the company's managers.

The general response trend can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. The central tendency of the respondents' answers regarding the practices adopted to increase workforce agility in organizations.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2.0	27	45.0	45.0
	3.0	15	25.0	70.0
	4.0	8	13.3	83.3
	1.0	6	10.0	93.3
	0.0	4	6.7	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	

The calculated values of the specific indicators for appreciating the central tendency of respondents' answers show that the specific practices for increasing workforce agility were adopted only to an average extent (45.0% of the respondents, the general median being equal to 2.000 and the general mode having the same value of 2.000).

3.3. Hypothesis Testing

As we have already stated in the introduction, the hypothesis from which we started the present study is the following:

Hypothesis: if human resources are ranked in the first position as the most important resource, then they positively influence the extent to which practices to increase workforce agility have been adopted in independent decision-making organizations.

Although our study continues and supports previous research in the field, this hypothesis is original, with a different approach from existing ones. This combines the results of studies that have proven the importance and role of human resources in organizations [10,17,18,21,22] with those that have emphasized the need to develop workforce agility and have identified specific practices to do so [13,18,19,23,24,28–30]. This study may be the beginning of a new research direction, that of identifying factors that either support or are barriers in this process. In our hypothesis, the two variables are closely related, the perception of decisions regarding human resources influencing the extent of the adoption of practices for increasing workforce agility in companies. We based this on the following reasoning: in cases where human resources are considered by the managers of a company to be the most important resource and ranked in the first position, then the level of adoption for practices aimed to increase workforce agility will be larger (Table 5). These practices will increase the workforce involved in the decision-making and decision-taking processes, including strategic decisions, empowering the workforce in their entire work.

Table 5. Crosstab between the most important resources and the adoption of practices to increase workforce agility in organizations.

Count		Agile Workforce Practices, Extent of Adoption					Total
		0.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	
Resources Top (First Position)	Financial resources	1	2	10	4	1	18
	Informational resources	0	0	3	1	0	4
	Material resources	0	2	2	4	0	8
	Technological resources	3	2	5	0	1	11
	Human resources	0	0	7	6	6	19
Total		4	6	27	15	8	60

In our opinion, ranking human resources in a position other than first in importance in the activities of organizations is similar to the non-adoption or the adoption to a very small extent of specific practices to increase their agility. Since they would not be considered the most important in the activity of the company, attention would not be directed to the better use of their capabilities and their involvement in obtaining a competitive advantage (Table 5).

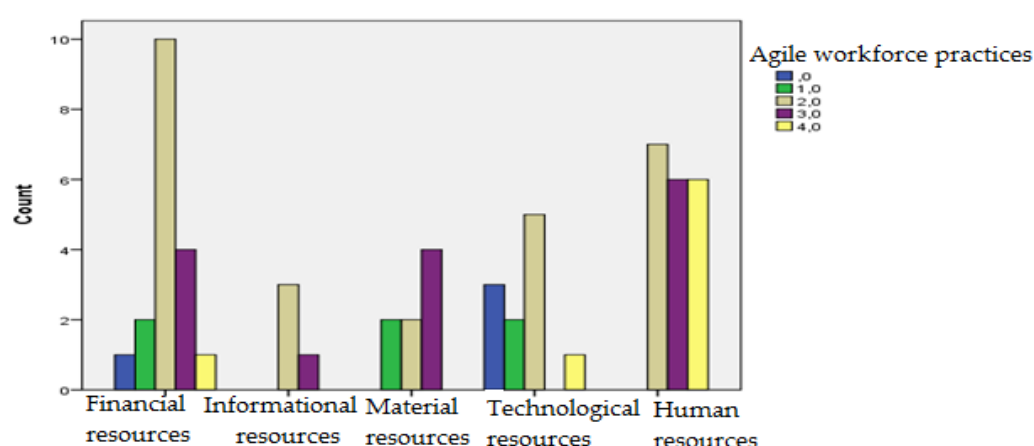
We used the Chi-Square Test to verify the existence and nature of the relationship between the two variables. It resulted in a significance value, Sig. equal to 0.026, lower than the value of the significance threshold $\alpha = 0.05$ (Table 6).

Table 6. Chi-Square Test—hypothesis testing.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-Sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	28.646 ^a	16	0.026
Likelihood Ratio	32.030	16	0.010
N of Valid Cases	60		

^a means $\alpha = 0.05$.

Therefore, we conclude that there is a direct and positive association between the positioning of human resources at the top of the importance given to all resources on the one hand and the measure of the adoption of practices that increase the agility of human resources, thus validating our hypothesis H (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The concordance between the variables of hypothesis H.

Our results also indicate that the importance of human resources in a company is confirmed when human resource practices are largely implemented in the company's activity, and not only stated as a simple, declarative level.

For the resources ranked second and third in terms of their importance to the activity of the analyzed organizations, we applied the same steps: crosstab operation and Chi-Square Test Tables 7 and 8, respectively Tables 9 and 10. In this case, our research results indicate that these two positions do not influence the extent of the adoption of practices for increasing workforce agility (a significance value Sig. equal to 0.463, and a significance value Sig. equal to 0.120, both bigger than the value of the significance threshold $\alpha = 0.05$).

Table 7. The crosstab between the resources ranked second and the adoption of practices to increase workforce agility in organizations.

Count		Agile Workforce Practices, Extent of Adoption					Total
		0.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	
Resources Top (Second Position)	Financial resources	2	2	10	3	4	21
	Informational resources	0	0	2	4	0	6
	Material resources	1	2	3	0	2	8
	Technological resources	0	0	4	3	1	8
	Human resources	1	2	8	5	1	17
Total		4	6	27	15	8	60

Table 8. The Chi-Square Test correlation between the resources in second place and the practices to increase workforce agility in organizations.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-Sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	15.852 ^a	16	0.463
Likelihood Ratio	19.098	16	0.264
N of Valid Cases	60		

^a means $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 9. The crosstab between the resources ranked third and the adoption of practices to increase workforce agility in organizations.

Count		Agile Workforce Practices, Extent of Adoption					Total
		0.0	1.0	2.0	3.0	4.0	
Resources Top (Third Position)	Financial resources	0	2	7	6	1	16
	Informational resources	0	0	2	0	0	2
	Material resources	1	0	3	4	2	10
	Technological resources	0	0	13	4	4	21
	Human resources	3	4	2	1	1	11
Total		4	6	27	15	8	60

Table 10. The Chi-Square Test correlation between the resources in third place and the adoption of practices to increase workforce agility in organizations.

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-Sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	31.436 ^a	16	0.120
Likelihood Ratio	32.139	16	0.010
N of Valid Cases	60		

^a means $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. Discussion

Flexibility, adaptability, speed, creativity, continuous development, and innovation are attributes of agility, sustainability, and competitiveness that can be acquired by companies only through their employees [10,13,14,17].

Once this idea appeared in the specialized literature, the first studies were conducted to identify the managerial practices that would support the development of workforce agility in companies. The results showed that organizational practices such as organizational learning and training, reward systems, involvement, teamwork, and information sharing support the development of workforce agility [28,29]. The initial studies were further developed, identifying yet another important category of practices, defined as psychological empowerment, that contribute to increasing workforce agility. Decentralized decision-making, employee autonomy, low formalization, and flat structure have emerged as promoters of labor agility [13,29,30]. Consequently, two categories of practices have been identified that facilitate the achievement and development of labor agility: organizational practices and psychological empowerment practices.

Recent studies, although still small in number, are beginning to be more in-depth and detailed. It has been shown that the intensity with which management practices contribute to the development of workforce agility differs. Certain practices have a greater impact on developing the agility of the workforce than others. For example, it was found that “Teamwork has the greatest influence on workforce agility, followed by compensation system (strongly related), empowerment (greater role), training (supportive practices of empowerment), and then information systems (little impact)” [28].

Starting from previous research, our study set out to study the reality in Romanian companies, identifying the extent of the implementation of the practices that facilitate the increase of workforce agility. At the same time, we wanted to see if there was a tendency for decision-makers to choose certain practices to the detriment of others.

The results of our study showed that the specific practices for increasing workforce agility were adopted “to an average extent”, the general median being equal to 2.000 and the general mode having the same value of 2.000.

We consider that the level of this result is justified by the close positioning of human and financial resources as the most important resources in the activity of a company. The limited empowerment of human resources may be another explanation.

The practices considered to be adopted “to a large extent” or “a full extent” also belong to the category of traditional management practices (the use of formal and selective techniques, procedures, and testing for recruitment and selection; the use by employees of specialized software for different human resource activities; ensuring the opportunity of developing skills professional systems at work; the existence of formal systems for evaluating professional performance and providing feedback; a system of benefits and incentives for recognizing professional merits; employee loyalty programs; employee safety and security at work programs; fair reward and pay programs) and also practices such as continuous improvement for innovation, easy access to the direct supervisor, work autonomy, and teamwork that belong to the category of practices that directly support the increase of the agility of the workforce.

Our results support the conclusions of previous studies, according to which a mix of traditional human resources management practices and supporting the agility of the workforce is normal. Each of these has a lesser or greater influence on the development of workforce agility, and each of these contributes to organizational success [29]. They must coexist, and no category can be neglected, ignored, or eliminated. However, our study observed the tendency of decision-makers to focus more on the classical practices of human resources management, easily adapted and improved, to the detriment of those belonging to the category of psychological empowerment. More extensive and intensive use of agility-supporting practices is needed in companies that plan to increase their workforce agility.

We conclude that the transition to agility has not been completed by any means, as the researched organizations are in the early stages of adopting and implementing agile practices. Therefore, a first and important step has already been taken.

In our opinion, in the immediate next stage more attention should be paid to: attracting and retaining the best employees within the company; to talent management, knowledge management, and performance management; to ensuring the opportunity for promotion; using employee loyalty programs; to ensuring the opportunity for flexible work organization; and to organizing quality circles, all of which directly contribute to increasing the motivation of employees and to being real promoters of creativity.

Once the above practices are adopted, the company can progress to the next stage, that is to successfully executing this change process, giving employees more freedom to act, increasing their involvement in the decision-making and the decision-taking processes, and making extensive use of delegating authority to employees. Previous studies have grouped the above practices into the category of psychological empowerment, demonstrating their efficiency and effectiveness in developing workforce agility [13,29,30]. It has been found that psychological empowerment practices contribute strongly to the development of a proactive attitude and increase flexibility, while also facilitating speed in decision-making, coordination, and action [29]. As to the style of management, we consider that a change is also needed in this phase. This change consists of extending the use by the managers of the company of a more participative style.

We conclude that following this path, companies can strive to create an agile, proactive workforce capable of satisfying creatively, efficiently, and responsibly in real-time the needs of their clients, and, therefore, increasing considerably their chances of becoming competitive and sustainable companies.

In particular, through our study we have succeeded in demonstrating the existence of an important factor in obtaining workforce agility, namely the adequate valorization of the human resources of companies. The extent of the adoption by companies of the practices supporting the development of workforce agility is directly and positively conditioned by the way in which the managers perceive their employees from the point of view of their importance in the activity of the company (Sig. = 0.026). Our results indicate that the importance of human resources in a company is confirmed only when human resource practices are largely implemented in the company's activity, and not only stated at a simple, declarative level, or in positions other than first.

5. Conclusions

Human resources should be assigned a fundamental, strategic role in companies. Declaring that human resources are their most important resource is just not enough. Managers of any company must also demonstrate a change in their practical approach to human resources.

Thus, one should observe a categorical transformation of these, a shift from the perception of human resources just as mere expenditure elements to that of genuine strategic resources of a company. We underline that this should happen not only at the theoretical, declarative level, but at the factual level, too.

Several specialists in the field have also shown that human resources can be considered the main source of competitiveness, being valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and relatively irreplaceable. Our study indicated that there is still a competition between these and the financial resources in terms of their importance as perceived by the managers of the researched companies. The results discussed in this paper strongly support the above statement. However, it is noticeable that the trend is favorable for human resources, which are ranked first in importance by managers in successful companies.

Considering that companies currently have to compete in a turbulent business environment, it should be more important than ever to focus their attention on their human resources. Positioning these as the most important resources in their activity represents a first step towards achieving agility, competitiveness, and sustainability. The adoption of practices to stimulate and increase the agility of the workforce demonstrates the importance given to them, and the fact that it does not exist only on a

declarative level. Moreover, there is a clear, direct, and positive relationship between the two variables, a fact also demonstrated by the results of our study.

The existence of an agile workforce has become a necessity for organizations aiming to gain a competitive advantage in the context of the current business environment. Carrying out the activity in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business environment implies quickly satisfying the changing needs of clients in the most creative, effective, and efficient manner. Thus, the agile workforce, by its characteristics, is the only one capable of responding to this business situation.

Although we have reached the objectives of our study, identifying that the resource considered to be the most important in the activity of companies was human resources, and the extent of the implementation of practices for increasing workforce agility, as well as the relation between the two variables, our research is not without limits. The limitations of our study are the following: the sample is limited to the Western Region of Romania and the results cannot be generalized; the subjectivism of respondents, the Human Resources Manager, in each researched company.

Although we appreciate that the way we approached it in this paper is one that provides both theoretically and practically useful information for those interested, it can certainly be improved and extended. We intend to carry out this study for other categories of companies, such as small and medium-sized companies, and also in the subsidiaries of multinational corporations in Romania. In our opinion, an interesting future research direction is to explore the relationship between various types of management styles (such as transformational, transactional, authoritarian, collaborative, and participative) on the one hand, and workforce flexibility on the other.

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