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## **The impact of benchlearning on the value of human capital. Reflections on an airline case study**

### INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, well-developed strategies, numerous rediscovered management methods and innovation combined with modern technology are behind the success and development of many companies. But the most important ‘element’ of sustainable competitive advantage is the human factor that determines not only the existence of these determinants, but also represents the largest potential for each company, enabling the implementation and the success of targets and tasks.

Human capital plays a crucial role in service companies where competence, knowledge and experience of employees in the course of their contact with customers determine the quality of services and competitiveness of the company. These aspects are of particular importance in relation to mainly airline companies, due to rapid advances in technology and the question of the safety of passengers. Therefore, the managements of many airlines look for such practices and management methods which permanently foster continuous learning and acquiring knowledge at the same time building the most valuable resource such as human capital.

Benchmarking is one of such methods, in the process of which human resources play a huge role because there is cooperation between people with different types of intellect, different views and character traits, which in turn increases obtaining particularly original and valuable solutions. It is worth mentioning that the method motivates learning, and most of all, continuous learning from the best, benchlearning, thereby building a learning organization<sup>2</sup>. This is also encouraged by its formal and procedural nature which disciplines employees, imposing a specific procedure on them. Therefore, to ensure adaptability of benchlearning in the structures of the

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<sup>2</sup> In the literature the term ‘a learning company’ can be found.

company we should use intellectual potential of all employees in the process of their interaction and the creation of a chain of knowledge that can quickly be distributed and used in specific projects [Cyfert, Krzakiewicz, 2009, p. 238].

The aim of this article is to determine the impact of benchlearning on the value of human capital in an airline company. The analysis of this phenomenon is important due to the nature of the aviation industry (the nature of service, innovation, dynamic development, safety), and the need for rapid and continuous learning which is so important nowadays.

### BENCHLEARNING – INTERPRETATION OF THE PHENOMENON

The sources of bench learning should be seen etymologically in the method of benchmarking, whilst it is correlated substantively and procedurally with the concept of a learning organization<sup>3</sup>. Benchmarking and benchlearning can also be considered as a complementary approach because learning is done through benchmarking [Niemiec, 2012, pp. 184–185]. As benchmarking is inextricably linked to learning, the rest of the discussion will be preceded by a theoretical introduction based on a brief review of the literature and at the same time constituting a prelude to explaining the concept of benchlearning.

As a method benchmarking inspires and stimulates the search patterns to learn quickly<sup>4</sup> from others and to create new standards of benefits [Garvin, 1993, pp. 78–81; Simatupang, Sridharan, 2003, p. 5]. Understood as the implementation of the best ideas which are preceded by a self-diagnosis, it is one of the pillars of a learning company [Miczyńska-Kowalska, 2005, p. 190], because it precedes the phase of inventing new solutions [Brilman, 2002, p. 262; Kowalczyk, 2003, p. 117]. So the basic skills in benchmarking of best practices are skills of quickly learning organizations<sup>5</sup> [Bogan, English, 2006, p. 44].

In turn, the concept of a learning organization<sup>6</sup> which is a manifestation of the search of companies for opportunities to gain a better position as a result of syste-

<sup>3</sup> Intensive development of the concept began in 1990 with the publication of P. Senge's work entitled *The fifth discipline: The theory and practice of the learning organization*. [Pierścionek, 2003, p. 254].

<sup>4</sup> J. Welch, an American scientist even believes that learning from others is 'a sign of honor' and it is in the interest of everyone to be a keen observer of the actions of others [Burniewicz, 2003].

<sup>5</sup> *Fast Learning Organizations* (FLO) have the ability to quickly introduce changes and creative evolution. They are characterized by relocation in the wake of the markets and customers.

<sup>6</sup> In many studies, the concept of a learning organization is identified with an intelligent organization and they are treated as exactly the same operating systems. Such an approach could be especially found in publications from the first half of the 90s. However, recently increasingly in the world literature there is a clear distinction between a learning organization and an intelligent organization, which recognizes the latter as a higher organizational form which, apart from acquiring and processing information into useful knowledge, primarily seeks to create the best conditions for the

matic learning, was developed in the late 80s of the twentieth century [Suszyński, 2003, pp. 57–58]. On the other hand, the genesis of the concept is seen in systemic research of organizations which started in the 30's by the L. von Bertalanffy [Rozkwit szpiegostwa gospodarczego, 1997, p. 35]. Peter Senge (USA), who is one of the currently leading popularizers of a learning organization, believes that a learning organization is the one where people continually expand their capacity to create a shared future, not being limited to the assimilation of information, where new ways of thinking and the freedom for collective action flourish and are nurtured [Quoted from Cyfert, Krzakiewicz, 2009, p. 224; Pierścionek, 2003, p. 254]. Batorski adds that a learning organization creates such conditions that learning is not only tolerated but actually required [Batorski, 1998, p. 55].

Learning of an organization is a reflective process which involves members at all levels and which includes the collection of information from the external environment and the inside of the organization [Fisher, White, 2000, p. 245; Pierścionek, 2003, p. 254, Koźmiński, 2004, pp. 111–113]. To stimulate learning processes within the company there is a need for specific actions within the framework of strategic and operational planning and management. In addition to a permanent adaptation of benchmarking within the structure of an organization which determines how to maximize learning [Kahn, 2004, p. 5], properly trained employees and information and communication systems are important conditions. Moreover, there is the need for the concern for the conditions conducive to learning, thus avoiding stress, providing assistance by the managers and a scheme for knowledge acquisition complying with the practice and the capacity of the company [*Pierwszy na rynku, pierwszy z rynku*, 1996, p. 22].

Therefore, in the context of the application of benchmarking within the organization more is said about the so-called. benchlearning [See Węgrzyn, 1998, p. 112] which is a derivative of the activities undertaken in connection with learning in the process of a benchmarking analysis. Sometimes the term benchmarking is replaced by benchlearning [Supernat, 2005, p. 64]. It is difficult to recognize these two concepts as synonymous. The common denominator of benchmarking and benchlearning is learning and the existence of dependence aimed at improving the performance of the company. Benchmarking is more procedural and methodological, whilst benchlearning refers more to human sphere (the development of competence and skills, culture, behavior, habits). Benchmarking is often a comparative analysis and learning from current best practices, whilst benchlearning is learning and drawing conclusions enabling the creation of a better solution. For employees benchlearning is a combination of a career development and organizational learning, and it can be the beginning of long-life learning within the organization. Unlike classical benchmarking, bench learning does not

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utilization of this knowledge through an adequate internal organization [Ziębicki, 2000a, pp. 11–14, Mikula, Ziębicki, 2000, p. 11].

necessarily entail the search for comparable organizations and the use of clear indicators in order to make direct comparisons. The aim of benchlearning is to look for inspiration, for more effective work and to strive for self-development of the employees.

Benchlearning is sometimes referred to as competency benchmarking. As one of the most sublime forms of benchmarking, it is free from fundamental flaws which used to be attributed to benchmarking. Competency benchmarking neither copies any solutions nor imposes solutions delayed in time in relation to the competition. It is focused on capacity building, not on immediate improvement in the condition of the company or improvement of its competitiveness in the medium term. It refers to company's resources, so the basis of which will ensure the success of the company [Niemiec, 2012, p. 180]. These competences are all the features of employees, their knowledge, skills, ambitions, core values, an adopted style of approach whose possession and employee utilization facilitates the pursuit of the strategy of their company [Rostowski, 2004, p. 41].

And finally, benchlearning is a tool to change the organizational culture and leads to what others call 'a learning organization,' provided that the organization creates an appropriate environment for learning, and the managers ensure 'a long-term enhancement' which encourages employees to learn.

#### THE VALUE OF BENCHLEARNIG IN TERMS OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND THE METHODOLOGY

The paper uses the results of the study which was conducted in the selected departments<sup>7</sup> of PLL LOT. Moreover, the research methodology consists of data collection methods, enumeration, analysis, elaboration and the interpretation of results [Kostera, 2003, p. 22].

The study used a questionnaire method and the method of standardized explicit interviews which helped detailing and clarifying the data from the surveys, and which was limited only to the managers of the individual departments. In the analysis and interpretation of the results the elements of descriptive statistics and statistical inference were used. For the analysis of contingency tables a chi square test<sup>8</sup> was used.

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<sup>7</sup> The study involved 27 employees from seven company departments who have used benchmarking to improve the quality of tourism services, with special attention being given to a transport service.

<sup>8</sup> A chi square test is the most common statistical test used to study the relationship between the two traits measured on a nominal scale. In this test made is the null hypothesis that the occurrence of an option of one feature is independent of the option adopted for the second feature (the features are independent). The alternative hypothesis assumes that features are related to each other. Low *p* values allow rejecting the null hypothesis and concluding the existence of dependence in the general population between the two considered features. Detailed calculation procedures can be found in

Because of the issues undertaken, there is a good reason for the structural characteristic of the people researched which takes into account factors such as their education, work experience and the membership of an occupational group. So all the respondents have declared higher education, and one of the them also provided information on a postgraduate degree. Among the 27 respondents there were 11 managers (41%) and 16 employees (59%). When it comes to job tenure, every third person has been working for a relatively short time, less than 5 years (37%), and approximately every fourth respondent has been working for over 20 years (26%).

In the first place, relevant was the question in which all the employees had to refer to the factors determining the competitiveness of the company. And here staff education and experience came in second with only 14 (52%) responses. This undesirable result is important in the context of the issues, as the lack of staff awareness and a belief in their technical and professional value for the development of the company will not be translated into activities related to learning and acquiring knowledge.

Another extremely important aspect of learning is correctness and formalism of tasks undertaken. In the case of such a complex and methodologically comprehensive method as benchmarking, only its correct application (formal benchmarking) can significantly broaden and enrich the knowledge of employees. Informal benchmarking was undoubtedly the most frequently used type of benchmarking in PLL LOT. It is used by 89%, or 24 out of the 27 employees surveyed. From the theoretical and methodological standpoint, the nature of informal benchmarking is very simplified and, in contrast to formal benchmarking, it is more complex and demanding in terms of time as it is not challenging methodologically for employees. It neither encourages employees to continuous learning nor positive competition in search for original solutions.

As a process, benchlearning builds corporate culture of the company, allowing for creation of a group of people within the company who, on many occasions, possess narrow specialties and skills that can be 'used' in the implementation of difficult and demanding tasks. An example of such a move can be a future creation of a team for a benchmarking project, however it was not identified in PLL LOT structure. With regard to process benchmarking, it is also difficult to talk about its effectiveness when the implementation of methods to enrich the knowledge of the employees and to encourage them to learn is accidental or dictated by necessity. In PLL LOT benchmarking is applied systematically by only 6 employees (22%)<sup>9</sup>, frequently by 7 of them (26%), and when necessary by 14 people, which represents 52% of all the 27 employees surveyed. The employees of a company

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a number of books on statistics [see Aczel, 2000, pp. 757–766; Stanis, 2001, pp. 221–262].

<sup>9</sup> That 6-person group applying systematic benchmarking coincides almost entirely with a 5-person group perceiving benchmarking as a process. Therefore, it is difficult to consider this relationship as accidental.

such as PLL LOT should know that the practice of the operation of businesses is subject to constant change, which must be monitored to ensure the identification of the best solutions [Kisperska-Moroń, 2000, p. 11], therefore the use of ad hoc methods is ephemeral.

A traditional learning process is understood as acquiring knowledge by employees through continuous workshops and training. Therefore PLL LOT employees were asked about their participation in training on management methods. Asking this question stems from a perception that the implementation of a given management method usually requires expansion of existing knowledge of both the method proper and its possibilities. As the learning process should involve all employees<sup>10</sup>, the question included the membership of an occupational group and the comparison between them was made with a chi-square test (Table 1).

**Table 1. Participation in training on management methods**

Participation in training on management methods	Occupational group ( $p = 0,3096$ )		Total
	employees	managers	
yes	7 (44%)	7 (64%)	14 (52%)
no	9 (56%)	4 (36%)	13 (48%)
Total	16	11	27

Source: own research.

On the basis of the study, it was found out that a slightly larger percentage of the company's management participated in training, but the difference between the two groups was not large enough to be considered coincidental ( $p = 0,3096$ )<sup>11</sup>. It should be noted that as many as 9 out of 16 employees did not participate in training on management methods.

It should be noted here that participation in training is one of the traditional ways of learning. Whilst organizational learning is a process consisting of three subprocesses such as traditional, empirical<sup>12</sup> and cyber learning<sup>13</sup>. The processes of training through continuous training run parallel to the processes of verification of the existing guidelines and rules governing the functioning of organizations

<sup>10</sup> A learning organization supports the learning process of all employees so that it could constantly change. In this case, it is assumed that between employees and managers interactions are formed, i.e. processes of mutual interaction which result in not only the transfer of knowledge and information but primarily bringing about a change in the attitudes of cooperating people.

<sup>11</sup> When  $p \geq 0.05$  (as in this case) we assume there are no grounds to reject the null hypothesis, which means that the tested difference, dependence, effect is not statistically significant.

<sup>12</sup> Learning understood on the empirical side is a process limited to the acquisition of skills through practical action.

<sup>13</sup> Cyberlearning is constant questioning and verification of existing assumptions about the functioning of organizations.

and the development of operational capabilities through practical action [Mikula, Ziębicki B., 2000, p. 13]. For PLL LOT employees these practical actions and results of traditional learning, manifested in training on management methods, may be their practical use.

Training which contains programs of knowledge acquisition is another quite popular step taken by the management which is a manifestation of benchlearning. One example of such a program, included in the strategic plans of PLL LOT in 2011, was a series of meetings aimed at professional development of its employees. This ‘investment in the employees’ concerned systematic training within the LOT Academy financed from the European Social Fund. The priority in the employee development was the creation of a ‘talent pool’ (Talent Pool Program), which is a key element for human resources in terms of taking up management positions and project management [Must Win Battles – PLL LOT Strategy, pp. 2, 83–85; East Meets West – PLL LOT Strategy, 2011, pp. 4–5]. Since these activities took place in the course of the research, the author had the opportunity to review the program and its principles through conversations with the participating employees<sup>14</sup>. It is difficult to assess how an assumed innovative and interesting program was successful because some of the participants left the company or were dismissed almost immediately after its completion. Therefore, wasted was the potential of those employees who were characterized by much greater openness to change, flexibility in responding to market fluctuations and better preparation for cross-training<sup>15</sup>, so valuable from the point of view of a learning organization.

## CONCLUSION

Expertise and current information is one of the most valuable resources of contemporary businesses. However, we should bear in mind that knowledge is rapidly aging and is subject to dissemination [Castells 1996, pp. 151–196] and as C.R. Roger said “... it is not certain ..., only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security and development ..”[Apanowicz 2005, p. 10]. However, information which is the source of knowledge is a momentary interpretation of reality which obliges us to immediate use. Therefore, gathering and processing information, and adapting knowledge should be continuous in every company. The creation of specific conditions for its formation by developing the organiza-

<sup>14</sup> The assumption of the program was based on a selection of 25 employees, the so-called ‘talented workers’ who throughout the year, an average of 2–3 days each month, participated in trainings on various subjects. The group was divided into smaller teams who through ‘learning’ had to develop a project on the functioning of the company i.e. PLL LOT. The program culminated in an exam. It is worth mentioning that the participants had English classes all the time.

<sup>15</sup> Cross training – preparing employees to take tasks beyond their normal duties.

tional culture<sup>16</sup> and value system which stimulate employee initiative and foster an atmosphere of creative engagement is a difficult but cost-effective task in view of the subsequent benefits [Gierczak, 2014, pp. 123–124].

Benchlearning allows that act of best knowledge acquisition. In its simplest form benchlearning is constant learning from the best. This process very strongly and effectively promotes the development of the organization and its employees, thus increasing the efficiency of its services. Benchlearning stems from the willingness of employees to challenge existing solutions and practices, with a great deal of criticism of their own skills, knowledge and beliefs that the introduced, sometimes far-reaching, changes will effectively serve the achievement of a common vision. Benchlearning will have a positive effect on building human capital if it becomes part of the mentality of the company, and the employees at seeing the results of their work will feel pride which, in turn, will boost their increased creativity.

Steps in this direction should be taken by all the employees, regardless of their position or seniority. Moreover, the ability to learn is an important criterion for the selection of companies, especially in the airline industry<sup>17</sup>, where change and progress determine their existence on the market.

Therefore, one cannot help feeling that PLL LOT forgot that in a learning organization we observe not so much the process of enriching the knowledge of individuals as the consciously shaped system for facilitating and inducing learning of all its employees. It has been neglected that reliability, accuracy and regularity are not only desirable characteristics in school, and employees' awareness of their technical and professional value for the company should not remain a dream. And in the end, that the choice of training and courses, and time spent on them should bring real and tangible benefits for employees and for the company which paid for them. Otherwise, there is doubt whether in such case benchmarking should be used for evaluation of human resources?<sup>18</sup> This would allow for benchmarks in areas such as learning and training, recruitment, professional development and evaluation, as well as job evaluation.

And finally, the key to successful outcomes of learning organizations at all levels is not only the acquisition and creation of knowledge but also sharing it. The one who learns the best and the fastest is most likely to remain on the market. The one who does not learn, will fall [Rutka, 1996, p. 43].

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<sup>16</sup> Mainly by removing organizational barriers, bureaucracy and communications barriers.

<sup>17</sup> In the industries related to the use of advanced technology, 20% of employees' knowledge becomes obsolete each year [quoted after: Bogan, English, 2006, p. 236].

<sup>18</sup> Saratoga Institute is a world leader in effective benchmarking of human capital management thanks to the world's largest (over 15,000 world companies) database of market practices in personnel management. The data relate mainly to the parameters characterizing human resources management, for example the rate and cost of absenteeism, training costs and the rate of training per employee, wage costs as a percentage of revenues and recruitment costs. [Bramham, 2004, p. 124].

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### *Streszczenie*

Mimo iż uczenie się nie jest zjawiskiem nowym to sposób zdobywania wiedzy i czas z tym się wiążący, ma ogromne znaczenie dla rozwoju każdego przedsiębiorstwa. Dlatego coraz częściej poszukuje się metod lub praktyk, które spełniłyby powyższe wymagania, tworząc jednocześnie w organizacji kulturę zachęcającą pracowników do nieustannego poszerzania wiedzy. Przykładem takiej praktyki może być benchlearning, który najczęściej bywa kojarzony z ciągłym uczeniem się i to od tych najlepszych.

W niniejszym opracowaniu podjęto więc próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy benchlearning ma wpływ na „wartość” kapitału ludzkiego. Pracownicy i firma, jaką wybrano do badań zdają się mieć istotne znaczenie i przesądzić o wynikach, gdyż takie przedsiębiorstwo jak PLL LOT powinno cechować nieustanne poszukiwanie sposobów sprostania ciągle rosnącej konkurencji rynkowej. Warto też nadmienić, że treści zawarte w niniejszym opracowaniu należy traktować jako wprowadzające z dwóch powodów. Po pierwsze, zagadnienie benchlearningu nie należy do tych najczęściej podejmowanych w literaturze przedmiotu, zarówno w wymiarze teoretycznym, jak i praktycznym. Po drugie, przedstawione wyniki stanowią tylko pewien wycinek rozbudowanego zagadnienia, jakim było stosowanie benchmarkingu w wybranych działach PLL LOT. Nie mniej jednak ze względu na specyfikę branży, jaką jest lotnictwo, i mocno utrudniony do niej dostęp, chociażby z racji bezpieczeństwa linii lotniczych czy ich pasażerów, czyni przedstawione wyniki istotnymi poznawczo.

*Słowa kluczowe:* benchlearning, uczenie się, kapitał ludzki, benchmarking, linia lotnicza

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#### *Summary*

Although learning is not a new phenomenon, the way of acquiring knowledge and time involved in it is of great importance for the development of each company. Therefore, more and more methods and practices are sought to satisfy those requirements, at the same time creating organizational

culture that encourages employees to continually expand their knowledge. Benchlearning, which is most often associated with continuous learning from the best ones, is an example of such practice.

Therefore, this paper attempts to answer the question whether benchlearning has an impact on the 'value' of human capital. The employees and the company which were selected for the study seem to be important and decisive for the outcome, because such a company as PLL LOT should be characterized by the constant search for ways to meet the ever-increasing market competition. It is also worth mentioning that the contents of this paper should be an introduction for two reasons. First, benchlearning does not belong to the most frequently undertaken issues in the literature, both in the theoretical and practical dimensions. Second, the results presented represent only a section of an extended issue which is the utilisation of benchmarking in the selected departments of PLL LOT. Nevertheless, due to the specific nature of the industry such as aviation, and its obstructed access, even because of the safety of airlines and their passengers all these make the results presented significant cognitively.

*Keywords:* benchlearning, learning, human capital, benchmarking, airline

JEL: D22, D83, I25, J24, L84, L93, M14, M12, O15