

CASE STUDY: HOW TO GET THE HARD SKILLS SOFT

Abstract

This case study deals with an issue that is specific for companies in the science and technology industry. Unlike most companies in the Liberec region, the company in this case study does not have a problem with recruiting new employees. It does not even lack skilled employees. There is, however, a lack of soft skills in the company. Soft skills such as communication, management, presentation and leadership skills are crucial for SMEs in order to compete with larger companies. This case study describes the company's situation, gives basic information about learning and development and soft skills in the company. It also introduces two practical tools that can be used when employees lack soft skills.

1.1 Introduction to the organisation and industry

The chosen company is a family business located in the Liberec region. It is an SME with 170 employees. It was founded in the 1940's as a Research Institute for Gems and since then the company has undergone several changes. Since the 1990's the company is working as we know it today. It runs a very specific business of synthetic crystal manufacturing. The industry requires highly educated employees, flexibility and constant research and development. The company is aware of the importance of employees' know-how and tries to appreciate them.

The company has reached worldwide appreciation for its integrated crystal-based solutions for the science and technology industry and is one of the leading companies in synthetic crystal manufacturing. Its products are used in electron microscopes, lasers, x-ray imaging and ionizing radiation detection. Figure 1 features examples of some products.



Figure 1: Example of products
Source: Company website

The company has internationally accepted certificate ISO 9001, but all processes in the company are managed in line with more strict regulations than the certificate requires. Modern technologies are used in order to achieve the highest quality of products, which is the core selling point of the company. The competition and customers exert constant pressure on the company. Because of this pressure, the company has to be on the top of the product quality and has to have 100% control of all its products. The company prides itself on the fact that the percentage of complaints or returns is almost inconsiderable.



Organisational structure

The company has a CEO and five departments: quality, business, finance, R&D and production. Every department has its own director and departments of R&D and production are divided into seven parts, in which every part has its own manager. The HR processes in the company are handled by the finance department. See the organisational chart in Figure 2.

1.1.1 HR processes in the company

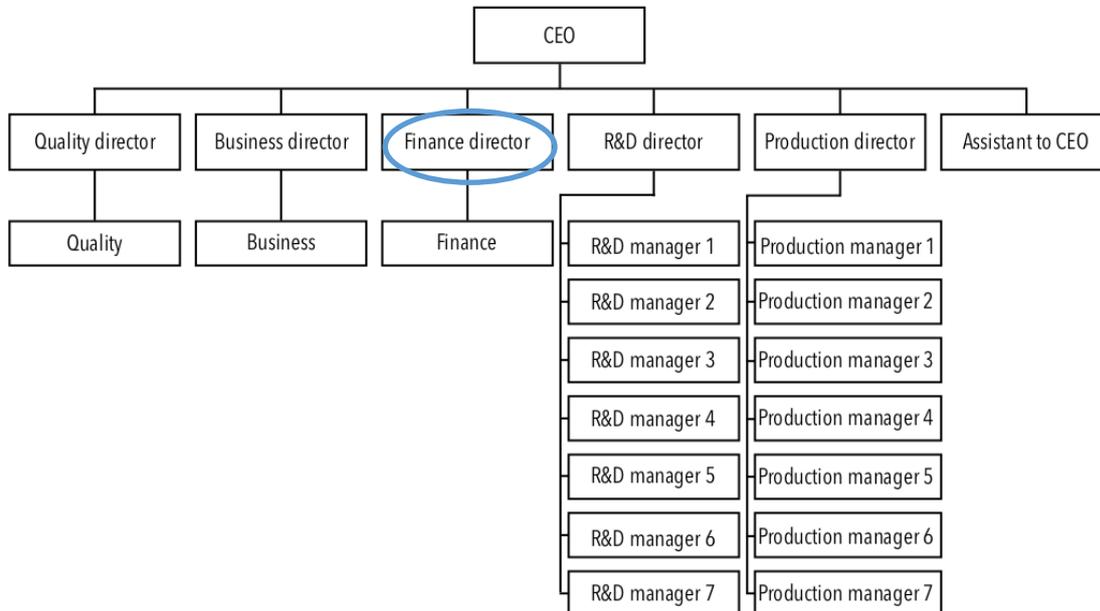


Figure 2: Organisational structure
Source: Internal sources, own elaboration

There is no HR department in the company. Almost all HR processes are handled by the finance department and some of the processes are ensured by employees' direct superiors and some of them even by the CEO. Before the company hired an HR specialist, almost all of the processes were secured by the finance director. The finance director was constantly overloaded. It was important to determine priorities. It is not possible for one person to handle all the tasks alone. After the HR specialist was hired, the responsibility for HR processes passed from the finance director to the HR specialist.

Processes such as job creation, job analysis, recruitment and employer branding are done by the HR specialist. Direct superiors still take care of several processes, such as induction process, employee evaluation or learning and development. To handle other processes, such as employee selection, career management or strategic HR planning, the HR specialist and direct superiors have to cooperate. This cooperation usually works well, but in some cases, it is not easy for them to find common ground.

Strengths & Weaknesses: Analysis of HR processes

Table 1 below outlines the main strengths and weaknesses of HR processes in the company. It is very important for the company to have qualified employees, not only because of research and development, but also because of the demanding nature of the production (some positions require fine motor skills, some are like cooking: they require certain intuition gained by experience). Most employees in the company have a university degree. The employees are



strong in hard skills. The management of the company is very supportive to its employees because it is aware of the importance of employees' know-how. Because of this approach, employees are satisfied with the working conditions in the company. This fact is supported by a minimal turnover rate. In order to acquire new qualified employees and new technologies, the company cooperates with academic institutions.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Qualified employees	No HR department
Supportive management	Weak soft skills
Minimal turnover rate	Long induction process
Cooperation with academic institutions	

Table 1: Strengths & Weaknesses: Analysis of HR processes
Source: Internal sources, own elaboration

1.1.2 HR challenges

A few weaknesses have been found during the cooperation with the company and the analysis of its HR processes. We can call these weaknesses HR challenges because they can be improved.

As mentioned above, the company **has no HR department**. The company has already 170 employees and with that number it is important to have well-written HR processes. HR processes are now well-written, but with no HR department, it is not easy to control the realisation of these processes. Hiring the HR specialist was a first step. However, if the company keeps growing it will need a separate HR department.

A lot of employees have university degrees and they thus are really strong in hard skills. On the other hand, their **soft skills (such as communication and leadership) are not so developed**. This means that sometimes communication problems occur. For some employees, improving soft skills is irrelevant, but for the company it is highly important. When the company is growing employees have to grow with it. Not only in hard skills, but also in soft skills. The company's learning & development system is very advanced but there is space for the improvement of soft skills.

Lastly, the demanding nature of production means that it takes a **long time to train a new employee** and thus the induction process is lengthy.

1.2 Literature review: Learning & Development

Employee learning and development (L&D) plays a critical role in SMEs. Learning and development is a process where a company makes sure it has as skilled and knowledgeable a workforce as it needs. Employees in the process gain the opportunity to develop their skills, knowledge and maximize their potential. (Armstrong, 2017)

The L&D process involves two groups: the company and the employee. It usually consists of a variety of tools and techniques. These are typically combined into a programme that follows



the company's strategic goals. This process is built to serve the needs of the organisation and to build sustainable success and development. (Page-Tickell, 2014)

One frequently-asked question is: Is there any difference between learning and training? In short, yes. Learning is a process. Through this process individuals acquire and develop skills, knowledge, attitudes and new behaviours. All this is acquired through experience and formal methods. Training is the systematic application of those formal processes to impart skills and knowledge. (Armstrong, 2017)

If you want to know more about learning and development, click on this link <https://www.powtoon.com/online-presentation/drwiZ1oGoWu/?mode=movie#/> to watch a video.

1.3 Methodology

This case study is mainly based on interviews with the HR specialist and shadowing in the company. Two visits were made to the company. During the first visit, the topic was specified and basic information about HR processes from the interview were collected. On the second visit, detailed analysis of HR processes was made and also two questionnaires were completed. One questionnaire was completed by the HR specialist and was related to the HR processes in the company. The other questionnaire, which related to the topic of Learning and Development, was completed by employees in order to find out their opinion about the L&D situation in the company.

1.4 Findings and analysis

Most HR processes in the company are handled well. Employees are usually very satisfied with their working conditions.

Most jobs in the company are very specific. Employees are recruited thoroughly and once they start working for the company, they usually stay working there for a long time. As a result of the large number of researchers in the company, the learning and development system is elaborate. The system is, however, more focused on hard skills. Employees' soft skills are weaker than they could be. This was identified as a weakness which can be improved. One reason why soft skills have not yet been effectively improved is the fact that some employees do not consider these skills important.

In order to find out more about employees and soft skills, a questionnaire (Appendix No. 2) was developed and a survey was conducted. Some questions used in the questionnaire were chosen to explore the situation in the company. 24 employees from different departments were asked to fill in the questionnaire, 6 women and 18 men. Most respondents were between 31 and 40 years old, only two respondents were older than 51 years (see chart 1). Half of the respondents (12) have master's degree, five have doctor's degree, five are high school graduates and two have bachelor's degree. Chart 2 shows how long the respondents have worked in the company.



Age

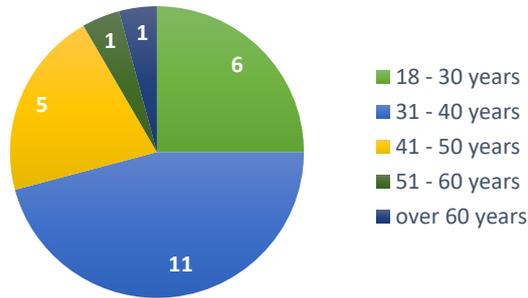


Chart 1: Age
Source: Own elaboration

How long have you been working in the company ?

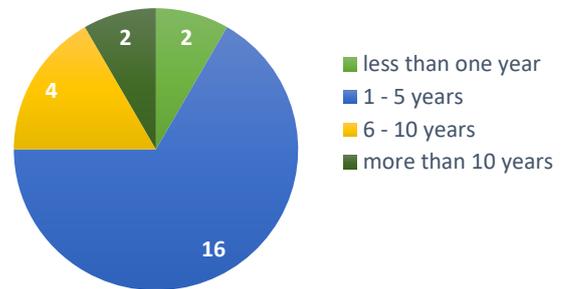


Chart 2: How long have you been working in the company?
Source: Own elaboration

Do you feel the need to learn and improve your skills ?

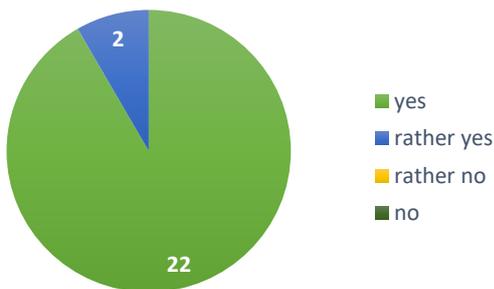


Chart 3: Do you feel the need to learn and improve your skills?
Source: Own elaboration

Do you feel the need to improve your communication skills ?

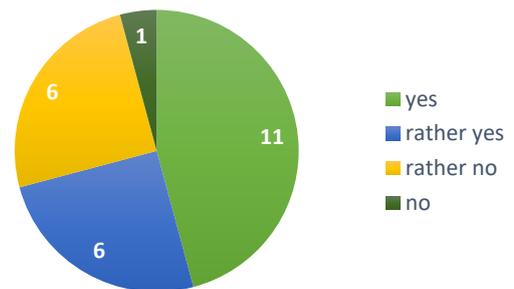


Chart 4: Do you feel the need to improve your communication skills?
Source: Own elaboration

The notion held by some employees that soft skills are not important for their work or the company is supported by charts 3 and 4. As the chart 3 shows, every respondent feels the need to improve his/her skills. So, they find learning and development important. But when the question is focused on soft skills, such as communication, the picture changes. Chart 4 shows that seven respondents answered no or rather no. That is a 32 % drop compared to the chart 3.

The question then is: how to arouse the interest in soft skills?

Despite what the previous two charts show, every respondent thinks good communication is important for positive work atmosphere (chart 5) and only two respondents think communication skills are not important for their job (chart 6). This might be where the problem lies. All employees consider soft skills important but some just think they do not need to improve them.

Do you think good communication between employees can make work atmosphere more pleasant?

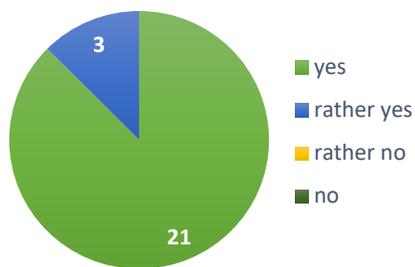


Chart 4: Do you think good communication between employees can make work atmosphere more pleasant?

Source: Own elaboration

Do you perceive communication skills as important for your job?

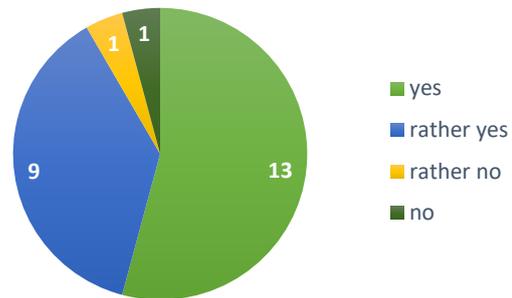


Chart 3: Do you perceive communication skills as important for your job?

Source: Own elaboration

1.4.1 Proposed HR tools

The created HR tool consists of two parts. The first one is a practical guide about how to proceed with the process of learning and development focused on soft skills. The second part is the questionnaire, which tries to find out the employees' opinion on soft skills.

The practical guide (Appendix No. 1) is further divided into five parts: **identify, specify, plan, implement and review**. Each part looks at one step of the process and describes how one should proceed with implementing a soft skills L&D initiative. One word permeates through every step: communication. Communication might be the most important thing in the whole process. See Appendix no. 1 for more.

The questionnaire (Appendix No. 2) should be given to employees in order to find out their point of view and to better understand the circumstances concerning the lack soft skills. The questionnaire contains 27 questions, which are related to the learning and development system and soft skills.

1.4.2 Critical evaluation of findings and proposed HR tools

There is always space for improvement. In the chosen company, soft skills development was found to be that space. It is crucial that the company's management is aware of this possibility of improvement and that they have already made the first step; they hired the HR specialist.

The HR practical tools provided in this case study should help companies evaluate the situation in the company and set up basic learning and development processes focused on soft skills. However, the HR tools were developed for a specific SME, which might lower their general applicability.



1.5 Conclusion

This case study is focused on the HR challenges facing a middle-sized company from the Liberec region in the Czech Republic. It is specifically focused on the learning and development process of soft skills. Learning and development is a crucial HR process for every company no matter its size. As the world changes and companies grow, there is a big pressure on L&D. The importance of learning and development cannot be aimed only at hard skills, such as knowledge and professional skills, but also at soft skills, such as communication, presentation and management skills. Just like in a life, in business, communication is key.



Appendix No. 1

Practical guide – LEARNING & DEVELOPMNET

What to do when employees lack soft skills?

Soft skills play a crucial role in every SME. Soft skills represent not only communication and presentation skills, but also how to be friendly and how to be a good leader. Unfortunately, not enough SMEs realise the importance of this. This practical guide can help you with the basic steps you could take when your company's employees lack soft skills.

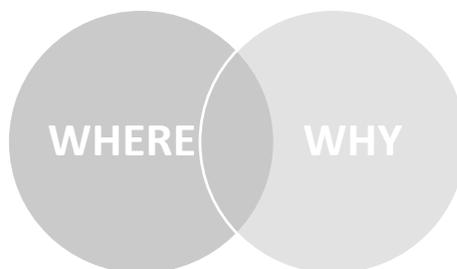


○ **To IDENTIFY**

The first and really important step is to identify if there is a lack of soft skills. Once the company knows about the issue it can start to think about the process. You can identify a lack either by testing your employees (there are various types of surveys, tests and activities on the internet) or simply by observing the behaviours of your employees (e.g., during meetings) and listening to their complaints.

○ **To SPECIFY**

Before planning the process, it is crucial to specify the situation. In this step you can use the provided questionnaire (Appendix No. 2). Give it to employees to fill in. This will help you find out their opinion about soft skills and also specify two questions, which should be answered before you start planning the process.



WHERE

- identify where exactly is the biggest lack of soft skills
- once a lack is identified it is crucial to start there



- do not forget to improve the soft skills within the whole company
- make groups of employees based on the questionnaire (e.g., what is the level of their soft skills, how they feel about soft skills...)

WHY

- identify why there is the lack of soft skills
- once the reason is identified it is easier to avoid the same situation again

○ To PLAN step by step process

To succeed in anything, one has to plan the process step by step. First, set a goal! Determine what you want to achieve. When you have the main goal, you have to set up the milestones, which will bring you to the goal. Use the SMART rule when you set up goals.

Specific – goal should be specific, understandable and written in a clear manner

Measurable – goal should be measurable, written into concrete measurable elements

Achievable – goal should be achievable and acceptable to you

Realistic – goal should be realistic, possible to accomplish and centred in reality

Time bound – goal should have a time frame with a specific date

Example: We want to improve communication skills of 20 R&D employees in the span of two years, resulting in a better working environment (i.e., 20% drop in the number of employee-about-employee complaints, 10% decrease in average time needed to finish projects).

○ To IMPLEMENT

When the process is planned you can finally put the process in the place. Follow your planned milestones and deadlines in order to achieve the goal.

○ To REVIEW

All the previous steps are done but the work is not done yet. When you want to be successful, you have to do a review. You have to compare your written goals with the real results. If you find out that goals were not achieved, you have to analyse why. Find the reason and make an improvement.

COMMUNICATION is always the key. When you want employees to be motivated and interested in soft skills, you have to communicate with them. Employees have to be informed about the situation in the company. Every employee, including managers and manual workers, should know about the importance of soft skills and how it can affect the whole company. Share the vision, share goals, share information.



Appendix No. 2

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT in the company

Dear employees, in order to find out your opinion about learning and development in the company, we would like to ask you a few questions related to this topic. The collected data will be used for improving the learning and development system in the company. Thank you for filling in the questionnaire.

1. Gender:
 - Female
 - Male

2. Age:
 - 18 – 30 years
 - 31 – 40 years
 - 41 – 50 years
 - 51 – 60 years
 - over 60 years

3. Achieved level of education:
 - Elementary
 - Secondary (vocational)
 - Secondary (general)
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Doctor's degree

4. In which department do you work? (possible to mention specific job):

5. How long have you been working in the company?
 - less than one year
 - 1 – 5 years
 - 6 – 10 years
 - more than 10 years

6. Do you feel the need to learn and improve your skills?
 - yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no

7. Do you think that your company is concerned with the learning and development of employees?
 - yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no



- no (why not?):
8. Does your direct superior motivate you to engage in learning and development? If yes, in which field? (possible to mark more than one option)
- no
 - yes: expert knowledge (technical skills, ...)
 - yes: personal skills (communication, ...)
 - yes: management skills (leadership, ...)
 - yes: business skills (sales skills, ...)
9. Are you interested in your career growth?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
10. Is there any field in which would you like to develop/improve? If yes, specify:
- no
 - yes:
11. Which attended workshop was most beneficial for you? Please specify the reason why:
12. Do you think a friendly work atmosphere is important for employee satisfaction?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
13. Do you think friendly work atmosphere can affect the prosperity of the whole company?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
14. Do you think good communication between employees can make work atmosphere more pleasant?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
15. Do you perceive communication skills as important for your job?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no



16. I think communication skills of our managers are: (choose the best option):
- very strong
 - strong
 - weak
 - very weak
17. Does your direct supervisor help you solve work issues?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
18. I think communication skills of our manual workers are: (choose the best option):
- very strong
 - strong
 - weak
 - very weak
19. Do you think it would be good if communication skills within the whole company were strengthened?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
20. Do you feel the need to improve your communication skills?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
21. Are you interested in workshops aimed at improving communication skills?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no
22. What would motivate you to improve your communication skills?
23. Do you feel the need to improve your management skills (leadership, motivating people, ...)?
- yes
 - rather yes
 - rather no
 - no



24. Do you think it would be good if the management skills of your managers were strengthened?

- yes
- rather yes
- rather no
- no

25. Are you interested in workshops aimed at improving management skills?

- yes
- rather yes
- rather no
- no

26. Are you interested in your personal growth? If yes, please specify what do you think would help your personal growth the most:

- no
- yes:



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