

## Introduction

Several changes can be observed nowadays in organizations and their environment. Regardless of the size of organizations, their management and human resource management are influenced by the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of the environment, which is referred to as VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity). The phenomenon stems from the 2008–2009 financial market crisis, which affected the economic situation of many countries. However, complications related to the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus were global in nature and its effects are still being faced by the economies of countries on all continents. In addition, Ukraine and neighboring countries have recently been affected by hostilities, with widespread and multidimensional consequences. Certainly, the phenomena will leave lasting marks in the social and economic spheres, governance, people management, employment and labor (Gross-Gołacka et al., 2020; Bednarkiewicz & Warwas, 2022). Thus, societies, economies, companies and their employees are not only forced to cope with the VUCA phenomenon but also to face other challenges, related to globalization, internationalization, cultural diversity, tertiarization, informatization and artificial intelligence, aging societies, increased competition and innovation, as well as changing consumption patterns and customs of citizens, along with the growing role of social media in acquiring knowledge and information about the world around them. The economic, technological, environmental, demographic and social changes taking place create a new context for theories, policies and practices of age management, diversity or human capital management. The changes largely affect small and medium-sized organizations.

Among the megatrends affecting human capital management, the phenomenon of population aging occupies an important place. It is an objective process, inevitable in the foreseeable future, since demographic changes are not reversible in the short term. The phenomenon can be looked

at both from the perspective of the organization and the labor market, social partners (Warwas & Matuszewska-Kubicz, 2022), difficulties in recruiting employees, the need to extend working life and changes in the ways of retirement (Wiktorowicz, 2016), as well as the context of raising or lowering the retirement age (Kuchciak & Warwas, 2021). Organizations can respond by implementing age management or multigenerational management if they have representatives of other generations working in addition to mature employees.

Diversity is an extremely important issue of interest in human capital management. The growing importance of the issue is due to, among other things, the above-mentioned demographic changes, but also the processes of population migration and free movement in the labor markets, including those forced, as in the case of the Ukrainian exodus. In addition, the diversity of human resources can be seen as a source of competitiveness of organizations (Gross-Gołacka, 2018b).

According to REGON data, 368,000 new enterprises were registered in 2021, while 190,000 companies were deleted from the register. Compared to 2019, the number of newly established enterprises increased by 11.9%, while the number of deleted enterprises increased by 11.8%. It is worth noting that over the 2008–2021 period, the number of newly established companies was (except in 2009 and 2011) higher than the number of liquidated companies, so the category is characterized by an upward trend. In 2020, there were declines in the number of new business registrations, which was most likely related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, greater fluctuations in the number of de-registered businesses have also been noted (Statistics Poland, 2022). It may confirm the uncertainty of the environment and the need for SMEs to cope in these challenging and turbulent conditions. In 2021, the largest number of SMEs were established in the following sectors of the economy: construction (72.9 thousand and this accounted for 19.8% of the total number of newly established companies), trade and repair of motor vehicles (59.6 thousand—16.2%), professional, scientific and technical activities (41.2 thousand—11.2%), information and communication (30.4 thousand—8.3%) and manufacturing (25.4 thousand—6.9%) (Statistics Poland, 2022).

Of Poland's SMEs, 53% are engaged in services, 21.6% operate in trade; 15.5% in construction and about 10% are engaged in industrial activities. The service sector includes areas such as tourism, catering and also IT, financial and legal services.

The trade sector is a diverse sphere, ranging from small local grocery stores to specialty stores. Industry is a sector where SMEs are an important part of

the value chain, often supplying specialized components and semi-finished products to larger companies. There are many SMEs in the metal, food, wood, chemical or technology industries (Skowrońska & Tarnawa, 2022).

Lachiewicz and Matejun emphasize that a peculiar feature of SMEs is a low-formalized, with the dominance of line ties, organizational structure, thus possessing high flexibility of operation. Entities representing this model have mainly a single decision-making center, a very fast way of transmitting information and ease of communication.

The high flexibility of operations makes it possible to respond to changes in the environment, which is undoubtedly an attribute of small and medium-sized enterprises. Sourcing of employees in SME companies is mainly based on recommendations and referrals, as well as family contacts. Such companies have an unofficial working atmosphere based on informal contacts, strong integration into the company, and a high degree of independence of action on the part of employees. In addition, limited opportunities for direct support from specialists are a distinguishing feature, as small and medium-sized enterprises often do not employ them. Under the conditions, intangible resources, including innovation, are of great importance to SMEs (Zastempowski, 2014, pp. 27–37). Small and medium-sized enterprises operating in an uncertain environment find it very difficult to survive and grow. One of the ways to cope with such a situation is to direct their activities to develop the ability to acquire and exploit market opportunities (Lisowska, 2020).

Human capital management, including aspects of managing diversity and age of employees, is a major challenge for organizations, and for small and medium-sized companies in particular. Therefore, it is important to gain insight into the functioning of small and medium-sized companies in Poland through the lens of selected aspects of human capital, which is attempted in this monograph.

The monograph is theoretical and empirical in nature and consists of six chapters. The first chapter is devoted to presenting the determinants of development and success factors of small and medium-sized enterprises. The second chapter reveals the role of human capital in building sustainable competitive advantages of enterprises in general, including small and medium-sized enterprises. The chapter precedes the presentation of research results on the role of intellectual capital in Polish SMEs, which are described in the third chapter.

The fourth chapter, in turn, deals with diverse resources and indicates the relationship between intellectual capital and diversity management, as well as the benefits of its implementation in businesses. The last two chapters

touch on one of the dimensions of diversity—multiple employees. Of these, the fifth chapter presents the results of research on age management in institutional, instrumental and functional terms, while the sixth chapter focuses on the themes of intergenerational knowledge transfer and the departure of mature employees.

The authors hope that the content presented in the monograph will broaden the debate on topics that are current, important and still gaining importance in today's socio-economic realities. At the same time, it seems crucial to give voice to Polish entrepreneurs, as the book is based on the results of two complementary research projects.