

DIRECT EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF POLISH COMPANIES

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to present the range of distribution of direct employee participation, its subject scope, and its effects in Polish enterprises. The first part of the paper presents the essence of employee participation and its basic levels, measures and types. The paper also discusses the principal consultative and delegative forms of direct participation. Particular attention has been paid to the benefits resulting from the deployment of participatory methods of work organization in enterprises. The analysis in the study is primarily based on the results of our own survey and case studies conducted under the NCN funded project titled “The types, extent and economic effectiveness of direct forms of employee participation in Poland compared to the old EU countries.” Conducted analysis reveals a widespread use of forms of direct participation in Polish companies, but its scope and distribution have less intensity. The main motives for introducing forms of this participation in enterprises were economic reasons (productivity), and primary benefit of its use was the improvement in quality of products and services.

Keywords: employee participation, new methods of work organization, consultation, delegation

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

Competition, volatility of the economic environment, and rising consumer expectations require from enterprises ever greater flexibility and innovation. They induce managers to make quick decisions in order to adapt to these changes and disseminate new participatory methods of work organization. That is so because employee participation is conducive for employees to accept decision made by the employer, reduces the resistance to changes and makes it possible to create creative solutions. The employees are expected to have greater qualifications, knowledge, creativity, and entrepreneurship. This implies the parallel extension of the scale of the autonomy of their activities, greater freedom in decision-making and greater scope of employee responsibility (Karpowicz, 2002).

The importance of participatory methods of work organization has been noticed by the European Commission which proposed the shift the focus from representative participation to the development of direct forms of participation. It has been assumed that this type of participation is the most beneficial for both the enterprise and the employees. Popularization of these new forms of work organization among companies is perceived as a major step towards improving the quality of production and the quality of employees' life, which has been expressed by the European Commission's Green Paper on a "Partnership for a new organization of work" published in April 1997 (Poutsma et al., 2003). According to Osterman (1994) the need for direct participation in the organizations seems to be a "new conventional wisdom."

The aim of the article is to present the incidence of direct participation, the subject scope, and its effects in Polish enterprises. The analysis is primarily based on the results of own survey and case studies devoted to direct forms of employee participation. The paper begins with a brief description of employee participation and its basic levels, dimensions and types. Subsequently, the main consultative and delegative forms of direct participation have been described. The incidence of the employee participation, the main practiced forms, its sectoral and subject-scope have been analysed in the empirical part. The last part of the paper is devoted to the economic and social benefits resulting from the practice of these forms in enterprises.

2. Levels, dimensions and types of employee participation

The process of employee participation is understood as increasing the rights of employees in the enterprise and their involvement in the operation of the enterprise both through their participation in decision-making and in the assets of the enterprise. The very issue of employee participation in the EU has a long tradition and has been widely incorporated into EU legislation. The most important EU directives devoted to employee participation include:

- Council Directive on the establishment of a European Works Councils or a procedure in Community-scale groups of undertakings for the purposes of informing and consulting employees (Official Journal of the European Communities, No L252/64),
- Council Directive 2001/86/EC of 8 October 2001 supplementing the Statute for a European company with regard to the involvement of employees (Official Journal of the European Communities, L. 294/22),
- Directive 2002/14/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of the 11 March 2002 establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees in the European Community (Official Journal of the European Communities, L. 80/29).

Taking into account the form of employee participation in the decision-making we can distinguish individual participation (individual employees) and team participation (whole teams or certain groups). Taking the notion of participation intensity as a criterion Tegtmeier has distinguished eight levels of participation out of which four are passive participation and the remaining are active participation. Co-operation (passive participation) involves the right to information, the right to listen to complaints, to give opinions and advice. Co-determination or active participation involves the right to express objection, the right to express consent, the right to settle problems together and the right to exclusive deciding (Mikuła and Potocki, 1997). The intensity of participation has been visualized by Wilkinson and Dundon (2010), who presented the so-called escalator of employee involvement. Taking into account the depth and scope of participation they distinguish five levels of participation i.e. information, communication, consultation, co-determination and control.

While analysing the process of employee participation one should consider its three main dimensions, namely: subjective, objective, and competence and quality. The subjective dimension determines the scope of people in the enterprise with participatory rights. The objective dimension concerns fields and areas of enterprise operation as well as the hierarchical level of decisions subject to participation. The last dimension defines the participatory rights that the employees are entitled to, i.e. how and to what extent they can participate in decision-making in the enterprise (Mendel, 2001).

Among the key types of employee participation we distinguish: direct, indirect and financial participation. The first one involves to the direct participation of individual employees or groups of employees in decision-making related to their workplace. The indirect (or representative) participation means involvement of employees in managing the enterprise through their representatives and takes place through intermediary of works councils, employee representations on the supervisory boards and union representatives. The financial participation offers the chance for employees to acquire a stake in the ownership of the company for which they work, mainly through such forms as profit-sharing and employee share-ownership.

3. Forms of direct participation

Modern enterprise management should involve decentralization of management, organizational flexibility, and task structure based on employee teams. One of implementing this target is to broad involvement of employees in the decision-making process at various levels of management. This enables better use of knowledge and skills in the workplace and ensures better integration of employees with the enterprise and their identification with the interests of the enterprise (Rudolf, 2006). The direct forms of employee participation are more important

for the role and position of employees in the workplace because they concern everyday, direct impact of individual employees or employee teams on the decisions made at their work stations and related with the work done by them (Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012).

According to the definition given by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Condition, direct participation is identified with initiatives to consult or delegate powers and responsibility by management to individual employees or employee groups. Based on this definition, we can distinguish four main forms of direct participation:

- 1) individual consultations,
- 2) group consultations,
- 3) individual delegation,
- 4) group delegation.

Individual consultation '*face –to–face*' are consultation involving discussion between individual employee and immediate manager, such as regular direct conversations, performance reviews or setting employee development plans (*New Forms...*, 1997). These meetings can also be irregular because of emerging problems. This form of direct participation provides employees with information about the company and prospects for career advancement. For employers these consultations provide a deeper understanding of the employee and can also be a source of new ideas for solutions sought.

Another type of individual consultation is consultation '*arms-length*' which allows individual employees to express their views through a 'third party', usually through their counselor or ombudsman. Employees may also present their views in an anonymous way, such as through employee attitude surveys or the so-called 'box of trust', a box to which employees may put notes with remarks and suggestions on work conditions and behaviour of managers. This type of consultation will be of interest to employees if management reacts to their remarks and suggestions. Top-down communication can be done by newsletters, bulletin boards or e-mails to all employees (Warszewska and Widerszal-Bazyl, 2003; Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012).

Group consultation is a meeting of a group of employees who jointly identify problems in their workplace and try to solve these problems. Such groups can be: 1) temporary, i.e., a team is appointed for a specified period of time because of some problems or events or 2) permanent, i.e., the team meets regularly for a long time. Temporary group consultations help employees to show their attitudes in particular matter and prepare proposals of solutions. They are an opportunity for superiors to listen to remarks, suggestions and ideas put forward by employees. The meetings are to activate employees, encourage them to discuss about common work, provide an opportunity for mutual communication, resolve disputes, plan and allocate tasks and provide information about the situation of the company.

The need for such meetings may also result from the necessity to discuss with subordinates some current issues or how to respond to chances or threats arising in the environment of the company (Piwowarczyk, 2006). Quality circles are examples of permanent group consultations. According to the concept of this form of participation, all employees have a positive impact on the quality of manufactured products. Quality circles are voluntary and are made up of small employee teams ranging in size from three to thirteen people. The teams meet regularly, usually once a week, and identify and resolve some minor issues of a technical nature. The teamwork is conducive to obtaining synergy effect of individual experience resulting in innovation and willingness to self-development of individuals within the group (Moczulska, 2011).

The delegative forms of participation are stronger than consultation participation because management provides individual employees or employee teams with greater responsibility and a certain degree of autonomy in the organization and performance of their work. The most important forms of individual delegation include job rotation, job enlargement and job enrichment. In job rotation, the worker periodically moves from one job to another, according to a predetermined plan. This method allows employees to learn new skills, gain knowledge about their company and make contacts with people working in other departments. In job enlargement worker is given more tasks to do within particular posts (Skorupińska, 2009).

The strength of motivation of these two forms of work organization is, however, small. Despite diversified work and certain increase in employee autonomy, introduction of job rotation or job enlargement in the company does not fundamentally change the content of work nor interpersonal relations. The best motivation results and the largest increase in employee autonomy is brought by the latter form, i.e., the job enrichment (Jasiński, 1998). This form gives the employees more authority to plan their work and decide on how it is to be done, which means making independent decisions, organizing work time, determining methods of work, and the choice of means for work implementation, etc. The prerequisite is to achieve the desired effects in a predetermined time. When it comes to deciding on organization of working time when implementing tasks we can talk about flexible working hours.

Self-managing teams called autonomous groups are a form of group delegation. The scope of teams' autonomy is illustrated by their rights to make decisions on e.g., composition of the group, the distribution of tasks within the group, the order and methods of implementation of tasks, the choice of a leader, or by solving upcoming problems on their own. The autonomous groups are responsible not only for the work they do but also for the monitoring of work performance (Mendel, 2001). Increased performance and employee commitment achieved using autonomous

groups within the company meant that they have become the most common form of intervention used in organisations seeking to flatten hierarchies (Muthusamy et al., 2005).

4. Incidence and subject scope of direct participation in Polish companies

Development of direct forms of employee participation, does as not result, as was the case of indirect participation, from legal regulations, but is the effect of direct relations between employees and management, and work management and organisation methods present in the company. The period of economic transition has not, however, resulted in the development of participatory style of management, as Polish employers did not realize the benefits of these new forms of work organization in companies. In Western Europe, the main premises of the development of direct participation included economic considerations, such as better performance, quality, lower costs, and it were the employers who were the party in favour of its implementation in companies. The direct forms of participation have gained great popularity in the EU countries, as indicated by the results of research carried out in 1996–1997 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. According to the results, no fewer than four out of five workplaces (82 per cent) in analysed 10 the EU countries practised at least one of the forms of direct participation (see more in: *New Forms...*, 1997).

In Poland the scope, forms, and effectiveness of direct employee participation are still difficult to due to a small number of studies conducted on this subject. The most recent and comprehensive study was conducted in 2011 by researchers from the University of Lodz on the sample of 254 enterprises. In 2007 a study on the prevalence and determinants of employee participation was conducted by Moczulska. The study covered 188 enterprises in the Lubush Voivodeship, excluding micro enterprises with fewer than 9 employees. Also Piwowarczyk analysed the range of forms of direct participation in 62 Polish enterprises. In 2003 a comprehensive study on the scope of direct participation in the work environment in Poland was carries out by Widerszal-Bazyl and Warszewska-Makuch. Of 1,500 enterprises to which the survey questionnaires were sent, 240 properly completed and returned questionnaires.

The research conducted by the Lodz team showed that the direct participation was applied by as many as 79.9 per cent of Polish organizations under study (both enterprises and non-profit institutions). The presence in the enterprise of at least one of the following six forms was the criterion for determining whether an organization uses participation: individual consultation ‘*face-to-face*’, individual consultation ‘*arms-length*’, group consultation – permanent groups, group consultation – temporary groups, individual delegation, group delegation.

Moreover, it turned out that industry, construction and transport are the sectors in which the direct forms of participation are the least practiced. On the other hand, in trade and in most sectors of the public sector and public services, this share was significantly above average (Table 1). Given the size of the organization, most entities applying forms of direct participation (94.4%) were in the entities employing between 200 and 499 people. Very big organisations (with more than 500 people) achieved the lowest score (70.6%).

Sector	% of workplaces with direct participation
mining	66.7
transport, communication	71.4
industry	71.2
banking and insurance	85.7
public utilities	85.7
public administration	83.9
construction	71.4
education	83.7
wholesale and retail trade	85
public health and social welfare	86.4
culture and recreation	80
hotels, catering	83.3
professional services	81.8
all workplaces	79.9

Table 1.
The incidence of direct participation by sector

Source:
Rudolf and Skorupińska (2012).

Study conducted on a sample of 254 enterprises demonstrated that the more the work is of intellectual character and requires in-depth expertise, the more employees are empowered to make their own decision in their work. Another factor influencing the use of direct participation by the company was the level of necessary qualifications. It was found that the higher the level of qualification required by the nature of the work, the more an organization is practicing forms of participation. The study also confirmed a positive correlation between the complexity of the work and the presence of direct participation, i.e., the more the work requires making a series of various operations the greater the likelihood of using participation (Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012).

Polish organizations most frequently use two forms of direct participation at the same time (24% of the entities with participation). All six of the analysed forms of direct participation were practiced by only 7% of businesses entities. This demonstrates the lack of an integrated approach to participation, i.e. the

simultaneous practice of various forms of direct participation. The most common form of participation was individual delegation, it was found in 52% of Polish organizations under study conducted by author [1]. Individual consultation ‘*face-to-face*’ was second with a slightly smaller result (51%). The least popular form of consultation was individual consultation ‘*arms-length*’ (Table 2).

Form of direct participation	% of workplaces with a given form of direct participation
individual consultation: <i>face-to-face</i>	51
individual consultation: <i>arms-length</i>	26
group consultation: <i>permanent groups</i>	30
group consultation: <i>temporary groups</i>	42
individual delegation	52
group delegation	39
Total	240*

* The sum of the figures shown in the table exceeds 100%, which means that some organizations applied more than one form of direct participation.

Table 2.

The incidence of the main forms of direct participation

Source: Rudolf and Skorupińska (2012).

Also, studies by Piwowarczyk (2006) have shown that this form of direct participation is rarely practiced by management. The management in only 18% of the 62 analysed enterprises examined by means of surveys the attitudes of employees and gathered their opinions on a variety of business plans. Not very popular in the Polish organizational reality are also group consultations in the form of permanent groups. The research conducted by Rudolf and Skorupińska (2012) has shown that regular meetings with task groups of permanent nature were used by only 30% of the organizations under the study (Table 2). The research of Piwowarczyk (2006) has demonstrated that fewer than one-tenth of enterprises use quality circles, the main form of permanent group consultation.

The research carried out in 1996–1997 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions showed that as in the studies of Rudolf and Skorupińska (2012), individual delegation was the most common form of participation also in the old EU countries. This form of direct participation was particularly popular in Sweden, Germany and Ireland, where it was practiced in respectively 69, 64 and 62 per cent of the analyzed companies in these countries. The least practiced form of participation was group consultation: *permanent groups*. Less than 30 per cent of analyzed enterprises in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Denmark and Sweden applied this form in their workplaces (*New Forms...*, 1997).

The subject scope of participation covers issues which are the subject of consultation with employees or issues where the employees are empowered to

take decisions. The research conducted in 2011 by a Lodz team demonstrated that in the case of individual consultation [2] the employees were usually asked to comment on the issue of training and professional development and the quality of products and services. The most frequently consulted by employee teams issue was organization of work. These are all personal and social matters which have a direct impact on employees. Changes in technology and investment decisions are rarely consulted with employees in both types of consultation. In this case these are the key issues for enterprises related to their finances and methods of production and therefore the management prefers to decide about them themselves.

With regard to the delegation it was found that most organizations delegate authority in the case of improvement work process. This is true both for the individual (44% of organizations) as well as the group delegation (34% of organizations) (Table 3). Scheduling of work is on the second position in terms of subject scope. Surprisingly, relatively rarely is authority delegated in the case of working conditions (individual delegation) or allocation of work (group delegation). These are areas which directly concern employees and they should be able to make independent decisions without asking their immediate supervisors (Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012).

Subject	% of workplaces	
	individual delegation	group delegation
Improvement work process	44	34
Scheduling of work	42	33
Time keeping	39	30
Dealing with 'internal' customers	35	-
Dealing with 'external' clients	30	-
Coordination of work with other internal groups	-	32
Quality of product or service	28	-
Quality of work	-	29
Attendance / absence control	28	22
Working conditions	25	-
Job rotation	-	10
Allocation of work	-	10

'-' means that this issue has not been the subject of delegation of authority

Table 3.
The subject scope of
direct participation

Source: Rudolf and
Skorupińska (2012).

Similar results in terms of the subject scope of direct participation were obtained in a study conducted by Widerszal-Bazyl and Warszewska-Makuch (2003). Quality of products and services, health, and safety were the issues which were most frequently consulted both in individual and group consultations. With

regard to the delegation the highest percentage of organizations delegated authority to employees in the following three areas: scheduling of work, improvement work process and dealing with 'internal' customers. Managers rarely delegated authority in matters of attendance/absence control and working conditions.

5. Advantages of direct participation

The prevalence of the use of direct employee participation by and large depends on the benefits that are achieved through the use of its forms in the enterprise. The benefits are both of economic and social character. Forms of direct participation are generally supported by the employers and introduced by them in the enterprise. This support, however results from pragmatic reasons. Managers believe that participation means not only greater integration in the workplace, but also higher efficiency.

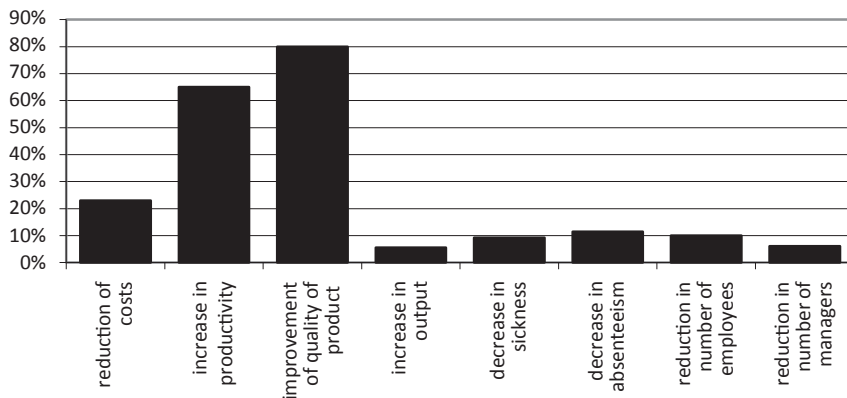
The studies conducted in 2011 showed that economic considerations, such as productivity turned out to be the most important motive for introducing direct participation in Polish organizations. This motive covers the following components: the need to improve the quality of products or services, the pressure to reduce costs, the pressure to reduce time expenditure and the need to encourage continuous improvement. The second most frequently mentioned motive was to improve the quality of working life. It should be noted that the managers who introduced forms of direct participation have not followed examples of other enterprises, i.e., the so-called 'good practices' (Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012). Also in the study of Widerszal-Bazyl and Warszewska-Makuch (2003) the desire to increase productivity was a dominant motive for application of employee participation in decision making.

The three main types of effects of the use of direct participation in Polish organizations have been analysed in the study conducted by Lodz team. The effects in terms of economic indicators included: reduction of costs, increase in productivity, improvement of quality of products and services, and overall increase in output. The second type of effects concerned the reduction in sickness and absenteeism (the effects in terms of labour costs). The last type of effects, in terms of labour market, involved reduction in the number of employees and the number of managers. According to opinion of managers the basic benefit resulting from practicing forms of direct participation in Polish organizations is improvement of the quality of products and services (Figure 1). This factor was indicated by 80% of the organizations under study which used direct participation. The increase in productivity turned out to be the second factor in turn (65% of respondents) and the third was cost reduction of operation of the enterprise (21% of respondents) (Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012).

These three economic benefits of direct participation were mentioned by managers in the study of Moczulska (2011). In addition, as the main benefits of

Figure 1.
The effects of direct participation

Source:
Rudolf and Skorupińska, 2012.



direct individual participation, they pointed to the increase in job satisfaction, better skills and qualifications of employees, better knowledge about the operation of the enterprise, and reduced monotony of operations. In the case of group participation the managers underlined better productivity, better flow of information and employee involvement in carrying out their tasks as well as increase in their motivation to work. Also Piwowarczyk (2006), indicates significant benefits of practicing direct forms of employee participation. According to the results of his research, the primary benefit resulting from the meetings and consultation of managers with employees is the better exchange of information within the enterprise. The other effects of participation include better labour productivity, innovation, increased motivation to work, the lack of violent conflicts in the work place and improved economic situation of the enterprise.

The above results of the three studies show that the use of direct participation in the enterprise brings economic as well as social benefits and these benefits are closely related. The involvement of employees in decision-making expands their knowledge of the enterprise, increases their commitment to work, and releases initiative, resulting in increased productivity and improved quality of products and services. The participation in such forms of work organization gives employees a greater sense of independence, improves their development and satisfies the need for self-actualization and consequently improves employee job satisfaction and enhances their motivation to work. In turn, job satisfaction improves relations with superiors, reduces absenteeism of employees resulting in lower operating cost of the enterprise.

In the literature, there are also arguments against employee participation (see e.g. Graham and Bennett, 1998; Mikuła and Potocki, 1997). They suggest that such meetings and consultations are time-consuming, that people can be manipulated through incomplete or misleading information, and that employees must be trained because they lack sufficient knowledge about the process of

rational decision-making. In addition, it is believed that that some employees may avoid effort and responsibility, if they are not paid for making decisions. Managers in the study of Moczulska (2011) also pointed to certain drawbacks of direct employee participation. These included time-consuming participation, the fact that employees may be guided by their self-interest, that subordinates have different or insufficient level of competence, diffusion of responsibility or avoidance of responsibility in big organizations.

The effectiveness of employee participation is above all dependent on effective access to information (Gilejko, 2005). Open and multidirectional information and communication with the employer should allow understanding of the business by employees, provide them with current information about the results of the company. Only then can they take effective action to improve these results (Borkowska, 2009). The developed system of communication as the basis for employee participation was mentioned also by representatives of the companies interviewed by the author in selected companies. According to Moczulska (2011) if direct participation is to produce the desired results, one must create an atmosphere conducive to the involvement and cooperation, build trust between employees, and apply methods for the integration of members of the organization. Managers should also let employees independently decide whether to participate – voluntary participation.

6. Conclusion

Direct participation is supported by both employees and employers. According to the employers it plays an important motivating role, enables employees to identify with the goals of the enterprise, but above all results in higher economic and technical effectiveness. The employer appreciate direct forms of participation significantly more than indirect forms such as works councils which may delay management decisions and limit their freedom of action. On the other hand, the direct participation offers the employees opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and leads to the fulfilment of their needs of recognition, respect and self-actualization. The participation extends also the scale of autonomy of their activities imposing at the same time a greater range of personal responsibility.

The development of direct forms of participation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is not so intense. However, one can expect the spread of such participation, which will be due to economic constraint. Also, the current economic crisis may be a factor supporting the introduction of direct forms of participation in enterprises, because the crisis forces the companies to make significant changes in the system of their functioning in order to increase their innovation and flexibility of organizational structures. The studies conducted in Polish enterprises have shown that direct forms of participation are commonly

used but their intensity is relatively weak. Most often Polish organizations use only two forms of direct participation at the same time. Moreover, it turned out that the industry has lost its leading position in the field of direct participation. The direct forms of participation are the most intensely used in the trade and services sector, public health and social welfare, banking and insurance, and public administration.

Taking into account the subject-scope of direct participation it should be noted that the most frequently consulted issues with employees include training and professional development, and organization of work. Most Polish organizations delegate authority to employees on matters involving the improvement of work process. The results presented in the study confirmed the benefits achieved thanks to the use of employee participation in the enterprise. Apart from economic benefits (improved product quality, increased productivity, cost savings), employee participation improves motivation and job satisfaction, improves skills and qualifications and the atmosphere in the company.

Notes

[1] The research of Moczulska (2011) also showed the frequent use of the individual forms of delegation. About 60% of workers in the surveyed enterprises were practiced job rotation three or more times a year, and 22% - twice a year. It was also observed that job enlargement prevailed over job enrichment in the enterprises.

[2] In the case of consultation respondents determine whether the issue is consulted "regularly" (2 points), "sometimes" (1 point) or "never" (0 points) and on this basis the incidence rate was calculated, which was the average number of points scored by particular issue in the entire group of companies.

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