

Education and the work situation: analysis based on surveys of entrepreneurs and employees

Wykształcenie a sytuacja pracy: analiza
na podstawie badań przedsiębiorców i pracowników

Key words: education, work situation, economic activity, entrepreneurs, employees.

Słowa kluczowe: wykształcenie, sytuacja pracy, działalność gospodarcza, przedsiębiorcy, pracownicy.

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest analiza roli wykształcenia w kształtowaniu sytuacji pracy. Przedmiotowa sytuacja pracy występuje tu w dwóch ujęciach: indywidualnej działalności gospodarczej i pracy najemnej. Jako materiał źródłowy posłużyły rezultaty badań surveyowych zrealizowanych w latach 2002–2012 na terenie województwa lubelskiego. Objęto nimi osoby prowadzące działalność gospodarczą w skali mikro- i małych firm, określane też mianem przedsiębiorców (pierwszy projekt – 739 respondentów; drugi – 652) oraz pracowników (359). W koncepcjach tych badań zastosowano zbliżone ujęcia teoretyczne i metodologiczne, dokonano także replikacji wskaźników. Stanowi to podstawę analizy porównawczej, w ramach której zestawiono wyniki badań wykonanych w różnych zbiorowościach. Uwzględnione zostały wybrane aspekty relacji zachodzących między wykształceniem i szeroko rozumianą sytuacją pracy jednostek. Szczególna uwaga została poświęcona takim zagadnieniom, jak: decyzje edukacyjne i zawodowe, oczekiwania wobec wykonywanej pracy, aktywność w zakresie kształcenia i podwyższania kwalifikacji, ocena przydatności wykształcenia we własnej pracy i na rynku pracy. Analiza wykazała, że zasadnicze znaczenie w projektowaniu sytuacji pracy, tak w wypadku przedsiębiorców, jak i pracowników najemnych, miały zasoby w postaci wykształcenia (poziom, typ, rodzaj) i przygotowania zawodowego. Pomimo wielu podobieństw, które wystąpiły w zakresie przekonań na temat pracy i wykształcenia, stwierdzono także istotne różnice. Posiadane wykształcenie łączyło się ze złożonym zestawem cech, ale w zależności od sytuacji pracy miał on swoistą strukturę. W wypadku przedsiębiorców w skład tego zbioru wchodziły głównie właściwości związane z wykonywaniem pracy i umiejętnościami wykorzystania wykształcenia w praktyce, natomiast w przypadku pracowników najemnych z kształceniem i podwyższaniem kwalifikacji (w ujęciu formalnym). Były to odmienne strategie realizacji potencjału wykształcenia w sferze pracy.

Introduction. In the literature on the subject matter, the issues of one's own business activities are usually discussed in two different perspectives. The first refers to the aspects of the establishing and operating of business entities, and the second to the paradigm of entrepreneur and the notion of entrepreneurship (cf. Schumpeter 1960; Drucker 1992; Knight 2012). While characterising the research approaches to the concept of work, viewed as the basis for shaping and implementing entrepreneurial

values, reference is often made to the studies by M. Weber (1994) and P. F. Drucker (cf. 1992, 1998). According to Drucker, entrepreneurship is a personal trait, although it involves behaviour patterns. It consists of creating new and innovative things, seeking changes and transformations, and taking the opportunities emerging in the market. Operational efficiency can stem from the utilisation of various personal resources which are shaped throughout the educational process, owing to new working experiences, especially when gained through hard and systematic work (Drucker 1994: 13, 34–39).

At present, a large number of studies focus on self-employment or own-account work. Emphasis is placed on the co-existence of two complementary approaches. The first, typical of economics, defines self-employment as the commencement of business activities at one's own risk and responsibility, along with the inherent civil-law obligations; a means of avoiding unemployment; and an alternative method of earning profits under one's own rules and means. The second approach appears closer to sociology, highlighting the aspects of finding one's own place within the social structure, social identification and identity bases, and satisfaction with one's own activities and abilities to use one's own predispositions under certain social conditions (Matusiak 2006: 106). Self-employment is treated as a way of both combatting unemployment and increasing the chances of creating new jobs, and as “[...] a manifestation of an entrepreneurial attitude oriented towards business activity providing an individual with an opportunity to earn income” (Drozdowski, Matczak 2004: 5). One can also distinguish two strategies of self-employment, i.e. oriented towards self-fulfilment and focused on professional survival, the latter indicating the readiness to accept employment outside one's own enterprise (Kryńska 2007: 63). At the same time, the literature emphasises the existence of numerous conventions in defining and classifying the population conducting business activities, exposing the lack of any statutory definition of self-employment, along with discrepancies between the legal doctrine and other sciences (cf. Kraśnicka 2002; Dominiak 2005; Duraj 2007).

The concepts of the author's studies are mainly based on the theory of work, though the notions of entrepreneur and entrepreneurship are also considered of major importance. Given the character of the population in question, being dominated by owners of micro- and small enterprises, these issues display the specificities of both a theoretical and a methodological nature¹. Despite certain reservations, the article uses the term *entrepreneur*, which refers both to business activities (even on the micro scale) and to the significance of personal qualities and an entrepreneurial attitude to one's work situation. For occupationally active people, the establishing of their own business constitutes one of the possible work situations, the others including hired work (performing work for an employer in lieu of remuneration) and unemployment. The aim of this article is to analyse the role of education in the process of developing the strategies of labour-market activities, and in particular in shaping the work situation. The work situation is presented from two perspectives, one of which involves commencing business activities and the other – undertaking work as an employee.

¹ See: Jezior 2009.

In line with the definition adopted, work means “[...] any activity performed on purpose, leading to the satisfaction of certain human needs, exhibiting social dignity [...], and assigning a specific position in society to the individuals or the groups performing such work” (Szczepański 1961: 171). The article also uses the term work situation, which is understood as one's working conditions, together with professional orientations, the perception of one's own professional role, and work satisfaction (Janicka 1997: 17).

As in the pedagogy of work, education is understood as “[...] the outcome of the educational and self-education process –in both the general and specific fields” (Okoń 2001: 453). Educational level is determined in relation to completing education in a given type of school. Considering the subject matter of the studies and analyses, and the population in question, special attention has been paid to the category of people with higher education.

Research methodology and population description. The source material included results obtained from a series of empirical studies conducted between 2002 and 2012 in the Lubelskie Voivodeship. These employed similar conceptual and methodological bases, and involved index replication, thus allowing a comparative analysis. The author's own studies were conducted in the Institute of Sociology at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, mainly as part of two projects addressed to people conducting business activities. Random samples were prepared by the Statistical Office in Lublin, based on the REGON register. The first project (referred to as P1), implemented between 2002 and 2003, covered a sample of 600 units, and the second (P2), implemented between 2010 and 2012, a sample of 1100 units. In the course of the work, many difficulties were encountered, such as incorrect addresses, invalid data and refusals to participate in the surveys, which necessitated the use of supplementary samples. The third project (P3) was implemented in 2004 among employees (mainly from the Biała Podlaska District). All these were survey projects, with data being collected by means of questionnaire interviews and circulated questionnaires. The years of the field-data collection are indicated in the survey-result description (Table 1).

Table 1. The general characteristics of the populations surveyed (%)

Features and categories		Employees	Entrepreneurs	
		2004	2002–2003	2011
		N = 359	N = 739	N = 652
Gender	Female	61.2	43.8	51.4
	Male	38.8	56.2	48.6
Age	Up to 24 years	6.8	5.5	2.4
	25–34 years	47.6	32.5	24.6
	35–44 years	25.1	27.6	29.7
	45–54 years	17.1	28.2	23.4
	55 years or more	3.4	6.2	19.9
Educational level	Basic vocational (or primary)	7.6	13.6	8.6
	Secondary or upper-secondary	42.8	57.0	40.7
	Higher (including BA degree)	49.6	29.4	50.9 (12.8)

Among the people conducting business activities, the largest category was formed by sole traders: P1 – 38.3%; P2 – 54.1%. The total proportion of entities employing up to five people (including the owner) was 84.7% in P1 and to 89.8% in P2. Based on the surveys conducted in other regions of Poland, similar characteristics of the population in question are generally obtained. The prevalence of men, medium-age workers and people with higher education is emphasised (cf. Jazwińska 1999; Kozek, Mielczarek 2000; Matusiak 2006).

The educational level as the work-preparation basis. Despite the time-lapse between the two survey projects in question, the diverse character of the population, the socio-economic changes taking place in Poland, and the revaluations in the fields of labour and education, similar structures of education-related decisions were found (Table 2). The principal role was played by individual factors (including interests, talents and predispositions), and by micro-social factors dominated by subjective and environmental measures of the attractiveness of various educational fields. Pragmatic attitudes and decisions taking into account actual career prospects were declared much less frequently.

Table 2. The motivations behind choosing a certain study major/vocation – a comparative compilation (%)

Response categories	Employees	Entrepreneurs	
	2004	2002–2003	2011
	N = 263	N = 629	N = 551
Interests and passions	60.5	54.4	61.3
Prospects of finding a job easily	24.7	20.8	20.5
Good salary prospects	24.5	20.7	18.0
Coincidence	14.5	17.5	15.4
Family traditions	8.8	12.4	11.6
High prestige	17.5	12.2	12.5
Influence of parents or family	6.8	11.0	8.7
No specific reason, some decision had to be made	8.4	10.7	10.5
Doing what one's friends do	5.3	9.4	6.7
Profession's being easy to train for	8.4	9.1	5.3
Limited educational requirements	0.8	1.8	*
Other reasons	4.9	3.3	2.9

Notes: The data do not add up to 100%, because up to three response categories could be selected (missing data was not included in the calculation).

*A different category was used, i.e. preparing for business activities (15.1%).

The analysis showed the existence of two primary types in the assessment of the value of education and perceiving its relationship to work. One type related to individuals who were more focused on the features of the educational process and obtaining

knowledge in a given field. In this approach, the significance of education was more frequently referred to knowledge acquisition, the teaching process and the functions of educational institutions, including higher-education institutions, than to economic conditions or labour-market requirements. In the second type, the context was the sphere of work and the basis for decisions was formed by expectations relating to the allocative functions of education. It should be emphasised that these decisions were examined retrospectively, which in the case of some individuals could mean a perspective of over ten years or several decades. With added experience, this resulted in a modified perception of the situation. In addition to the types mentioned, a number of different motivation types were also present. These were not always opposite to one another, and were internally diversified. The predominant orientation towards self-fulfilment was heterogeneous, and was found in individuals with various educational paths (profiles, majors).

In developing one's situation of work, primary importance was ascribed to education and professional qualifications, but these concepts differed in terms of convictions and actions. Personal and micro-social resources were considered the most important factors for preparing a person to conduct economic activities. These included knowledge gathered at various stages of education and in the previous job (P1 – 34.8%; P2 – 35.7%), intuition (30.2%; 30.4%), self-education (30.3%; 26.6%), and the support of the family and friends (31.2%; 30.2%). In the context of self-employment experience, the key importance in shaping one's professional situation was ascribed to attitudes and dedication, while achieving success was mainly connected with high-quality work, conscientiousness and professional reliability (P1, P2). In the case of entrepreneurs (P1, P2) the features of the work situation were connected with education – the higher the level of education (and when it was technical, medical, legal or economic), the higher the probability that a person would be the head of a larger company with good results on the market, which is seeking development opportunities (e.g. innovation, technological or technical improvement, increased employment). It should be noted that business-consultancy services were used relatively rarely (P1 – 30.5%; P2 – 22.8%) and participation in courses and training sessions was mainly determined by the specific industry or the statutory requirements applicable to the given profession. Distancing oneself from institutional support was explained by difficulties in financing the learning process, but also by the lack of learning needs, and by independence and self-education, as well as having the sufficient qualifications. In the case of employed individuals (P3) a connection between education and the work situation was also present – the higher the level of education, the higher the positions held at work and the employment rate.

Education as an element of the work situation. Establishing the features of a good or rewarding job is useful both for describing employee expectations and as a context for the role of education in shaping the work situation (Table 3). In spite of the diversity of the examined populations and the heterogeneous forms of measurement, recurring sets of features were obtained again. Work organisation, remuneration, employment stability, and work atmosphere were the most popular.

Table 3. The features of a good/rewarding job – expectations and assessment (%)

Response categories	Employees	Entrepreneurs		
	2004	2002–2003	2011	
	N = 355	N = 732	N = 644	N = 653
1	2	3	4	5
Good organisation of work	81.1	73.9	33.9	29.5
High salary potential	70.3	69.6	54.7	14.9
Job certainty	71.7	65.5	20.0	25.7
Personal satisfaction from work	70.5	64.1	*	41.5
Good atmosphere among employees	82.3	64.0	34.5	23.2
Self-reliance, responsibility	53.0	59.2	61.2	76.3
Healthy working conditions	63.0	57.8	7.0	24.0
Low stress levels	60.6	51.1	23.8	13.7
Good technical equipment	49.7	48.4	8.1	18.6
Opportunities for skills improvement	48.4	42.7	24.1	16.7
Meeting other people	39.2	41.3	27.5	57.4
Appropriate assessment of employee performance	56.0	39.5	6.1	11.2
Promotion opportunities	34.6	31.6	7.3	2.4
Interesting and varied tasks	27.3	28.4	16.6	18.2
Normalised working hours	44.9	25.5	11.6	19.9
Work in the field one has been educated for	22.2	20.9	11.8	31.5

Notes: Columns 2 and 3 specify the percentages of respondents who considered a given feature as very important at work (on a five-grade scale). Column 4 contains data on work satisfaction (multiple-choice questions with selection limited to 4 categories). The last column shows the percentages of respondents who assigned to their job the highest grade (on a five-grade scale). *This category was absent (the question was about work satisfaction).

The most frequently expressed work expectations were almost universally held. This is also evidenced by the small range of correlations found in the analysis which used independent variables (e.g. education, type of profession, gender). However, there was a recurring correlation between the level of education and the number of respondents who chose such aspects as self-reliance, interesting tasks, and satisfaction, while salaries and employment were less common answers (P1, P2, P3). The feature which shows the connection between the sphere of work and the sphere of education was also associated with the level of education: in P1 and P2 statistically significant differences were found in the assessment of importance of this feature (Table 4).

Table 4. The importance of the feature of a good job: opportunities for skills improvement and training according to the level of education

The surveyed population	Education			<i>F</i>
	Basic vocational	Secondary	Higher	
Entrepreneurs 2003–2003 (N = 735)	3.87	4.07	4.34	10.14
Employees 2004 (N = 353)	3.68	4.34	4.47	14.21

Notes: Arithmetic means of grades are provided; $p < 0.0001$.

On the basis of all the described research projects it was found that the higher the educational level, the better an individual was positioned on the labour market. The analysis showed a number of unexpected trends, however. On the one hand, the respondents were in favour of the meritocratisation of the social order, and accepted the relationship between education and the chances of being offered attractive job positions and high salaries. There was also a readiness to bear the costs of lost investments as a result of retraining or changing the workplace. On the other hand, the condition of performing the job one was educated for was only rarely included in the set of the most important features of a good job. Furthermore, obtaining new knowledge and skills was among the work objectives which were rarely mentioned (P1 – 22.6%; P2 – 14.7%; P3 – 32.2%)². Nevertheless, information about currently participating in courses to improve one's skills and qualifications was relatively frequent (P1 – 19.0%; P2 – 37.0%; P3 – 34.1%), as were declarations that respondents wished to participate in such courses in the future (P1 – 23.9%; P2 – 31.9%; P3 – 37.9%). Another observed rule was that being active in learning and skills improvement was connected with the respondent's level of education – the higher it was, the higher the probability of engaging in such activities: P1 0.20; P2 0.23; P3 0.22 (Cramer's V , $p < 0.001$). Among respondents who had completed higher education, this percentage exceeded 40%, and was several times higher than for the category of respondents with basic vocational education.

A detailed analysis revealed a number of significant regularities. Firstly, the comparison of the activity level in the sphere of education, including life-long learning, revealed differences between the individual categories of respondents. At the same time, the influence of such variables as educational level and professional resources reduced the clarity of these differences in the case of different work situations. Secondly, the key issue relates to the role ascribed to the educational level, especially in the context of the tools used for the favourable allocation of individuals on the labour market. Entrepreneurs saw progress in economic activities and success in business mainly as the result of personal involvement and diligence, self-education and obtaining "practical" knowledge. This connection between a business's fate and the work potential of its owner allowed the better adjustment of the educational level to the working conditions, and, as a consequence, affected the assessment of the factors decisive for this work situation. Thirdly, this supported the conviction that the chosen career path was right. Although there was a variety of reasons for establishing one's own business, such as self-fulfilment and defensive strategies (staying on the labour market, avoiding unemployment), only one in ten respondents preferred being an employee in the question about employment prospects (P2). To a certain degree, these opinions resulted from the awareness of the difficult conditions on the labour market. The analysis demonstrated, however, that the crucial aspect of accepting one's current job (features, conditions) were again the respondent's individual resources. The inclination to continue economic activities increased with the assessment of usefulness of one's education (0.17) and one's chances on the labour market (0.18) (Cramer's V , $p <$

² The question related to the goals the respondents would like to achieve through their work.

0.001). There are a number of arguments in favour of the conclusion that opinions on the usefulness of one's education and the basis for professional and business achievement had a special significance depending on the respondent category. Usually those respondents were self-employed, not people who employed others. In the surveys of employees, the clarity of forming strategies based on own resources was weaker, and their effectiveness was more often seen in the context of the influence of external factors, such as labour-market conditions, employer requirements, and the type of job offers.

Table 5. The assessments of the usefulness of education and the chances of being offered a job according to educational level – Entrepreneurs 2011 (data in %)³

Item	The usefulness of education (grades)						The chances to work outside your own company (grade)		
	In your own company			On the labour market					
Education	N = 629; R = 0.12; <i>p</i> < 0.05			N = 548; R = 0.14; <i>p</i> < 0.01			N = 632; R = 0.19; <i>p</i> < 0.0001		
	small	average	high	small	average	high	small	average	high
Basic vocational	26.4	17.0	56.6	27.3	38.6	34.1	46.3	27.8	25.9
Secondary	32.0	20.0	48.0	39.9	31.7	28.4	40.4	30.2	29.4
Higher	21.5	15.6	62.9	24.7	33.1	42.2	23.5	33.8	42.7

Notes: The table consists of three cross tables; Spearman's *R* was specified (missing data was not taken into consideration). The questions used a five-grade scale, which was reduced to a three-grade scale for the purposes of the analysis.

The comparative analysis, which involved the results of surveys carried out in various populations, led to the conclusion that resources, which included education (level, type, form) and professional skills, were the key factor in planning the work situation. In the case of economic activity, this often formed its objective basis. In the context of experience and "years in the business", the attitudes and predispositions which were seen as the key elements in qualifications needed to run one's own business were assigned high grades. Entrepreneurs more often saw success as resulting from high-quality work, reliability and conscientiousness, than from formal education. In spite of the indicated differences, the surveyed populations showed a similar (and nearly universal) level of work satisfaction: P1 – 86.6%; P2 – 82.5%; P3 – 85.2%.

Conclusions. The comparative analysis of the obtained results demonstrated that there were complex relationships between education and the work situation of both entrepreneurs and employees. At the stage of making educational decisions and functions ascribed to education and its effects, the visibility of these relationships was relatively low. As for the type of work situation, it was connected with the various assessments of the role of education on the labour market and its usefulness in the current job, and implied different attitudes to taking up successive stages of education and skills improvement. In the case of employees this was often formalised, and learning

³ These variables were not determined for P1. The respondents were asked about having a job related to their education. The percentages of affirmative responses according to educational level were as follows: basic vocational – 25.5%; secondary – 30.9%; higher – 51.1% (N = 723; Cramer's *V* = 0.12; *p* < 0.001).

was seen as a condition of planning and achieving the work situation and an investment which improves one's employment prospects. In the case of entrepreneurs, the features or conditions of being self-employed largely resulted from the respondent's educational level. Although its usefulness was recognised, the key resources to develop this work situation included the methods of carrying out tasks, dedication, the ability to put knowledge and education into practice, experience in business, and self-education. A comparison of the said work situations leads to the conclusion that the obtained differences were more a matter of focus and perspective in assigning grades and spotting opportunities to capitalise on the resources held, including education, than of different meanings and actual usefulness of resources in work.

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