"The impact of employer brand on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement"

| AUTHORS | Greta Drūteikienė (iD)
 Julija Savicke (iD)
 Daiva Skarupskienė |

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Greta Drūteikienė (Lithuania), **Julija Savickė** (Lithuania), **Daiva Skarupskienė** (Lithuania)

THE IMPACT OF EMPLOYER BRAND ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Abstract

In recent years, employer brand has been widely addressed as a crucial factor in attracting and retaining the best employees. Research on its impact on organizations can provide a better understanding of the benefits of employer branding in unlocking the potential of employees. Thus, this paper aims to evaluate the impact of employer brand on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement in Lithuanian companies. The study surveyed 429 employees (from < 18 years to > 65 years) of Lithuanian companies. The data were collected via an online survey of the respondents and by sending e-mails to the administrators of randomly selected Lithuanian companies requesting to share the survey link with their employees. Descriptive statistics, reliability assessment, ANOVA tests, multiple linear regression, and moderation analysis were used to analyze the collected data. The study found that employer brand directly impacts employee engagement ($\beta = 0.114$, $p = 0.004$). However, employer brand does not have a statistically significant effect on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement ($p = 0.2224$). Based on the results, employees working in Lithuanian companies are more engaged when they perceive their employer brand as positive. In contrast, when psychologically empowered, employees engage in work regardless of their perception of the employer brand.

Keywords	employer brand, psychological empowerment, engaged employees, human resource management, Lithuania
JEL Classification	M12, M54

INTRODUCTION

Employer brand, as an asset contributing to the competitive advantage of organizations, has become a particularly relevant topic among practitioners in Lithuania. It is especially crucial in the face of recent unrest in the labor market due to the global pandemic and geopolitical situation in Europe. As a result, organizations compete to retain the best talents and win the image game against the newly allocated international organizations.

In the past, employer branding was only perceived as an external factor that helped organizations attract new employees. In contrast, nowadays, it turns into an internal focus and effort to retain the most valuable talents and to strengthen their perception of the organization's ability to create a positive work environment that supports and develops its employees.

Employee engagement is essential for organizational success in today's competitive business environment. Employers must find a sustainable business model that combines business strategy with employees

Greta Drūteikienė, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Vilnius University, Lithuania. (Corresponding author)

Julija Savickė, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Vilnius University, Lithuania.

Daiva Skarupskienė, M.A., Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Vilnius University, Lithuania.

committed to the company's goals. Therefore, employees must feel recognized and valued. In addition, psychological empowerment has recently gained popularity among human resource management practitioners as a measure to stimulate employees' sense of self-control, independent performance, and belief in their own abilities to perform work tasks.

In the scientific literature, little attention is paid to the role of employer brand on the organization's existing employees, especially in terms of the practical consequences of this phenomenon. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical studies in the scientific literature on the direct and indirect influence of employer branding on today's human resource management strategy related to psychological empowerment and employee engagement. Thus, this study aims to fill in this research gap.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Employer brand that fosters a positive work environment and recognizes employees' abilities can be the key to disclosing the full potential of the organization's employees. Employee engagement fosters enthusiasm and dedication to work, and psychological empowerment allows employees to take full advantage of individually performing tasks. Therefore, the potential of synergy between the three phenomena shall be explored.

In recent decades, organizations have faced rapid and turbulent changes in uncertain environments. In such circumstances, it is essential to enable employees to make independent decisions at the operational level, solve challenges in their responsibility areas, propose performance improvement initiatives, and be willing to implement them (Spreitzer, 1995). Therefore, the phenomenon of psychological empowerment includes the perception that employees can independently think, behave and take actions in controlling their performance and making decisions (Bakotić & Rogošić, 2017). The scientific literature discloses a variety of aspects of this phenomenon. Analyzing the work of scientists (Jokubauskaitė & Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė, 2015; Naqshbandi et al., 2019; Hussain & Rehman, 2020; Khoshmehr et al., 2020; Özdemir et al., 2020; Kiliç et al., 2020), the study distinguished the following employee traits (self-esteem, extroversion, risk-taking propensity, proactiveness, generalized self-efficacy), professional satisfaction, and self-assessment, a balance between self-esteem and constructive deviant behavior. Moreover, high organizational commitment, trust in direct supervisors, management efficiency, and job satisfaction. Innovativeness, creativeness at work, and higher

job performance (Jokubauskaitė & Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė, 2015; Hussain & Rehman, 2020; Shah, Shah, et al., 2019; Khoshmehr et al., 2020), lower tendency to leave an organization and higher engagement are also relevant.

Psychological empowerment is linked to social cognitive theory (Shah, Shah, et al., 2019), where efficiency is critical. The increase in employees' psychological power leads to increased performance and the perception that an individual is capable of executing the task (Özdemir et al., 2020). Thus, psychological empowerment can be considered a significant work outcome (Shah, Shah, et al., 2019). Subsequently, it is necessary not only at the individual level but at the organizational level as well: through a better understanding of business needs, satisfaction with the job, increasing task control, more rapid reaction to market changes, creation of a collaborative work environment, decreasing employee turnover, accumulation of new knowledge and skills. Empowerment, or, in other words, giving power to employees (Conger et al., 1988), strengthens employees' beliefs that they can adequately react to situations, select proper actions, and apply professional knowledge and skills (Žukauskaitė et al., 2019). Hence, psychological empowerment appears to be closely linked to employee engagement: psychologically empowered individuals are more creative, resilient, and take more job initiatives (Shah, Khattak, et al., 2019), which suggests that they are more engaged in their job and work-related goals (Shah, Khattak, et al., 2019).

Organizations that recognize human resources as the key asset for their success inevitably end up rethinking their perception in the eyes of their people. More and more organizations strive to invest in their employer brand to become

positive among their employees (Khan, 2009; Ozcelik, 2015; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Henkel et al., 2007). Employer brand helps organizations identify themselves among current employees (Srivastava et al., 2012), create the identity, image, and uniqueness as a desirable employer, and thus motivate, engage, and convince employees to stay in the organization (Srivastava et al., 2012; Chawla, 2020). A strong employer brand is linked with the ability to build and effectively manage employer-employee relationships (Ozcelik, 2015; Biswas & Suar, 2016). Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2010) suggest that employees experience higher self-esteem, better psychological state, and more robust identification with an organization when an employer brand is positive. Furthermore, Kashyap and Rangnekar (2016) revealed a positive impact of an employer brand on employee retention. Ozcelik (2015) states that an employer brand fosters motivation in employees, provides them with a clear direction in their work, and increases their commitment to the organization, all of which contribute to the success of the business strategy.

Tanwar and Prasad (2017) distinguished five dimensions of the employer brand. First, it is a healthy work atmosphere: the organization cares about a safe, friendly, and collaborative atmosphere at the workplace. Second, it is training and development: providing employees with possibilities for developing skills and strengthening competencies. Third, it is work-life balance: creating and supporting a work environment that allows balancing the work and career-related goals and personal life. Fourth, it is ethics and corporate social responsibility: an organization's commitment to conform to high ethical standards and social mission to society. Fifth, it is compensation and benefits: an adequate remuneration system and additional benefit packages available to employees. The study concluded that a healthy work atmosphere was perceived as the most significant dimension of the employer brand. At the same time, compensation and benefits were the least significant to employees and perceived as a self-evident attribute of an organization (Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). Therefore, these dimensions are associated with the benefits of employer brand, distinguished by Ambler and Barrow (1996): healthy work atmosphere and work-life balance highlight the psychological benefits of a positive employer brand; training and development, and ethics and social responsibility are emphasized as functional benefits, compensation and benefits are viewed as economic benefits of employer brand (Tanwar & Prasad, 2017).

The analysis of existing literature on employer brand, psychological empowerment, and employee engagement reveals that these phenomena are all linked with regard to disclosing employees' potential for an organization's success. Employer branding strategies can build work environments where employees reveal their creativity and independence in performing tasks, which stimulates them to accomplish their goals and creates psychological conditions that lead to higher engagement (Chawla, 2020; Dhir & Shukla, 2019). The scientific literature discloses employer brand through employee benefits (Ronda & Azanza, 2021). Employees who perceive to receive such benefits tend to believe in organizational values, strive to contribute more substantially to achieving corporate goals, and are willing to stay in an organization (Stoyanova & Iliev, 2017). Conceptually, all the above fall into the phenomenon of employee engagement (Gaurylienė & Korsakienė, 2017; Lisbona et al., 2018; Žukauskaitė et al., 2019). Therefore, organizations that put more effort into strengthening their employer brand will likely result in more engaged employees (Younis & Hammad, 2021; Srivastava et al., 2012; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017; Ronda & Azanza, 2021). According to Andrew and Sofian (2012), employee engagement involves emotional and psychological relationships between employees and their organization that may lead to positive or negative behavior demonstrated in the workplace. Janighorban et al. (2020) state that psychological empowerment motivates employees to perform tasks actively. Others identify high organizational commitment among psychologically empowered employees (Jokubauskaitė & Lazauskaitė-Zabielskė, 2015; Özdemir et al., 2020). Jose and Mampilly (2015) and Ugwu et al. (2014) confirm the positive relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement. Employer brand is associated with psychological benefits to employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). The scientific literature confirms that a positive employer's brand has a significant advantage in engaging employees in the long-term perspective

(Dhir & Shukla, 2019; Chawla, 2019). It can be assumed that psychologically empowered employees can be more engaged when they perceive the employer brand as positive. Thus, the study elaborates on the following hypotheses:

H1: *Employer brand positively influences employee engagement.*

H1a: *Healthy work atmosphere positively influences employee engagement.*

H1b: *Training and development positively influence employee engagement.*

H1c: *Work-life balance positively influences employee engagement.*

H1d: *Ethics and corporate social responsibility positively influence employee engagement.*

H1e: *Compensation and benefits positively influence employee engagement.*

H2: *Psychological empowerment positively influences employee engagement.*

H3: *Employer brand moderates the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement.*

H3a: *Healthy work atmosphere moderates the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement.*

H3b: *Training and development moderate the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement.*

H3c: *Work-life balance moderates the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement.*

H3d: *Ethics and corporate social responsibility moderate the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement.*

H3e: *Compensation and benefits moderate the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement.*

2. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study was performed to test the impact of employer brand on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement. The data for this quantitative study were collected through an online survey of employees in Lithuania in October-November 2021. Questionnaires were distributed through the online survey platform *apklausa.lt* and by sending e-mails to the administrators of randomly selected Lithuanian companies asking them to share the survey link with their employees. To ensure that relevant respondents participated in the study, a filter question 'Do you currently work in an organization?' was used: respondents who do not currently work in an organization (i.e., are self-employed, unemployed, etc.) were removed from completing the questionnaire. A total number of 429 questionnaires were eligible for further analysis. The sample comprised 65.5% female, 33.8% male, and 0.7% other respondents. The majority of the respondents represented age groups of 26-35 years (36.8%) and 36-45 years (35.9%); 74.8% of the respondents held a higher education degree. The majority of the respondents were employed at their current workplace for 1-5 years (35.2%), representing the private sector (68.8%) and large organizations with over 250 employees (43.8%).

The questionnaire consists of four sections:

1) Employer brand was measured with the employer brand assessment questionnaire by Tanwar and Prasad (2017), translated into Lithuanian. The scale constitutes five dimensions of employer brand: healthy work atmosphere (six items), training and development (six items), work-life balance (three items), ethics and corporate social responsibility (four items), and compensation and benefits (four items). Items were measured on a 5-point scale, from 1, 'strongly disagree' to 5, 'strongly agree.'

2) The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), in its official Lithuanian translation, was used to measure employee engagement. The scale includes nine items, measured on the scale from 0 'never' to 6 'always.' Therefore, the overall employee engagement is calculated as an average score of 9-scale items.

3) Psychological empowerment was measured with the Revised Lithuanian Employee Psychological Empowerment Questionnaire (LPEQ–9) (Tvarijonavičius et al., 2016). It includes nine items, measured on a 6-point scale, from 1, 'strongly disagree,' to 6, 'strongly agree.' Therefore, the overall psychological empowerment was calculated as an average score of 9-scale items.

4) Demographic questions examined respondents' gender, age, education, work period in their current workplace, sector (private/public), and the size of their current workplace.

As seen above, the measures used in the questionnaire differ in the measurement scales; thus, the normalization of variables has been performed using the z-score normalization method. Normalized variables were used in further analysis and hypotheses testing.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Reliability assessment

The internal consistency analysis was performed to estimate the reliability of selected constructs (Table 1). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the 'work-life balance' (0.580) and 'compensation and benefits' (0.622) dimensions were below the typical threshold of 0.7, indicating the low reliability of the components. Tavakol and Dennick (2011) and Ursachi et al. (2015) focused on potential causes for such situations, linking lower Cronbach's alpha coefficient with a small number of items in the scale, which took place in the frame of Tanwar and Prasad (2017) scale, used in this study: 'work-

life balance' – three items, 'compensation and benefits' – four items. Hence, this study proceeds with further analysis with no changes to the initial scale by Tanwar and Prasad (2017).

3.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 portrays the mean and standard deviations of variables used in this study: psychological empowerment, employer brand, its five dimensions, and employee engagement.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Construct	Min	Max	Mean	Std. deviation
Psychological empowerment	1.00	6.00	4.5939	0.79587
Employer brand (overall)	1.00	5.00	3.4534	0.65553
- Healthy work atmosphere	1.00	5.00	3.6511	0.67673
- Training and development	1.00	5.00	3.2953	0.93060
- Work-life balance	1.00	5.00	3.1368	0.99451
- Ethics and corporate social responsibility	1.00	5.00	3.8601	0.70211
- Compensation and benefits	1.00	5.00	3.2249	0.91495
Employee engagement	1.00	7.00	5.2497	1.11080

Respondents tend to assess their employer brand somewhat positively (all mean scores above 3 points on the 5-point scale). Ethics and social responsibility were assessed highest among the dimensions of employer brand (mean = 3.8601). In contrast, work-life balance was assessed lowest (mean = 3.1368), suggesting that organizations in Lithuania have a high focus on appearing to employees as socially responsible while still coping with the work-life balance challenge, which has been a matter of particular challenges during the pandemic time when this study was conducted. The results show that employees in Lithuania

Table 1. Reliability assessment

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Construct	Cronbach's alpha
Employer brand (overall)	0.906
- Healthy work atmosphere	0.788
- Training and development	0.872
- Work-life balance	0.580
- Ethics and corporate social responsibility	0.747
- Compensation and benefits	0.622
Psychological empowerment (PJKL-9)	0.895
Employee engagement	0.926

perceive being relatively highly psychologically empowered (mean = 4.5939) in their workplace. The level of engagement among respondents was also somewhat high (mean = 5.2497); however, a high standard deviation allows assuming that it varied significantly among employees of different organizations.

The relationships between employer brand, psychological empowerment, and employee engagement were tested using linear regression. In contrast, the moderating effect of employer brand on the relationship between psychological engagement and employee empowerment was measured using the path analysis modeling tool by Hayes (2019).

Multiple linear regression was used to test *H1* and *H2*. Independent variables are X1 – psychological empowerment, X2 – employer's brand, and the dependent variable is Y – employee engagement. The ANOVA test (F = 272.353, p = 0.000) showed that the model is statistically significant and explains 56% of the total variation (adjusted r2 = 0.559). Table 3 portrays the results of the multiple linear regression analysis.

The multiple linear regression analysis revealed that psychological empowerment and employer brand positively influence employee engagement (p = 0.000 and p = 0.004), confirming *H1* and *H2*. Standardized coefficients of the regression model

(β = 0.114 and β = 0.678) suggest that increasing the employer brand perception by 100% leads to an increase in employee engagement by 11% while increasing psychological empowerment by 100% leads to an increase in employee engagement by 67%.

The multiple linear regression with a stepwise method was used to further explore the direct influence of dimensions of the employer brand on employee empowerment and test *H1a-H1e*. Independent variables are X1 – psychological empowerment, X2 – healthy work atmosphere, X3 – training and development, X4 – work-life balance, X5 – ethics and social responsibility, X6 – compensation and benefits, and the dependent variable is Y – employee engagement. The ANOVA test (F = 288.545, p = 0.000) showed that the model is statistically significant and explains 57% of the total variation (adjusted r^2 = 0.573). Table 4 portrays the results of the multiple linear regression analysis.

A stepwise analysis has eliminated four out of five dimensions of the employer brand from the regression model, rejecting *H1b-H1e* while confirming *H1a* (p = 0.000). Standardized coefficients of the regression model (β = 0.180 and β = 0.645) suggest that increasing healthy work atmosphere perception by 100% leads to an increase in employee engagement by 18% while increasing psychological empowerment by 100% leads to an increase in employee engagement by 65%.

Table 3. Multiple linear regression model of the influence of psychological empowerment and employer brand on employee engagement

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5.790E-16	.024	–	.000	1.000
	Psychological empowerment	.630	.036	.678	17.404	.000
	Employer brand	.145	.049	.114	2.933	.004

Note: a. Dependent variable: Employee engagement.

Table 4. Multiple linear regression model of the influence of psychological empowerment and employer brand dimensions on employee engagement

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5.689E-16	.023	–	.000	1.000
	Psychological empowerment	.599	.035	.645	17.152	.000
	Healthy work atmosphere	.191	.040	.180	4.798	.000

Note: a. Dependent Variable: Employee engagement.

The moderator analysis was used to test *H3*. The moderation effect of W (employer brand) on the relationship between the independent variable X (psychological empowerment) and the dependent variable Y (employee engagement) was assessed. To test *H3a-H3e*, the moderation effect of employer brand dimensions was checked: W1 – healthy work atmosphere, W2 – training and development, W3 – work-life balance, W4 – ethics and social responsibility, W5 – compensation and benefits.

The moderating effect of employer brand on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement was not statistically significant (p ≤ 0.05); thus, *H3* was rejected. The study further tested the moderating effect of each employer brand dimension (W1-W5) on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement. The moderator analysis revealed that the effects of each dimension of the employer brand were not statistically significant (p ≤ 0.05), thus rejecting *H3a-H3e*.

4. DISCUSSION

Data analysis confirmed the positive influence of employer brand on employee engagement. These findings contribute to earlier studies on the topic and support earlier insights (Srivastava et al., 2012; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017; Bakanauskienė et al., 2016; Ronda & Azanza, 2021; Chawla, 2020) that employer brand plays a significant role in human resource strategy and impacts existing employees of an organization. In this study, the employer brand was decomposed into five dimensions according to the perceived benefits of the employer brand in the employees' eyes. Tanwar and Prasad (2017) suggest that a healthy work atmosphere is the most robust dimension of the employer brand. In the study, it was the only dimension of the employer brand with a positive impact on employee engagement. Therefore, when the atmosphere in an organization is perceived as healthy (friendly, safe, and nurturing), employees are more engaged in their work. This suggests that organizations must clearly communicate policies and measures that support and enhance a healthy workplace atmosphere.

The results also confirmed the positive influence of psychological empowerment on employee engagement (Ugwu et al., 2014; Jose & Mampilly, 2015; Kong et al., 2016). This result is rather expected and thoroughly addressed in both human resource management theory and practice. Psychological empowerment strengthens the employees' beliefs in their ability to successfully solve complex tasks and issues independently, involves their creativity, and reveals their full potential. Therefore, it is viewed as a source that could help an individual to engage in the work (Ugwu et al., 2014).

A valuable insight appeared from the fact that the impacts of employer brand and psychological empowerment on employee engagement were measured in combination. It was found that psychological empowerment contributed to increased employee engagement more significantly than employer brand or its dimension of healthy work atmosphere. It is argued that such a result does not allow concluding that employer brand is not vital for employee engagement. Thus, psychological empowerment, being a direct human resource management measure, has an evident and targeted influence. In contrast, employer brand results from various measures, impacts, and formed perceptions that determine various attitudes and behaviors of employees. Engagement is just one positively enhanced employee behavior among many. Ozcelik (2015) shared somehow similar idea, stating that the internal brand (hence, employer brand in the eyes of current employees) should be viewed beyond human resource management practices, focusing on the value proposition to employees, who then internalize the brand identity in their work attitudes and behaviors.

Data analysis did not confirm the moderating effect of employer brand on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement, therefore denying that a positive employer brand contributes to strengthening the engagement of psychologically empowered employees. This result does not support the insights from Ambler and Barrow (1996) and Tanwar and Prasad (2017) that employer brand provides psychological benefit to employees and that psychologically empowered employees consciously take advantage of organizational benefits (Ugwu et al., 2014), highlighted through employer brand. Therefore, the role of the employer brand is not in helping employees form a perception about the organization's efforts to create favorable conditions

of psychological empowerment but in other complex perceptions that lead to higher engagement. Thus, employer brand should be perceived not as a part of human resources management tools or practices but as a separate phenomenon that simultaneously shapes employees' perception of the benefits of working or staying in the organization, evokes a sense of identification with the organization, and promotes and maintains employees' involvement in their work in other aspects.

CONCLUSION

Employer brand is flexible and turbulent, affected by both internal organizational factors and the external environment. However, employees' perceptions of their psychological empowerment and engagement can be considered as somehow more stable phenomena. This study did not confirm the moderating effect of employer brand on the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee engagement. Hence, employer brand can be viewed as a capture of momentum and shall be used occasionally for strengthening particular perceptions of employees. In contrast to optimism prevailing in the scientific literature and shared by practitioners, this study suggests that organizations shall not rely solely on employer brand to make their human resource management practices perceived as successful by employees.

The findings revealed that the healthy work atmosphere dimension of employer brand has a positive influence on employee engagement. Therefore, perceived organizational care about maintaining a friendly, safe, and collaborative environment in the workplace leads to increased enthusiasm and dedication to work. Employees feel protected, supported, and valued.

Therefore, the role of the employer brand in building and strengthening employee engagement is evident. However, it requires further insights and investigation to become entirely integrated as a human resource management technique, considering turbulent changes in human resource management practices in the pandemic and post-pandemic times and the face of the fourth technological revolution.

Several practical implications can be drawn based on the study conducted. As employer brand has a direct positive influence on employee engagement, human resource management practitioners and managers may establish activities that contribute to building and strengthening it. Involving employees in such activities contributes to raising employees' perception of being significant to the organization and building loyalty. Furthermore, to strengthen and retain high employee engagement, practitioners should pay attention to the positive influence of the employer brand by building a long-term development strategy and allocating adequate resources for its implementation. Finally, systematic monitoring of the level of psychological empowerment and employee engagement would allow organizations to assess potential risks associated with presumably incorrectly portrayed employer brand value, as well as long-term risks of employee turnover caused by insufficient empowerment and hostile employer brand perception.

Several limitations of this study must be emphasized. First, the study was conducted in Lithuania, bringing to the attention the level of development of employer brand as strategic and human resource management tools, which, in some companies, may yet be underestimated. Second, the data analysis did not include demographic data variables, which could be significant to the perceived employer brand, assuming that large corporations work more extensively on strengthening their employer brand among their current employees, and it could play a more significant role in strengthening the engagement of psychologically empowered employees. Third, this study did not address a particular organization but captured the overall picture of the market in Lithuania. Thus, conducting similar studies organization-wide and performing inter-organizational comparisons in Lithuania and other countries is suggested. Furthermore, the generation aspect may be interesting to explore further.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Greta Druteikiene, Daiva Skarupskiene.
Data curation: Greta Druteikiene, Julija Savicke, Daiva Skarupskiene.
Formal analysis: Greta Druteikiene, Julija Savicke.
Funding acquisition: Greta Druteikiene.
Investigation: Daiva Skarupskiene.
Methodology: Julija Savicke, Daiva Skarupskiene.
Project administration: Greta Druteikiene.
Resources: Daiva Skarupskiene.
Software: Julija Savicke.
Supervision: Greta Druteikiene.
Validation: Greta Druteikiene, Julija Savicke, Daiva Skarupskiene.
Visualization: Julija Savicke.
Writing – original draft: Julija Savicke, Daiva Skarupskiene.
Writing – review & editing: Greta Druteikiene.

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