

HR TRENDS AND TENDENCIES IN HUNGARY IN THE LIGHT OF THE EXPERIENCES OF THE LATEST CRANET SURVEY 2021

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Abstract: The regime change in 1989 marked a significant milestone in the development of human resource (HR) management in Hungary. Changes in the legal, institutional and ownership environment placed significantly different demands on the HR work of companies and institutions. It has become very important for organizations to have access to comparative HR data with other organizations related to HR activities.

The Cranet international HR university non-for-profit research network, founded in 1989 in Cranfield, England, has a long tradition in this field. Hungarian researchers have participated in Cranet's international HR research on four occasions so far. In

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this article, we aim to present the main features of the Cranet HR research in Hungary in 2021. We review the findings and noteworthy results of the research. Where possible, we compare it with relevant data from the 2014-2016 survey.

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1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges the Hungary has ever faced is to meet the huge economic and political transformation taking place in Hungary over the past decades, which has resulted in significant changes in the perception of the human resource management (HRM) function of organizations. More and more companies and institutions have recognized the importance of this field. However, on the basis of our research carried out over the past decades, it can be concluded that – “In larger domestic organizations, radical changes have occurred in the management of people, but the HR practices of foreign and domestic companies showed significant differences at the turn of the millennium, so that in the case of the latter, the areas of change and their extent were not significant compared to the situation before the regime change” (Karoliny-Poór, 2019: 158).

Around the turn of the millennium, the HR practices typical in Hungary still differed to a large extent from those practiced in the more developed countries of the world. This finding of ours is particularly valid for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) here. Thanks to this, and to the slower change, the peculiarities that are still alive here in the middle of the second decade were formed, which can be identified in the difference in the proportion of users in several HR areas – for example, individual recruitment and selection techniques or career planning solutions – showing the disadvantage of Hungarian respondents.

Among the characteristics of Hungary and other CEE countries, it was particularly striking that they differ from all other examined country groups of the world, according to which direct (line) managers are the decisive decision-makers of different HR policies (Kazlauskaite et al., 2013).

The changes in Hungary at that time seemed faster and more powerful in many respects compared to those of the other CEE countries. We found it characteristic of Hungary that the field of HR, which is otherwise dominated by women, proved to be the most strongly female profession (80%) in the Hungarian sample.

As both literature findings and practical examples point out, subsidiaries of foreign companies often carry out more advanced (Hiltrop, 1991) and more complex human resource management work than local ones. According to research by Lewis (2005), this difference is particularly striking in the case of the catching-up Central and Eastern European countries. The indicated difference was also striking in Hungary (Poór et al., 2018).

The economic transformation in Hungary over the past decades has led to significant changes in the perception of the human resource management (HRM) function of organizations. The importance of this field is now recognized in an

increasing number of companies and institutions. However, based on our research over the past decades, until now we have found that, overall, ‘although there have been radical changes in the management of people in larger Hungarian organizations, the HR practices of foreign- and domestic-owned firms at the turn of the millennium showed substantial differences, with the latter having neither the areas nor the extent of change compared to the pre-transition period’ (Karoliny-Poór, 2019: 158).

In the past few years, several unprecedented crises have affected and continue to affect the lives of companies and institutions and the practice of HRM in the world and in Hungary.

The last years of the second decade of the 21st century in Hungary were a period of steady GDP growth, with incomes rising steadily and unemployment falling to a 30-year low. This was halted by the series of Covid-19 pandemic waves that started in 2020. This crisis affected different parts of the economy very differently.

Table 1: GDP growth in different parts of the world and Hungary (2019-2022)

Areas	2019	2020	2021	2022*
Global	3%	-4.80%	5.50%	3.60%
USA	3.65%	-4.20%	4.20%	3.10%
China	5.95%	2.60%	6.50%	3.50%
EU-27	1.70%	-7.50%	5%	2.70%
Hungary	5%	-4.80%	7.10%	4.20%
Romania	4.20%	-3.70%	5.90%	5.10%
Slovakia	2.50%	-4.80%	3.00%	2.30%

Sources: Authors’ own researches on the basis of Statista, IFM and OECD data

However, the recovery period in 2021 resulted in high output growth (7.1%) at the level of the national economy. This was largely due to the fact that a significant number of organizations in Hungary saw the crisis as an opportunity as well as a problem. In many places, it was perceived that the era of a low-wage export-driven economy was over and that new measures were needed to ensure the survival of organizations and the physical and mental wellbeing of their staff.

In this article, we do not undertake anything other than presenting the characteristics of HRM here based on the 2021 Cranet survey in Hungary. Where possible, we compare it with the most important data from the previous 2014-2016, 2008-2010 and 2004-2004 Hungarian Cranet HR survey. For a proper evaluation of the above-mentioned comparisons, we provide some baseline data from the current and previous HR surveys in Hungary (Musztyné, 2021).

Table 2: Number of responding organizations of Cranet surveys in Hungary

Years	2021	2014-2016	2008-2010	2004-2005
Number of responding organizations	59	139	273	311* 161

* This article contains data from organizations with less than 100 people
Sources: Authors own researches

Before presenting the empirical research of Cranet in Hungary, we will review the main theoretical principles of comparative management in general and with a focus on HR.

2. Literature review

Comparative management research – benchmarking in common parlance – can be applied to any organizational (company, institution) process (Camp (1989), be it marketing, logistics, sales or HR activities (Hammer – Champy, 1993). In the early 1980s, the Saratoga Institute laid the foundation for strategic analysis and measurement of human capital in the field of HR, before which large organizations could not measure whether their own human resources activities were performing well or poorly. In the early days of the use of comparative HR studies in HR, static comparative data, more than two years old, were used, but at the time these data relevant because commercial markets were more predictable and industries were evolving at a slower pace.

By using comparative research, organizations gain information that can be used to determine where other organizations are better and what steps they need to take and change in order to become the best (Urgureanu, 2011).

In such comparisons, it is important that the data are real and relevant, as the business environment changes very rapidly (Dervitsiotis, 2000). Furthermore, it is advisable to use more than just HR activities and results within the industry. Comparisons with data from other industries can also be a good guide and provide ideas for further improvement and short-term goals.

In the comparison process, HR professionals are engaged in comparative evaluation of data, analysing the costs associated with selection, training, which provide information on the success of the operation. According to Swist (2002), HR benchmarking consists of two steps: the first step is the audit, which is concerned with the functional areas of human resource management, while the second step is the comparison of human resource management practices for continuous improvement. Individual measures alone are not sufficient, successful benchmarking processes are the combined result of several measures and improvements. Maintaining corporate competitiveness is supported by the use of new analytical and data collection systems provided by technology, which are available through access to global benchmark data collected at an international level (Buzády, 2017).

One of an organization's assets is the human resources in the organization and the value they provide, which HR benchmarking helps to identify and improve their performance (Morris, 2016).

In the field of human resource management, the question often arises – especially in multinational companies or when applying an EU rule – whether a universal or a country-specific solution would be the most appropriate method or rule to apply. For a long time, the universal logic of the US was the dominant one. The followers of this thinking believed that HR solutions developed and applied in the US could be applied anywhere in the world (Beer et al., 1984; Fombrun et al., 1984). In this context, researchers have made a number of increasingly complex comparisons of the application of American HRM models in different cultures and to identify the reasons for similarities and differences (Budhwar-Sparrow 2002).

The non-for-profit research network called Cranet was the first to provide the scientific evidence for the contextual nature of HRM (Dewettinck-Remue, 2011). Cranet founder Brewster published a landmark article in 1995 in which he questioned the universality of American HRM and argued for the existence of a European HRM model (Gooderham-Nordhaug, 2010).

The existence of the contextual nature of HRM was argued and has still been argued by the authors for a number of compelling reasons. Thus, among others, the existence of several macro-models of capitalism (e.g. liberal-market capitalism and coordinated market capitalism) in Anglo-Saxon or continental Nordic or Latin countries has been highlighted. It was pointed out that the management of firms in European countries is not as independent as that of American firms. The organization and different levels of development of trade unions also have a significant impact on the different nature of HR work (Mayrhofer-Brewster, 2005)

Also, building on the basic assumptions of those who have studied the impact of national cultural values, attitudes and behaviors on business and management styles and HR practices (Hofstede 1998; Bandura 2001; Fisher 2008), different cultural contexts have been identified in many countries around the world, and a useful summary assessment has been made (Reiche et al., 2012).

The Cranet network, which has been operating for more than thirty years, is one of the few international research organizations whose repeated surveys offer not only spatial but also temporal comparisons, i.e. longitudinal analyses (Lazarova et al. This network now includes almost every country in Europe (including Hungary), so that the possibilities for exploring the HR practices of Western Europe in the early decades and identifying features that differ from the American model (Brewster 1994) are expanding.

The Faculty of Economics of the University of Pécs (PTE KTK, Cranet member since 2004) and the Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics of the Hungarian University of Agrarian and Life Sciences – MATE (Cranet member since 2011), as members of the Cranet international research network and Hungarian professional HR organizations, like the National Association of Human Professionals (HSZOSZ) and the National Association of Human Management (OHE) with professional support, for the fourth time (2004/2005; 2008-2009; 2015-2016; 2021), conducted a HR survey on Cranet basis regarding the situation of human resource management in Hungary, which can also form the basis of international comparative studies (Lazarova, Morley&Tyson, 2008).

3. Methodology

In all cases, examinations applied during the research are based on facts, objective data and not opinions. The questionnaire, after regular revision over three decades to ensure comparability over time, has undergone only minor changes and, in most cases, uses closed questions to facilitate statistical analysis. It asks respondents to indicate the most typical of the pre-written answers, which cover a wide range of topics.

The survey, based on the Cranet international questionnaire, contains more than 60 questions, which in this round was extended to companies in Hungary below the threshold of the 100-strong Cranet methodology. The questionnaire, used worldwide, consists of the following seven main parts:

- ❑ The first part of the Cranet questionnaire looks at the main characteristics of the EEM activities of the organizations surveyed.
- ❑ The second part of the questionnaire asks about the staff provision activities of the responding organizations.
- ❑ The third part deals with issues related to performance appraisal, staff development and career development.
- ❑ The fourth part explores the methods used to provide incentives and remunerations.
- ❑ In the fifth part, the questionnaire asks about the existence and forms of employee/staff relations and communication within the organization.
- ❑ The sixth section contains questions on general organizational data.
- ❑ The seventh section collects personal data from the respondent filling out the questionnaire.

4. The HR practices of recent years in the light of the 2021 survey

During the past two and a half years, three significant changes have influenced and continue to impact the HRM systems of organizations and institutions both in the world and in Hungary. In a way not typical of previous crises, the unprecedented closures required and initiated a wave of measures that had not been experienced until now, which greatly affected the employees and HR practices of various organizations.

In the following, we summarize the results of our Cranet survey conducted in 2021, which also includes the HR characteristics of responding organizations with less than 100 employees.

Our survey published in our article reports on the personnel/human resources (HR) management policies and practices of 311 public and private organizations (companies and institutions). A total of 236,179 people work for the indicated organizations, i.e. more than 5.1 percent of the people currently employed in Hungary (KSH, 2021).

Based on size, two-thirds of the responding organizations belong to the organizational size category below 250 employees. A quarter of our responding organizations were founded in the first decade of the 2000s, and another quarter have been operating for barely 10 years, but among them all size categories appear in the same proportion, i.e. about a fifth of the largest can be considered relatively young (Chikán, 2020).

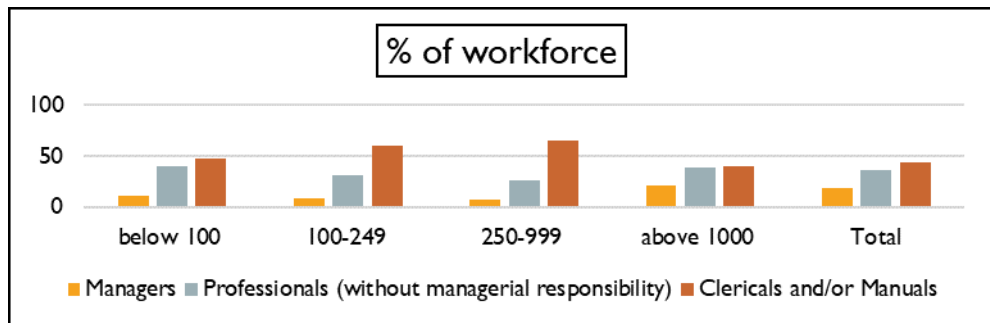
Table 3: Size of responding organizations

Number of employees	Size of responding organizations	
	n	%
Below 100 people	150	48.5
100-249 people	53	17.2
250-1000 people	62	20.1
1001-2000 people	13	3.9
2001-5000 people	25	7.8
Above 5000 people	8	2.6
Total	311	100.0

Source: Authors' own research

Office/administrative and/or physical workers make up more than half (44.1%) of the total number of responding organizations. They are followed by the layer of white-collar (professional) employees (37%), and the sample share of the group of leaders/managers is 19%.

Figure 1: Percentage of workforce at responding organizations



Source: Authors' own research

4.1. Main characteristics of the HR activity

As expected, the appearance of the HR functional area as an organizational unit is more and more likely as the size of the organization increases. According to our survey, nearly two-thirds of the responding organizations have some kind of HR department or a person performing such a function. 80% of the examined organizations had an independent personnel department due to Cranet survey 2014-2016.

In our country, the trend typical of previous decades is still very typical, i.e. that nearly four-fifths of those employed in this field are women.

There is an interesting change in the number of employees per HR employee. Compared to the Cranet surveys/researches conducted in Hungary in the previous years (2014-2016, 2008-2010 and 2004-2005), the number of employees

per HR worker has increased. This phenomenon can also be assessed as a result of the increased efficiency of these HR departments due to the digitalization in the meantime.

Table 5: Number of employees per one HR employee

Cranet surveys	2021	2014-2016	2008-2010	2004-2005
Number of employees per HR employee	73.1	67	45	41

Source: Authors' own research

We also found that it is typical for the majority (62.1%) of organizations employing more than 1,000 people that HR managers are involved in the strategy creation and formulation process from the very beginning. For the majority of other responding organizations, the trend indicated above is not typical at all.

For the respondents, the proportion of wage costs within the operating costs of organizations is typically in the range of 21-40%, with the exception of respondents with 100-249 employees.

4.2 Activities for the provision of the workforce

In the last three years, the total number of full-time employees in the responding organizations has not changed in only 13% of the surveyed organizations. The majority of them implemented a staff-increase, while a smaller part was characterized by some kind of staff reduction, the most common method of which was voluntary departure / natural attrition and the application of a headcount freeze. In the case of different occupational groups, the responding organizations use different recruitment and labor-force retention methods.

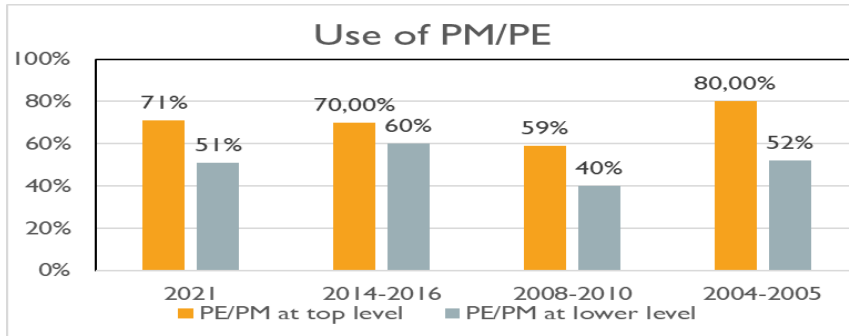
The researched organizations typically focus on younger, disabled and female employees when they organize action programs for employees with special situations – mainly regarding their recruitment.

4.3 Staff development

The most common forms of flexible working are flexible working hours and part-time working hours, which are used by more than three-quarters of the responding organizations.

Almost two-thirds of the responding organizations use some kind of formal PE/PM (performance evaluation/performance management) system, the introduction of which becomes more and more typical as the size of the organization increases. Most often, the immediate supervisor is the person who conducts such a performance evaluation. The PM/PE performance evaluator was the immediate supervisor in 50-80% of the cases during the four survey periods (2004-2021).

Figure 2: Use of PM/PE

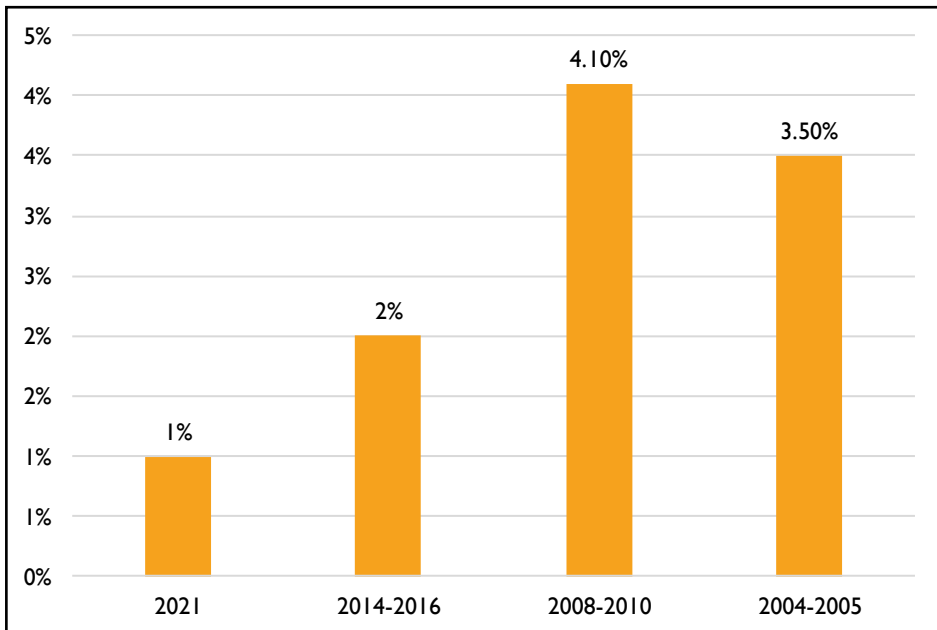


Source: Authors' own research

Appraisal data used to inform decisions in 70-75% of cases during the four survey periods (2004-2021).

In the course of our research, we found that more than one-third of the respondents use less than 1 percent of their wage costs to finance the various training courses¹. For a quarter of them, the typical training cost ratio was 4-5 percent.

Figure 3: Proportion of the annual payroll costs currently spent on training



Source: Authors' own research

¹ This low value may also be characteristic of the fact that this sample also includes respondents with less than 100 employees.

Figure 3 also shows that our analyses for the period 2008-2010 and 2004-2005 show much higher values compared to the latter period. This can be explained, among other things, by the fact that in Hungary, in the first decade of the millennium, the training cost could be accounted for as an expense reducing the corporate tax base (Poór et al., 2018).

Cranet global survey visits for the last three survey periods show the values presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Global average of training cost in different Cranet surveys

Years	2014-2016	2008-2010	2004-2005
Global average (%):	3.70%	4.62%	3%

Source: Authors' own research

The number of days spent on formal training per year among managers and white-collar (specialist) employees exceeds by more than one day (with a value of 7.2 days/year) the typical value for professionals, the sample average of which is 6.0 days.

4.4. Compensation and benefits

The results obtained in all employee categories show that the larger the size of the organization, the stronger the regional and national wage bargaining . Based on the responses to our survey, it can be concluded that there are clearly identifiable differences in terms of job categories with regard to the incentive solutions that are part of each remuneration package.

4.5 Employee communication and TU

Among the channels of bottom-up communication between employees and management, informing the immediate superior comes first (64%), followed by informing the top managers directly (with 46.3%). The use of electronic channels is also in third place, but the most perceptible here is that the rate of use of upward channels among our respondents is significantly lower than that of top-down channels, almost regardless of organizational size.

5. Emerging trends

Two-thirds of the organizations participating in the survey do not have a trade union at all. The proportion of these organizations shows a strong relationship with the size of the organization, as the proportion of those operating without trade union members is getting lower as the staffing categories we examine increase. (Note: This trend has not changed significantly compared to previous years.)

The Covid-19 crisis severely affected Hungary's export-oriented economy and ended the period of continuous GDP growth from 2016-2019, during which incomes increased steadily and the unemployment rate fell to a 30-year low (3.5%) (Fazekas, 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, researchers mainly looked at the similarities and differences between this crisis and previous ones (Diamond, 2019; Fergusson, 2021). According to various sources, Covid-19 has accelerated, not disrupted, HR trends (Caligiuri et al., 2020; Gartner, 2021; Ulrich, 2021).

The "CoronaHR" research group was established in Hungary with the cooperation of researchers from twelve universities in Hungary and one abroad, including two Hungarian Cranet partner universities (Pécs and MATE-Gödöllő) as well. During the three virus waves, the three survey response periods were as follows: 1st research: 12.06-31.07.2020; 2nd research: 01.08-15.11.2022; 3rd research: 01.03-20.04.2021. In the three periods, a total of 1,785 respondents (companies, institutions and non-profit organizations) sent back evaluable questionnaires. Thus, among other things, we have found as follows:

HR had to respond to the unexpected global health, social and economic crisis of Covid-19.

Based on our research findings (2020-2021), organizations face similar problems as their peers worldwide.

HR has become important in the crisis management process, especially regarding internal communication, atypical employment and occupational safety measures.

HR managers also need to find new, forward-looking measures for the post-Covid-19 period.

Another important result of our research was that the Corona virus pandemic, similar to that experienced in other countries of the world, has devalued and made many jobs dangerous due to overwork and overload (e.g. healthcare).

Employers need to retain their employees with much more complex and innovative solutions than before.

In 2021, during the recovery from the pandemic, the economic performance increase of the Hungarian economy was high (7.1%). The fact that a significant number of Hungarian organizations saw the coronavirus crisis not only as a problem, but also as an opportunity, contributed to this. Today, the era of low-wage export-driven economy is over. New measures are needed to ensure the survival of organizations and the physical and mental health (wellbeing) of employees.

At the same time, the process of recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and the initial recovery may be overshadowed by another crisis that may be triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war (Tooze, 2022). The war in Europe has had a global economic impact in six months, culminating in rapidly *rising inflation in Europe and a shortage of raw materials and growing uncertainty*.

6. Conclusion

Based on the broad outlines of our Cranet HR survey research and other HR surveys conducted in the last two years, the situation of HR in Hungary can be summarized in the following, without claiming completeness:

- ❖ In the beginning, HR changes in Hungary seemed to be faster and more powerful in many respects than in other CEE countries.
- ❖ The decisive decision-makers of HR policies in Hungary are still direct (line) managers.
- ❖ Multinational companies contributed very significantly to the transformation of HR in Hungary.
- ❖ The strength and influence of trade unions is still significant in the public sector and in some special sectors in Hungary.
- ❖ The changes that have taken place in the last two years have greatly accelerated the changes in the field of HR.

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