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MENADŽMENT U SEKTORU INFORMACIONIH TEHNOLOGIJA U SRBIJI – SPECIFIČNOSTI I PREPORUKE

MANAGEMENT IN THE SERBIAN IT SECTOR – SPECIFICITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Apstrakt

Nakon početnih pretpostavki, u radu se predstavlja strukturna analiza sektora informacionih tehnologija u Srbiji. Dok su neke IT/Tech kompanije globalne, poslednjih godina pojavljuju se lokalne – srpske IT kompanije. U nastavku se analiziraju specifičnosti IT sektora u Srbiji a, pre svega, motivacija zaposlenih, primenjivane metode menadžmenta, procesa ocenjivanja zaposlenih kao podloge za napredovanje i klasifikacije radnih mesta kao osnove od koje zavisi visina zarada. Na osnovu navedenog, izvodi se zaključak: za državni budžet veći značaj imaju lokalne nego globalne IT kompanije. Nadalje, identifikuju se tri paradoksa u vezi sa: transferom znanja, netransparentnim odlukama top menadžmenta i razmaženošću zaposlenih. Zaključak – pozitivan efekat IT sektora na nacionalnu ekonomiju zavisi od dva glavna faktora: zastupljenost lokalnih u odnosu na globalne kompanije i pravni tretman radne snage – zaposleni nasuprot preduzetnicima. Najvažniji deo ovoga rada predstavljaju preporuke: regulator treba da poveća stimulisanje lokalnih IT kompanija, kompanija treba da prihvati uočene paradokse kao neizlečive i da se fokusira na izlečive probleme, odnosno da modifikuje stil menadžmenta u cilju uskladjivanja sa kulturnim specifičnostima: prihvati da je zarada primarni motivator, modifikuje Skram metodu – uvede nedeljne umesto dnevnih sastanaka, ograniči vreme za izlaganje zaposlenog na jedan minut, poveća kontrolu procene vremena potrebnog za neki zadatak u formi stori pointa, rangira zaposlene bez vredjanja i modifikuje kriterijum za nagradjivanje, kako bi zarada više zavisila od složenosti radnog mesta, a manje od pozicije zaposlenog.

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Abstract

Following the initial assumptions, we present the structural analysis of the Serbian IT/Tech sector. While some of the Tech companies are global, we have seen the emergence of local Serbian tech companies in recent years. Further, we analyze the specificities of the Serbian Tech sector in terms of motivational drivers, applicable management techniques, and the employee evaluation process. We conclude – from the country perspective, local tech companies are more beneficial than global companies and employees are more beneficial than entrepreneurs. We identify paradoxes related to knowledge transfer, non-transparent top management decisions, and spoiled working force. We conclude – the benefit of the tech sector to a national economy depends on two key factors: the ratio of local vs global companies and legal treatment of workforce – employees vs. entrepreneurs. Most important part of this paper are recommendations: the regulator shall increase stimulation for the local tech companies, the company shall acknowledge identified paradoxes as incurable, and focus on curable issues. The curable issues to be focused on are: modification of the management style to adjust for the cultural differences, acknowledge salary as a primary motivation driver, and modify scrum methodology. Scrum should be altered to introduce weekly instead of daily scrum meetings, limit the time for team members to report to one minute per person, increase the control of estimates (story points). Also, rank employees without offending them and modify the compensation criteria to be more driven by job complexity/skill requirements and less by the employee position.

Keywords: *IT/Tech, Serbia, company, management, cultural differences, workforce relocation*

1. FACTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

In recent years, we observe that global tech companies (GTCs) tend to relocate tech resources from developed countries (DCs) towards less developed countries (LDCs). In response, local tech companies (LTCs) emerge in LDCs.

Relocation of the software production from DCs into LDCs has modified the global environment:

- "Relocation of routine functions such as support services is driven by operational savings and low costs" (Grant Thornton, 2016) effectively moving stressful and lower income jobs out of DCs.
- Sensitive products in the domain of rocket systems and space exploration with high-profit margins have not been relocated due to legal restrictions (CFR, 2017). Development of non-sensitive products in the area of finance, trading, and payments have been more likely to be relocated and their industries affected.
- If production is partially relocated, more complex tasks have been moved out of DCs. For example (a) tasks where the ability to work with complex mathematical models is required, such as financial risk calculations or (b) tasks where business knowledge requires a professional license (CPA, CFA, etc.) on the top of the standard academic education.

The practice of grouping individuals from different geographic locations to work in one *virtual team* has demonstrated both advantages and difficulties:

- The differing backgrounds and experiences of geographically and culturally dispersed group members "encourage creativity and create conflicting viewpoints, which make it more likely that multiple options are explored and considered" (Wikipedia, 2018). On the other hand "we still lack research on precisely how International Human Resources Management systems can be designed to ensure that organizations reap these benefits". (Audra I. Mockaitis, 2018)
- Relocation may negatively impact the DC if LDC starts to use transferred knowledge and skills to initiate its own production and compete with the GTC. Samsung vs. Apple would be a good example of patent infringement
- The best students from the top-ranked universities in DCs tend to work in a *sensitive* sector, most likely drawn by higher salaries. Due to the forces of supply and demand, a less qualified workforce remains for the *non-sensitive* sector in DCs. Consequently, GTCs have no choice but to mix a relatively more skilled workforce from LDCs alongside less skilled peers from DCs on projects. Within this mix of resources, teams from LDCs

usually perform better as compared to peer teams from DCs, within the same company.

With the strategy of keeping or even increasing their dominant position, DCs use vertical and horizontal integration, effectively imposing a monopoly/oligopoly in the world market. The tech industry follows similar trends as in the automobile industry. Mergers and acquisitions have resulted in just a few industry giants, crowding out local companies from the world market. In a similar way to how MS Windows and MS Office products are the de facto standard in the world market, almost every segment of the tech industry is dominated by one or few dominant companies. Interestingly, LDCs have been advised by international organizations to follow exactly the opposite path – to decompose the largest companies and stimulate small and medium enterprises.

2. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE SERBIAN TECH SECTOR

Firstly, we differentiate between global vs. local tech companies and the effect of legal treatment of the workforce on income distribution. Further, we estimate trends in terms of capacity and quality.

2.1 Tech Companies in Serbia

Three distinctive type of tech companies are present in Serbia:

- *Global* tech companies (GTC) moved development centers, effectively relocating the production completely from DCs into LDCs. They mostly operate in the world market and rarely in the Serbian market. The key property is outsourcing and the company does not sell its own product. Consequently, regardless of the company's financial result, the profit will not come into the LDC. From the legal perspective, resources are mostly treated as employees. The knowledge in the form of innovations automatically becomes the property of a GTC leaving employees with the salary as the dominant form of compensation.
- *Regional* tech companies (RTC) have been initially founded as local (e.g. Serbian). Gradually they started to sell their own in-house product in the regional market and were finally acquired by a larger foreign company.
- *Local* tech companies (LTC), small size companies, are mostly engaged in outsourcing in the form of project-based coding and testing. A key property of an LTC is sales of its own product. An increase in sales will increase the company profit, the state budget will benefit from the increase in profit based tax and some employees may even get rich. To put things into perspective, all rich Serbian programmers are working in an LTC while none working in a GTC became rich, at least until this moment.

Table 1. Type of Tech Companies in Serbia

#	Company Type	Company Ownership
1	Global	Foreign
2	Regional	Mixed
3	Local	Serbian

In addition, *freelancers* sell their services via collaborative platforms, working either from home or from a hub.

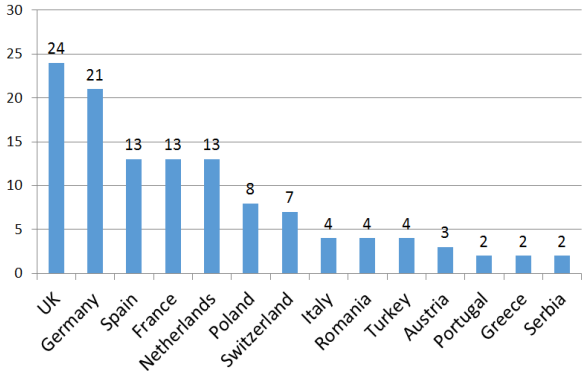

Fig. 1 Number of distinct hubs with >500 active members of tech-related Meetup groups by country (Atomico, 2017)

A number of employees in Serbian tech companies classified by ownership in 2017: foreign ownership 38%, mixed ownership 13% and local ownership 49% (Kukic, 2017).

Table 2. Employees in Serbian Tech Companies (Kukic, 2017)

#	Company Ownership	Number of Employees (%)
1	Foreign	38
2	Mixed	13
3	Local	49

The future ratio of global vs local tech companies is hardly predictable, as new business models emerge, each one carrying its own specificities. For example, Initial Coin Offering (ICO) as a source of founding capital centered around cryptocurrencies became popular in 2017. Looking at global vs local components within Serbian ICOs, the ratio is approximately 96% - 4%.

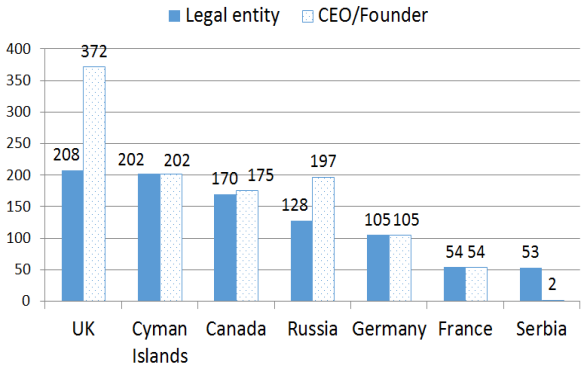

Fig. 2 Countries by capital raised ($M) via ICO based on country of legal entity location and country of CEO/Founder location (Atomico, 2017)

2.2 Taxation

Serbian Individual Income Tax Law prescribes that income tax shall be payable on various types of remunerations received by an individual for services rendered, including among other things, the personal earnings of employees (salaries and bonuses) and income from self-employment of entrepreneurs. Depending on the legal treatment of the taxpayer (an employee or an entrepreneur) different taxable basis are prescribed – significantly higher for employees compared to entrepreneurs.

Consequences of the different tax treatment of employees vs. entrepreneurs depend on the perspective:

- For a company, both options have similar underlying costs.
- For the state budget, employees are more beneficial than entrepreneurs.
- For a taxpayer, the legal status of an entrepreneur is more beneficial. The worker with the legal status of an employee with the net salary of 1,500 EUR per month would receive approximately 1,900 EUR per month if he was registered as an entrepreneur. The difference of 400 EUR per month is effectively a gain for a worker and a loss for the state budget.

In recent years, Serbian tech companies showed the tendency to adopt the entrepreneurship model. In terms of amounts, one programmer entrepreneur is equivalent to 5-6 average taxpayers. To put this in perspective 10,000 taxpayers in the tech sector are equivalent to 50,000 average taxpayers and that is a loss for the Tax Authority.

2.3 Capacity

Europe's tech workforce is growing significantly faster than overall EU employment: 2.6% year-on-year growth in European tech worker population in 2017, compared to just 0.8% growth in overall EU employment in 2017. The number of professional developers in Serbia is estimated at 47,351 in 2017. (The State of European Tech 2017, 2018).

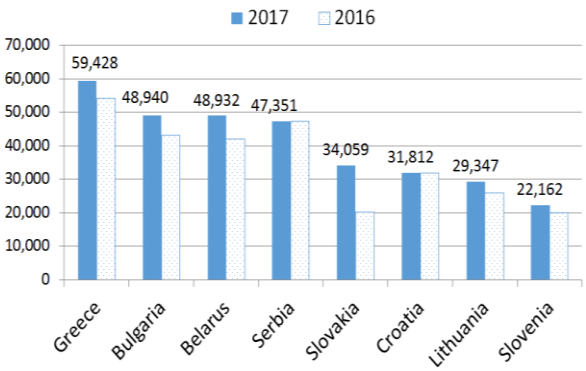

Fig. 3 Number of professional developers by country (Atomico, 2017)

Serbia's tech resources are expected to (1) exponentially increase until Serbia becomes a member of the European Union and (2) decrease following the admission. Two key reasons for the increase are: (a) tech sector is the only sector with a large deficit of workforce and (b) the average salary in the tech sector is significantly higher compared to the Serbian average. The key reason for the decrease is because of the expected migration from Serbia into the EU. Migration of tech resources affected heavily Eastern European countries such as Poland. A similar scenario is expected in Serbia. Resources are most likely going to move to Western European countries, driven by higher salaries. How long will they stay, remains an open question – "For example, we have a lot of really good engineers from Slovenia and Croatia going to work for Facebook or Google for a couple of years in the States but they would wish to come back,

they would like to be back in Europe" (Srsen, 2018).

2.4 Quality

Research of the Serbian developer community shows that Serbian tech resources are significantly more educated compared to the world average. 70,88% with the University Degree. 20% of faculty degrees are awarded by a non-technical faculty. (Kukic, 2017)

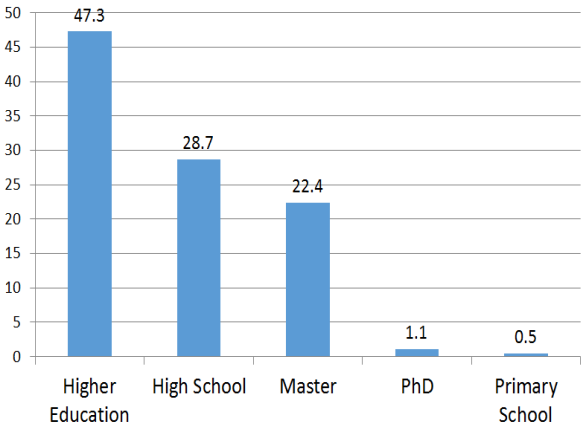

Fig. 4 Awarded Academic Degree (Research of Serbian Dev Scene, Kukic, 2017)

In the future, the quality of Serbian tech resources is expected to (1) increase due to the knowledge transfer from the DCs and (2) decrease due to the hyperproduction of tech students. While a decade ago, only the best students have been accepted, we observe an exponential increase in the number of faculties and courses that provide training for developers in Serbia.

3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

"As the workforce diversifies, a broader awareness of these differences might affect the actions of both employees and HR departments" (Nick Deschacht, 2016). Serbian cultural specifics are examined in terms of motivational drivers, management techniques, yearly evaluation policies and the basis for compensation.

3.1 Motivation

"Money can cure many evils in a poor or unfair compensation system. And as long as there is enough to keep everyone happy, many problems remain out of sight". (August J. Aquila, 2017) Motivational drivers are not customized for cultural differences. In DCs tech resources are interested both in salary and benefits (such as social security package for the family, voluntarily pension funds, etc.). In LDCs the situation is very different – the dominant and almost only relevant motivational driver is salary, while other benefits are irrelevant. The key reason is the current low level of Serbian salaries – a person earns less than the required threshold. If salary (800 EUR) is less than monthly costs (1,000 EUR), people will immediately move to a new company that offers a higher salary, even when the difference is relatively small in the absolute amount. In LDC, an additional 200 EUR on top of the 800 EUR make a huge difference, while an additional 200 EUR on the top of 4,000 EUR in DC does not make any difference.

3.2 Management Techniques

"Cultural differences are one of the most important issues for software development teams from different locations and cultures". (Georgios Dafoulas, 2017)

Management techniques adopted in DCs have been transferred to LDCs without an adjustment for cultural differences. The key problem is the inability to acknowledge the cultural differences between DCs – such as the USA (where headquarters of most GTCs are located) and Serbia (or any other country with a Mediterranean culture).

On the other side, countries like the Netherlands are "developing a more strategic approach to International Cultural Policy" (Hurkmans, 2008). One should be aware of "how organizational culture with its various types (clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, market) impacts the information systems success dimension (system quality, information quality, service quality, usability, user satisfaction, and net benefits)." (Romi, 2011)

3.3 Employee Evaluation

"Too many companies end up with a love/hate relationship with metrics, especially metrics related to agility" (Kerzner, 2018). The end-of-year performance evaluation of employees and promotion policies have not been adjusted for Serbian cultural differences. For normal distribution of employees in the DC, one naturally expects to have all modalities represented in prescribed percentages (5% excellent, 25% very good, 50% good, 25% below average, 5% insufficient). This is simply not applicable for the

ITC in LDC where GTCs accept only best students from the top-ranked universities.

3.4 Employee Compensation

The compensation system has not been adjusted to acknowledge the skill requirements i.e. required skills are acknowledged but not enough. For example, banks usually have three departments such as front, middle, and back office. The middle office may be and often is much more demanding in terms of skill requirements compared to the back office. In DCs a quantitative finance specialist dealing with risk modeling may easily start at 80K USD per year, while the head of the back office may be a person without a University degree and with a lower salary. In LDCs, compensation is based mostly (but not only) on the rank – a novice in the middle office will almost never be paid more than senor in the back office.

4. PARADOXES

Several paradoxes have been observed such as (1) knowledge transfer paradox, (2) strategy paradox and (3) spoiled child paradox.

4.1 Knowledge Transfer Paradox

Knowledge transfer paradox originates from the complex relationship between branches in the DCs and LDCs. Two paradoxes are observed, one caused by LDC and other by DC.

- Firstly, once you decide to start the relocation, the employees from the branch in the DC (the USA) will be instructed by the manager to transfer knowledge to peer employees in the LDC (Serbia). From the employee perspective, the faster he finishes the task, the sooner he will be fired. From the employee perspective, it makes more sense to try to make yourself irreplaceable.
- Secondly, once you temporarily relocate an employee from the branch in the LDC (Serbia) into a branch in the DC (USA) to speed up the knowledge transfer, the employee will most likely not return to the LDC to share his knowledge with colleagues. From the employee perspective, it makes more sense to remain in the DC and work for a significantly higher salary.

4.2 Strategy Paradox

The knowledge paradox causes the strategy paradox. Top management of the GTC in DC needs to keep some information away from the employees and mid-level management in the LDC branches. The reason is simple – people will adopt, smart people in the Serbian tech sector will adopt promptly and that may not be in the interest of top management. There are legitimate reasons for some decision to be distributed on a need-to-know basis. Once senior management decides to shut down a product, members of the unfortunate team will try to find a new job. From the employee perspective, it makes sense to leave the sinking ship sooner rather than later. From the perspective of the top management, and in the best interest of a company, sinking ship shall not sink over the night. The logical course of action for management would be not to distribute the decision to sink a ship – keep it as a secret for some reasonably short period. In addition, a secret decision may require additional actions to be undertaken which may be even more confusing for the management and employees in the LDC. An example would be the situation when a request for a new employee is approved and after that canceled by senior management. We need to acknowledge this as a paradox – nobody shall be blamed, especially not the top management in the DC. In the future, if we relocate production from Serbia into some other country, the same would hold for Serbian top management.

4.3 Spoiled Child Paradox

During the final round of interview for a junior programmer in a global tech company located in Serbia, the candidate wanted to know if the company had a billiard table in the office. The company had few gaming rooms but not the billiard table. Once the candidate was given the answer, he suddenly stood up and left the meeting saying, “Unbelievable!” The more the demand exceeds the offer, the rare good Serbian programmer will raise expectations that are logical and expected. If the demand is significantly higher, expectations tend to increase exponentially. Instead of avoiding any contact with the spoiled child, the company is forced to indulge the child.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The effect of globalization in terms of a relocation of the working force in the tech sector depends on the perspective:

- For the employee in the LDCs (e.g. Serbia), it is beneficial as wages are higher compared to other sectors and new jobs are created.
- For the state budget of the LDC, the effect is beneficial and depends on: (1) structure – local tech companies are more beneficial compared to global tech companies and (2) tax treatment – employees are more beneficial than entrepreneurs.
- For the global tech company, the effect is beneficial. "Globalization was a corporate agenda driven mainly by the desire to increase profits with the effect of lowering wages in the United States." (Stiglitz, 2018)
- For the employee in the DC (e.g. the USA), the effect is detrimental as wages are lower and existing jobs are destroyed.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides following recommendations: (a) acknowledge the difference between global and local tech companies, (b) ignore the paradoxes as non-curable issues and (c) focus on curable issues – modify management style to adjust for Serbian cultural specificities

6.1 Global vs. Local Tech Companies

Both private and public sector should acknowledge the difference between global and local tech companies.

- *The private sector* should increase investments in local tech companies. We have already observed the increase in investments from the private sector in local tech companies. Currently, this is true for the applications that need to be parameterized in the local language and in line with local regulations, such as applications for lawyers, restaurants, service providers (dentist, hairdresser etc.). The underlying business logic is straightforward – simple applications need simple customization. Implementation and support are straightforward and a key focus is sales on the local market – which is not dominated by global tech companies. Next step would be the increase in the number of local outsourcing tech companies. This is expected to happen either (1) in a form of tactical grouping of freelancers or (2) when existing team members jointly leave the company (GTC or RTC) and found their own local tech company.
- *The regulator* should increase the fiscal stimulus to local tech companies. Firstly, we acknowledge the benefits of global tech companies in Serbia as they significantly contribute to an increase in employment and the average income. Furthermore, it would be financially wise to have more local tech companies as they contribute more to the state budget in terms of profit based taxes. Finally, we do not advise any specific measure – any reasonable and 'allowed' stimulus would have a positive effect on the state budget. The point is not in the discrimination. The interest of a country shall prevail over the interest of investors, and if a country is better with local investors, it is reasonable to stimulate them. To put it simple and without any irony – Serbia First!

6.2 Real vs. Simulated Tax Activity

Tax authority should prevent the tax evasion based on the simulated entrepreneur activity. If an entrepreneur is actually engaged as an employee in the corporation and his engagement is not entrepreneurship by its real nature, this kind of engagement is considered as simulated tax activity by the law. Tax Authority may charge the taxpayer in line with real (instead of simulated) tax activity and moreover impose additional charges as a punishment for the simulation. In recent years, this right has not been applied, but this is not expected to be tolerated in the future.

6.3 Ignore Paradoxes

On one side, standard human resource practice suggests that a company should try to fix the identified issues. From the other side, we believe that some issues are systematic in nature. We hypothesize that paradoxes are immanent and suggest that companies should ignore them. Instead of healing an incurable disease, the company should focus on curable issues i.e. modify existing management style to adjust for cultural differences.

6.4 Money Talks

The standard human resources practice of investigating reasons for staff turnover should be modified. Companies should acknowledge compensation as the key and the only driver. Recommendation is based on two assumptions: (1) we already know that key reason for leaving the company is higher compensation offered by some other company and (2) in the context of Serbian culture, employees are not likely to provide a sincere feedback on this issue for various reasons: (2.1) it is not appreciated if a person is motivated by 'material' motives and (2.2) even if money is not the primary driver, we are rarely going to discover the true reason. It is not wise to shut the door as you are not sure if you will need to return to the company. Smart employees would rarely criticize colleagues or managers even when he or she is moving to a new company, and Serbian employees are smart!

6.5 Agile and Scrum are not a Bible

"In the past decade, many information technology (IT) companies have changed their systems development life-cycle methodology to a more flexible framework approach, such as agile and Scrum" (Kerzner, 2017).

However, in the context of Serbian culture, few deviations have been observed in relation to daily scrum meetings:

- Employees tend to use the opportunity for self-promotion by taking more time than necessary to reflect on his/her assignment. To compensate, we advise decreasing the number of scrum meetings to one per week instead of one per day. A team member may send an email to the scrum master to request an ad-hoc meeting for any showstopper issues. The scrum master would then be responsible for inviting only the relevant team members for the issues identified.
- Employees do not carefully listen to the reports of other team members. To compensate, we advise limiting the report presentation time available for each person to one minute for example. One-minute speeches (Rule 163) in the European Parlament would be a good example. (European Parliament EPTV, 2015)
- Employees tend to overestimate the time required for a specific task in the form of story points. As performance is measured by the ability to finish dedicated tasks before the deadline, it is natural that employees tend to overestimate the time required for a task. To compensate, we advise increasing the control of estimates. This is easier said than done – it is hard to give a precise estimate, especially during the new product development.

We suggest the modification of scrum practice: (1) organize scrum meetings on a weekly instead of a daily basis, (2) limit the presentation time per person and (3) try to control the allocation of estimates of a required time per task in the form of story points.

6.6 Below Average

We would advise companies to modify the ranking descriptions of their end of year employee evaluations with more positive framing. For example quantification of the following attributes would feel better for the employee: "Excellent", "Very Good" and "Good". Avoid using the following, negative descriptors: "Below Average" and "Insufficient". The underlying idea is to allow the managers to rank employees without labeling highly intelligent and hardworking people with demoralizing, nonmotivational attributes.

6.7 Job Complexity

Companies should modify their existing compensation system to be based more on job complexity (e.g. skill requirements) and less on the employee's position within the company hierarchy. For example, in the banking sector, positions that require more skills such as risk modeling in the middle office shall be paid significantly more than less demanding positions in the back office.

7. LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by the lack of data on the precise job description of employees within the tech companies (e.g. software engineer, quality assurance engineer, business analyst, system administrator).

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