

# BRIDGING THE GAP: HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN ROMANIA'S EVOLVING LABOR MARKET WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION FRAMEWORK. STUDY CASE IN BIHOR COUNTY, ROMANIA

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**Abstract.** *This study examines the role of human resource management (HRM) practices in addressing labor market challenges in Romania, a relatively new member of the European Union (EU). Focusing on Bihor County, the research investigates how Romanian employers adapt their HRM strategies to navigate labor shortages and align with EU competitiveness standards. Through a quantitative analysis of 254 private sector employers, the study explores the interplay between post-communist entrepreneurial culture, evolving HRM practices, and EU-driven economic objectives. Findings reveal a persistent parochial management approach, with employers reluctant to engage professional recruitment services or explore international labor markets. The research identifies a significant mismatch between employer demands and available skills, particularly in vocational and technical fields. While employers recognize the value of workplace training, there is less emphasis on other retention strategies such as competitive compensation or work-life balance initiatives. The study highlights the need for closer collaboration between educational institutions and employers to align training programs with market needs. It also underscores the importance of developing more sophisticated HRM strategies to address ongoing labor shortages and enhance Romania's competitiveness within the EU. This research contributes to the understanding of HRM's role in bridging the gap between Romania's economic potential and its current performance within the EU framework.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, Romanian Labor Market, Post-communist Entrepreneurial Culture, Human Resource Strategies.*

## 1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long recognized the intrinsic link between sustainable economic growth and competitiveness among its member states (European Commission, 2024). As the EU strives to maintain its position in the global economy, it becomes increasingly apparent that the success of individual member states is crucial to

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the collective prosperity of the union. As a relatively new member state, Romania presents a compelling case study in this context. Despite possessing significant economic potential, Romania faces challenges in fully leveraging its resources to achieve the level of competitiveness envisioned by EU standards.

Central to unlocking Romania's economic potential is the development of a competent management class capable of navigating the complexities of modern business environments and aligning with EU objectives. Within this broader management landscape, the specific domain of human resource management (HRM) emerges as a critical factor in successfully implementing European goals within the Romanian economy (Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Farndale, 2018). Effective HRM practices not only contribute to organizational success but also play a vital role in fostering innovation, adaptability and productivity key drivers of national competitiveness (Boxall & Purcell, 2022).

The importance of HRM in this context is multifaceted. Firstly, it serves as a bridge between organizational strategies and the workforce, ensuring that human capital is optimally utilized to meet both company and national economic objectives (Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2012). Secondly, in an era of rapid technological advancement and changing labor market dynamics, HRM is instrumental in developing and retaining talent, which is essential for maintaining competitiveness in knowledge-based economies (Cascio & Boudreau, 2016). Lastly, as the EU emphasizes sustainable and inclusive growth, HRM practices that promote diversity, equity, and work-life balance become increasingly relevant in aligning business practices with broader societal goals (Farndale, Horak, Phillips, & Beamond, 2019).

The focus on HRM takes on added significance when considering the current state of the Romanian labor market. Romania is grappling with a severe labor shortage, driven by a confluence of demographic trends and economic factors. High levels of emigration (Sandu, 2005), particularly of skilled workers to other EU countries, have depleted the domestic workforce (Andr n & Roman, 2016). The loss of workforce is compounded by low fertility rates, resulting in an aging population and a shrinking labor pool (World Bank, 2024). Paradoxically, these challenges are occurring against a backdrop of sustained economic growth, which has further intensified the demand for skilled labor across various sectors (National Bank of Romania, Annual Report 2023<sup>1</sup>).

This labor shortage on the market presents both a challenge and an opportunity for HRM practices in Romania. On one hand, it necessitates innovative strategies for talent attraction, development, and retention to mitigate the impacts of workforce scarcity. On the other, it underscores the potential for HRM to play a transformative role in shaping Romania's economic landscape by optimizing the use of available human capital and fostering conditions that might encourage skilled expatriates to return.

However, the implementation of effective HRM practices in Romania faces several challenges. These include the legacy of communist-era management styles, a mismatch between educational outputs and labor market needs, and the ongoing brain drain of skilled professionals to other EU countries (Grigore & Mitroi, 2012). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from various stakeholders, including policymakers, educational institutions, and business leaders.

This paper aims to explore the role of human resource management as a key element in bridging the gap between Romania's economic potential and its current

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bnro.ro/DocumentInformation.aspx?idDocument=45715&idInfoClass=6874>

performance within the EU framework. By examining the interplay between HRM practices, national competitiveness, and sustainable economic growth—all within the context of Romania's unique labor market challenges—we seek to identify strategies that can enhance Romania's position within the European economic landscape and address its pressing demographic and workforce issues.

## **2. Empirical Objectives and Theoretical Framework**

From an empirical point of view, we propose the general hypothesis that the HR adjustment strategies implemented by the employers depends on variables such as employer size and type of activity. The number of employees positively correlates with a more diverse employee structure, which permits a larger array of human resource strategies such as internal hiring. In addition, larger companies are more likely to organize HR departments or to hire HR specialists to diversify their approach towards human resource management (Brewster, Wood, Brookes, & Ommeren, 2006; Purcell, 2014). The type of activity of the employer determines the structure of professions that have different availabilities in the labor market. To underline this aspect, we used the variable "Workforce deficit" designed to underline the labor shortage as experienced by the employer, which also expresses the motivational component of the adjustment process to labor market conditions. Considering the context of our analysis, we can narrow down the general hypothesis as follows: Human resource adjustment measures, implemented by employers in Bihor County, which are conditioned by the entrepreneurial culture, are predicted by variables such as company size and labor shortage.

The Romanian labor market presents a unique case study of economic transition and its impact on human resource management practices. This chapter examines the interplay between Romania's post-communist entrepreneurial culture, its evolving educational system, and employers' strategies for adapting to labor market challenges. By applying theoretical frameworks from sociology and economics, we aim to elucidate the complex dynamics shaping human resource management in Bihor County, Romania.

### **2.1. Romania's Post-Transition Context**

Following the 1989 revolution, Romania embarked on a transition from a communist system to a democratic, capitalist society with a free market economy (Sandu, 1999). This transition has resulted in a post-transition society with distinct characteristics that continue to influence economic behavior and labor market dynamics.

The Romanian educational system has undergone significant changes since the fall of communism. While the communist-era system was ideologically constrained, it nonetheless provided diverse scientific training programs. The post-communist period saw attempts at reform and democratization, coupled with increased international cooperation. However, these reforms have been criticized for lacking coherence and failing to adequately respond to economic needs (Hannah, Elizabeth, Kirsteen, Anne, & Soumaya, 2017).

A notable trend has been the massification of higher education (Tight, 2019), mirroring Western patterns but without commensurate increases in resources to maintain quality (Curaj, Deca, Egron-Polak, & Salmi, 2015). This expansion of university education, driven by social prestige, has come at the expense of vocational training, contributing to a mismatch between educational outcomes and labor market demands.

The economic transition in Romania necessitated a shift from a centralized, bureaucratic economic management model to an entrepreneurial one. This process has given rise to a unique entrepreneurial culture that blends elements of communist-era political-administrative management with imported Western capitalist practices (Marinescu, 2013). Key characteristics of this entrepreneurial culture include:

- Blurred boundaries between public and private economic spheres
- Preference for "experiential" management approaches based on intuition
- Reliance on self-taught training due to a lack of professionalized economic management education

These cultural elements significantly influence employers' strategies for adapting to labor market conditions.

## **2.2. Employer Adjustment Strategies**

In the context of the Romanian entrepreneurial culture, the employer's adjustment process can be better approached using the theory of social action (Craib, 2015), which gives the fundamental concepts necessary to analyze the „orientation and motivation” of action of an „actor” in the social system. Also, we can use the sociological and economic approach to labor market analysis proposed by Granovetter in which he emphasizes the ”intertwining of economic and noneconomic” aspects on the labor market (Granovetter, 2017). In the present research, the actors are employers, who are oriented towards a social system represented by the labor market, as well as the processes and institutions that influence it.

Along with immediate responses to environmental stimuli, the actions of the actors represent a system of expectations about the environment. An actor, such as an economic agent, can be viewed as an instrumental action-orientation sub-system, in which the institutional patterns of the component roles determine “expectations of action involving the fulfilment of an actor's technical goals, exchange relationships, and cooperative relationships” (Ormerod, 2020). Transposing these ideas in the present research, the empirical model includes the actor (private companies) that, responding to environmental stimuli represented by the labor market, manifests social actions such as gathering information about the labor market used to develop adjustment strategies that determine certain expected results (sustainable economic activity). Regarding the employer's adjustment strategy, it can be differentiated between two sets of actions: short- and medium-term measures that influence internal factors over which the management has significant control, such as the organizational structure, recruitment methods, employee retention conditions, and long-term policies regarding the labor market favored by the employer's management, such as governmental policies in the fields of demography, education, and the regulation of the national labor market.

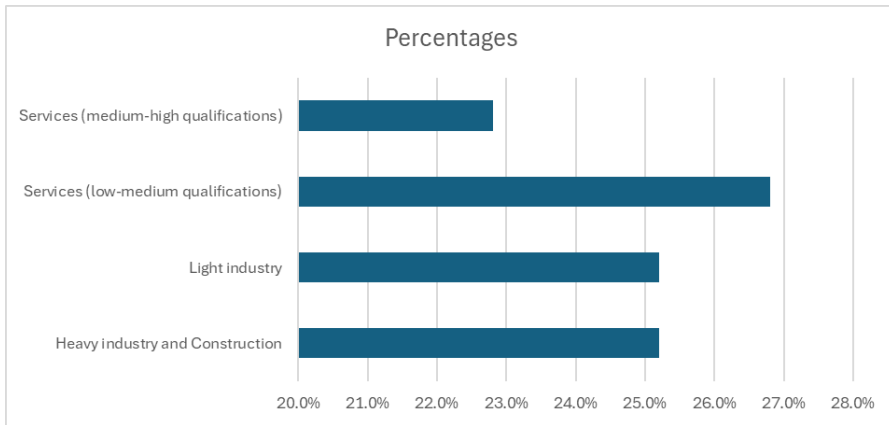
## **3. Methodology**

This study employs a quantitative approach to investigate employers' HR strategies in response to labor market dynamics in Bihor County, Romania. The research focuses on private sector employers, as they are key actors in driving economic growth and responding to market forces (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011).

### **3.1. Sample and Data Collection**

The sample was constructed using stratified random sampling, considering both the type of activity and size of employers. This method ensures representation across

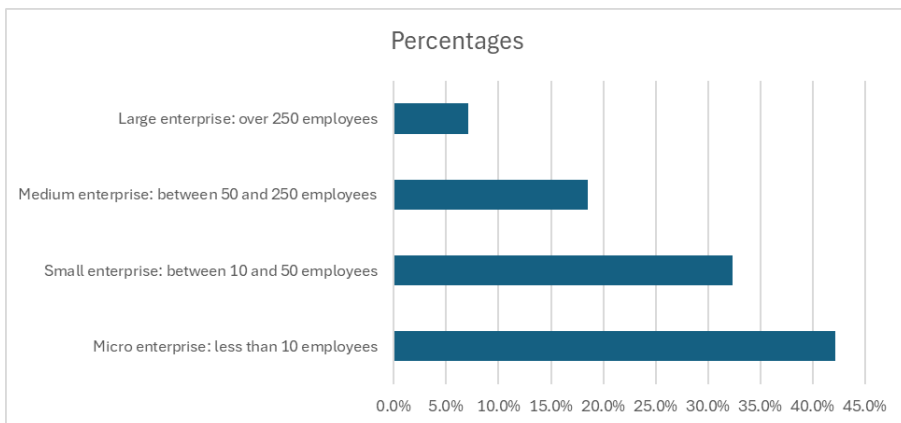
different sectors and company sizes, enhancing the generalizability of findings. The sampling frame was stratified into four categories based on activity type fig.1:



**Figure 5** Sample, activity type.

*Source:* research data

Company size was also considered in the stratification (fig.2), with an intentional overrepresentation of small, medium, and large enterprises relative to microenterprises. This decision was made to account for the higher likelihood of active employment in larger companies (Birch, 1981).



**Figure 6** Sample, company size.

*Source:* research data

The final sample consisted of 254 employers, providing a representative cross-section of the private sector in Bihor County. Data were collected between November 2022 and January 2023 through questionnaires administered to company representatives who were responsible for the HR management.

### 3.2. Instrumentation

The research team organized a focus group in October 2022 with seven human resources specialists from Bihor County representing private companies and the local employment authority, which provided us with valuable information to develop our

questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to capture several key aspects of employers' labor market strategies:

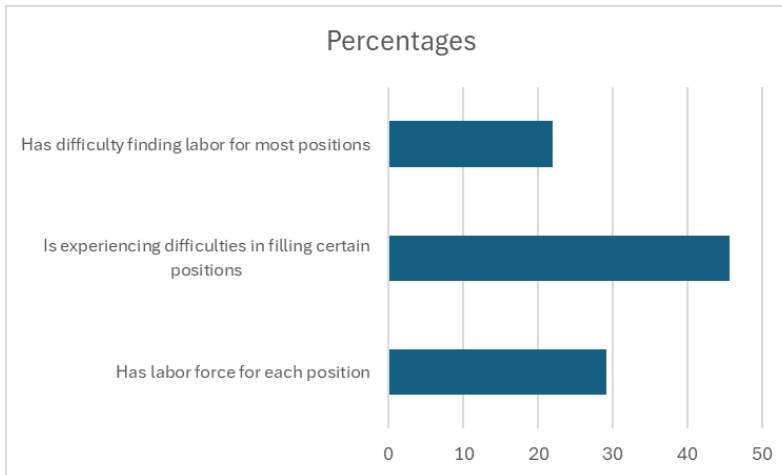
- Information-seeking behaviors regarding the labor market
- Recruitment strategies
- Use of labor market intermediaries
- Short- and medium-term measures adopted or planned in response to labor scarcity

These measures align with theoretical frameworks on organizational adaptation to environmental changes and strategic human resource management (Schuler & Jackson, 1987).

Short- and medium-term measures were also analyzed as indicators of entrepreneurial culture and strategic response to labor market conditions. These measures included aspects such as changes in organizational structure, recruitment methods, and employee retention strategies (Huselid, 1995).

### 3.3. Explanatory variables

We stated above the following hypothesis: human resource adjustment measures, implemented by employers in Bihor County, which are conditioned by the entrepreneurial culture, are predicted by variables such as company size and workforce deficit. Next to the variable company size (see fig.2) we measured the variable workforce deficit (see fig.3).



**Figure 7** Workforce deficit experienced by the employer.

*Source:* research data

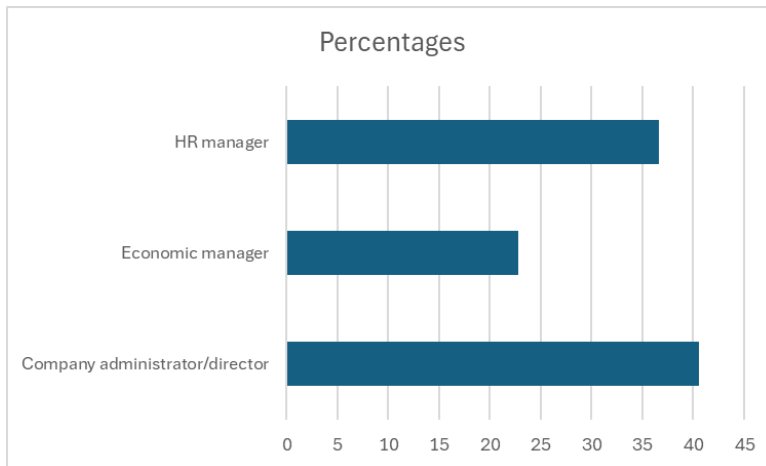
### 3.4. Limitations and Generalizability

While the study is geographically limited to Bihor County, its methodological approach and findings may be relevant to other regions with similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. However, caution should be exercised in generalizing results to significantly different contexts (Yin, 2009).

## 4. Results & Discussion

### 4.1. The profile of HR managers

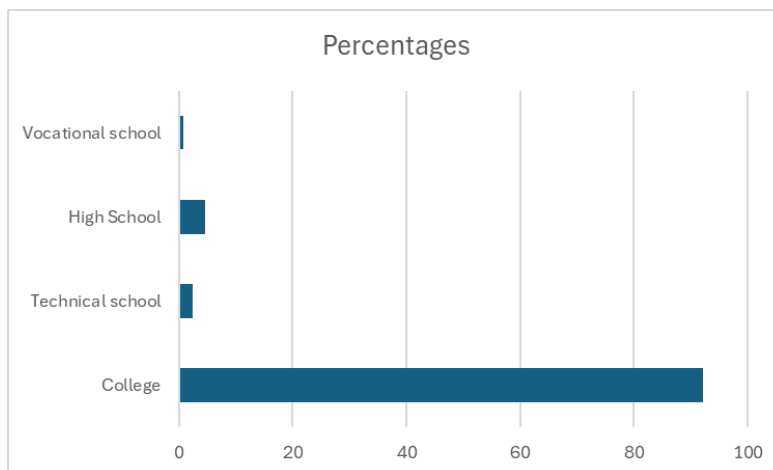
The people who were responsible for the HR management had different titles (see fig.3), only 36,6% had the title HR managers. If we take in account, the fact that 74.4% of the companies had less than 50 employees, the percentage of dedicated HR managers is impressive and is pointing towards the professionalization of human resources management.



**Figure 8** Position held by the respondent.

*Source:* research data

We measured aspects of entrepreneurial culture through the variable such as "The last educational level completed by the respondent". Interestingly, we found extremely high homogeneity in educational levels among respondents (fig.4), suggesting that entrepreneurial culture may function more as a constant in our analysis, providing an explanatory backdrop rather than a variable factor.



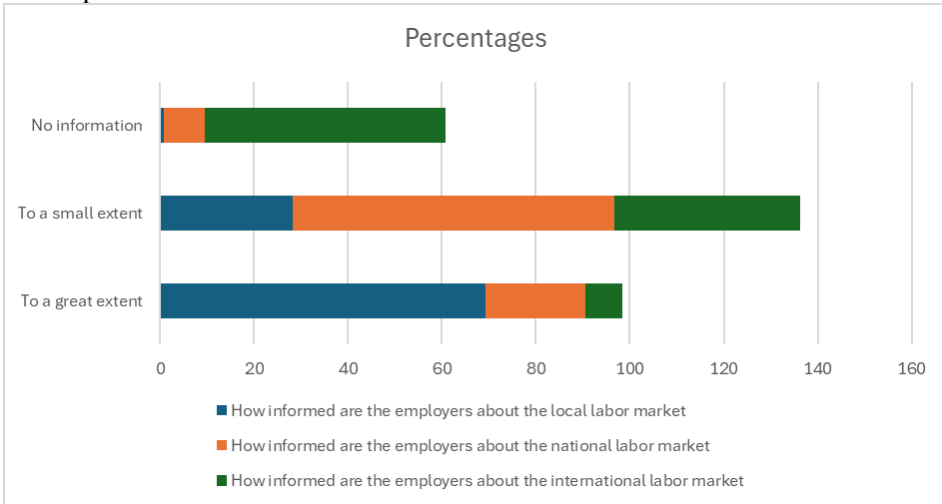
**Figure 9** The last educational level completed by the respondent.

*Source:* research data

**4.2. Gathering information about the labor market**

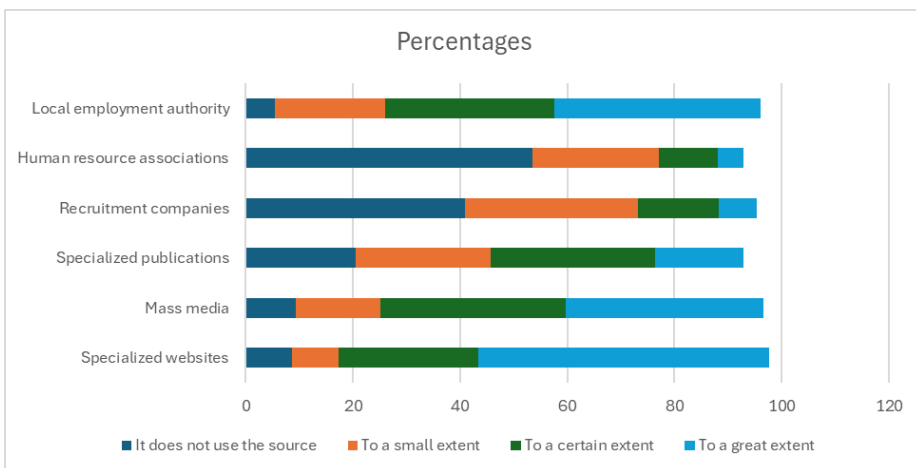
We can observe in fig.5 that 69.3% of employers consider themselves informed "to a great extent" about the local labor market, a percentage that drops significantly regarding the national (21.3%) and international (7.9%) markets.

Regarding the process of gathering information about the labor market, the modal analysis clearly shows that the surveyed employers are oriented mainly towards the local labor market and less towards the national market. The international labor market is very unlikely to be part of the adjustment strategies adopted by employers. Employer size has no influence on how informed employers are about the local, national, or international labor market ( $p > 0.005$ ). Employers who are generally less informed about the local labor market have a greater worker deficit (Kendall's tau-b = -0.254,  $p = 0.001$ ). Regarding the level of information about national and international markets, we did not find a significant relationship with worker deficits.



**Figure 10** Employer's information about the labor market.

*Source:* research data

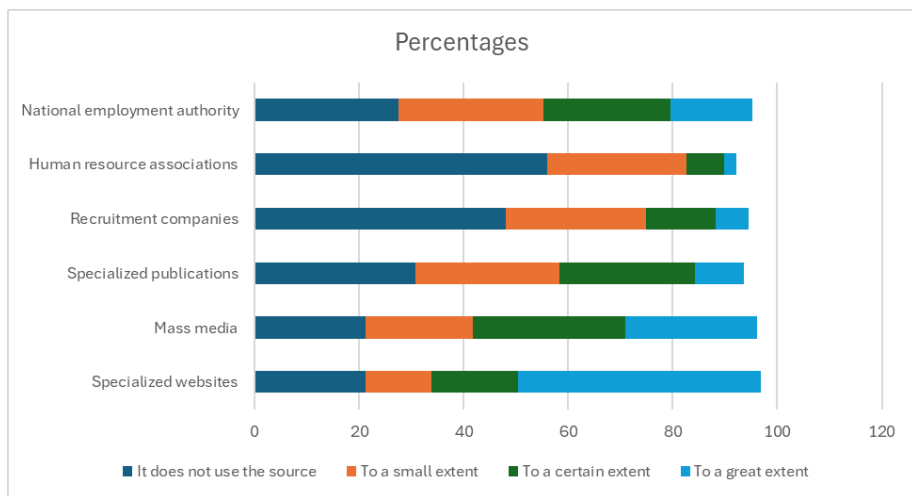


**Figure 11** Employer's sources for information about the local labor market (percentages).

*Source:* research data

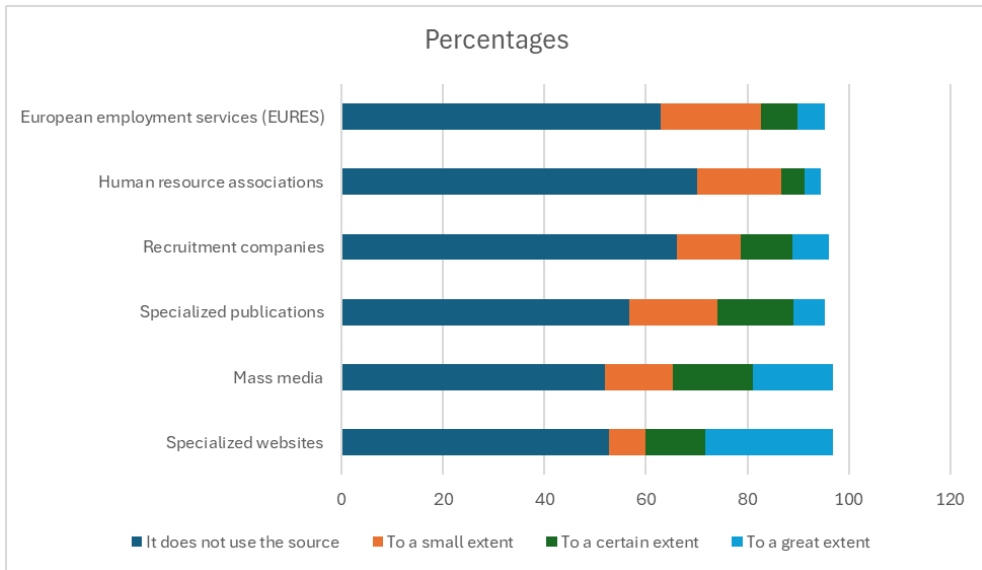


From the fig.7-9 we observe that the main sources of information about the labor market, at the local and national level, are websites. In the focus group, human resource specialists suggested differentiating between the positions targeted by the recruitment method. Accordingly, we differentiated these positions into three categories: management positions, positions for office work, and positions in the production area. Employers are mainly informed about the local and national labor markets from specialized websites, mass media, and local authorities (see fig.7-9). The answers received were checked by asking the respondents to mention the most important source. There were many answers for websites, but no specialized publications or human resource companies were mentioned. These results are in line with the premise of Romanian entrepreneurial culture, which is based on the personal experience of the manager, has an "ad-hoc" approach, and is still dependent on the administrative solutions of the state, relying less on independent forms of organizations, such as recruitment companies or human resource associations.



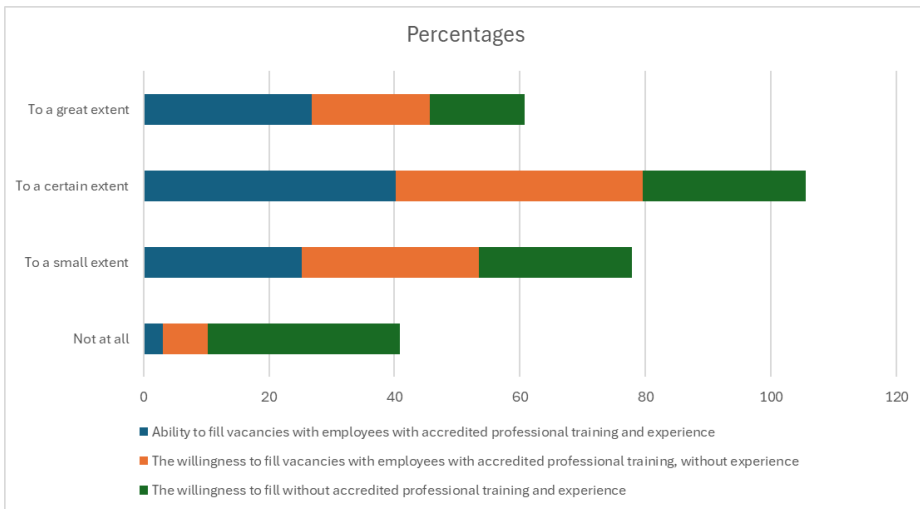
**Figure 12** Employer's sources for information about the national labor market (percentages).  
Source: research data

Fig.10 shows that employers are able to fill vacancies with trained employees to a certain extent as they try to avoid hiring untrained employees. Employer size had a statistically significant association with all variables in fig.10 ( $p < 0.005$ ). There was a positive correlation between employer size and employer willingness to fill positions with employees with accredited professional training and without experience (Kendall's tau-b: 0.204,  $p < 0.001$ ) and without employees without accredited professional training and experience (Kendall's tau-b: 0.175,  $p = 0.001$ ), which signals the willingness of larger companies to organize their on-the-job training. We observed a negative correlation between employer size and employer ability to fill positions with accredited professional training and experience (Kendall's tau-b: -0.166,  $p = 0.003$ ), indicating that smaller companies experience difficulties in hiring trained personnel. Regarding workforce deficit, we observed a statistically significant negative correlation with employer ability to fill positions with accredited professional training and experience (Kendall's tau-b: -0.286,  $p < 0.001$ ), which means that as the employer's work deficit worsens, it is less able to find trained workers. The other two variables from fig.10 did not have a statistically significant relationship with worker deficit ( $p > 0.005$ ).



**Figure 13** Employer's sources for information about the international labor market (percentages). Source: research data

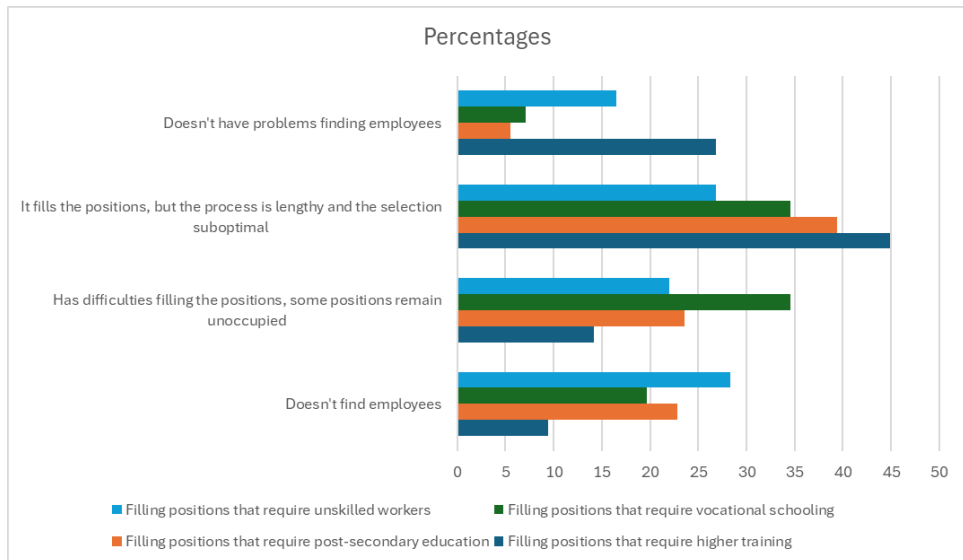
### 4.3. Recruitment issues and strategies



**Figure 14** The employer's ability/willingness to fill vacancies according to training and experience (percentages)  
*Source:* research data

Fig.11 presents the structural aspects of the recruitment process regarding the level of training required to fill the positions. The variables followed four levels of training: higher, post-high school technical training, vocational, and no professional training. Employers had the most difficulty hiring employees with vocational-technical training. Emphasis on higher training at the university level creates an oversupply of qualifications that are less in demand. We found a statistically significant positive

correlation between employer size and the extent to which employers are able to fill positions that require vocational schooling (Kendall's tau-b: 0.211,  $p < 0.001$ ) and unskilled workers (Kendall's tau-b: 0.230,  $p < 0.001$ ). This means that larger employers appear to have a higher tendency to fill positions that require vocational schooling and are more willing to hire unskilled workers. The data showed no statistically significant correlation between employer size and employer ability to fill positions that require higher training or post-secondary education ( $p > 0.005$ ). Workforce deficit presented no statistically significant correlations with the variables in fig.11 ( $p > 0.005$ ).

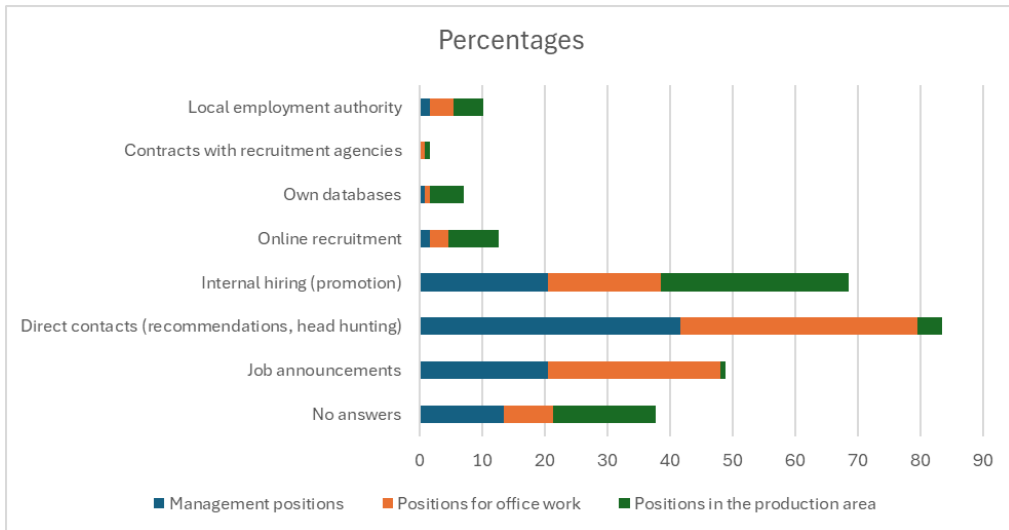


**Figure 15** Recruitment and the level of training (percentages).

*Source:* research data

From fig.12, it can be observed that the differentiation between the types of positions did not show significant differences between recruitment methods. The most commonly used methods are direct contact (recommendations, head hunting), job announcements, and internal hiring.

Direct contacts and job announcements were the most used recruitment methods by employers, which underlines certain aspects of the entrepreneurial culture that do not use independent forms of organizations such as recruitment agencies. A high level of internal hiring indicates scarcity of labor. Employer size did not significantly influence the most commonly used recruitment methods for management positions ( $p > 0.005$ ). However, for recruitment methods used for positions in the production area and office work, we found a statistically significant relationship with employer size ( $p < 0.005$ ). From the contingency table, it appears that, for positions for office work, micro and small enterprises rely heavily on direct contact and less on job announcements, medium enterprises use mostly job announcements, while large enterprises favor internal hiring. For positions in the production area, micro enterprises rely on direct contacts, while small enterprises use mostly job announcements. Medium enterprises also favor job announcements, while large enterprises favor direct contacts. Regarding the relationship between worker deficit and the variables in fig.12, we did not find any statistically significant relationships ( $p > 0.005$ ).



**Figure 16** The most used recruitment method (percentages).

*Source:* research data

#### 4.4. Short- and medium-term measures

Employers are reluctant to orient themselves regarding the recruitment of new employees towards the national labor market and, even less so, towards the international labor market (see fig.13). The relocation of the activity is also rejected by the majority of employers as a solution to the problem of scarcity of the labor force. With regard to employer size, the analyzed data revealed a statistically significant negative correlation with the employer's willingness to reduce the number of positions in the company (Kendall's tau-b: -0.179,  $p=0.001$ ), which means that larger companies are slightly less inclined to reduce the number of positions. We did not find a statistically significant correlation between employer size and other variables in fig.13 ( $p>0.005$ ). There were no statistically significant correlations between workforce deficits and the variables shown in fig.13 ( $p>0.005$ ).

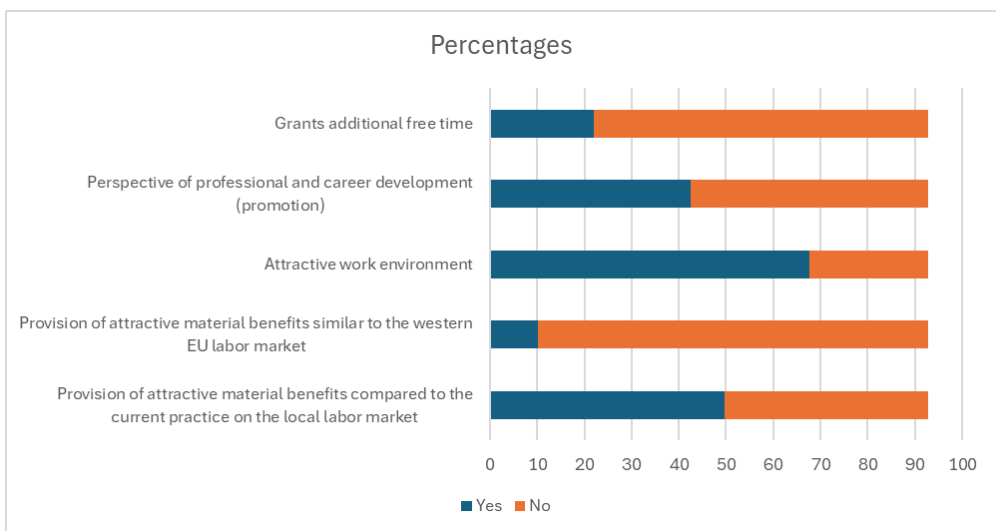
In fig.14, we analyze dichotomous variables regarding the measures expected by employers to retain employees. We observed a division among employers regarding the increase in material benefits in accordance with the local market and regarding the provision of career development opportunities. The idea of salary increases at the Western level, and the reduction in working hours is clearly rejected. Employer size is associated with the way the employer's representatives would consider the provision of attractive material benefits compared to the current practice in the local labor market ( $p=0.004$ ) and give additional free time to improve employee retention ( $p=0.001$ ). From the contingency table, we find that micro, small, and medium enterprises are divided regarding the provision of attractive material benefits compared to the current practice in the local labor market, as the representatives of large companies reject the measure.

### 4.5. Short- and medium-term measures

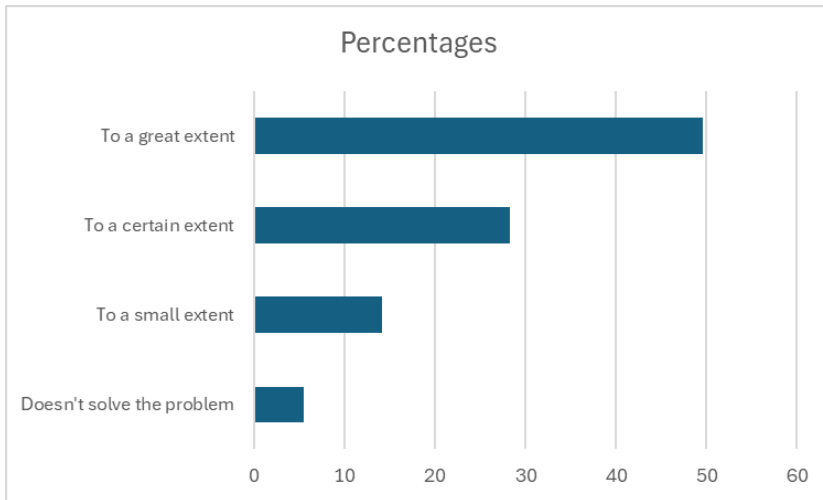


**Figure 17** Measures taken by the employer in case of labor shortage (percentages).  
*Source:* research data

On the contrary, regarding providing additional free time to improve employee retention, the representatives of micro, small, and medium enterprises reject the measure, but large companies are divided. We did not find a statistically significant correlation between employer size and the other variables in fig.14 ( $p > 0.005$ ). Workforce deficit has an influence ( $p = 0.001$ ) on the way the employer’s representatives would consider giving additional free time to improve employee retention. From the contingency table, we observed that representatives from companies with higher worker deficits would consider this measure less. We did not find a statistically significant correlation between workforce deficits and the other variables shown in fig.14 ( $p > 0.005$ ).

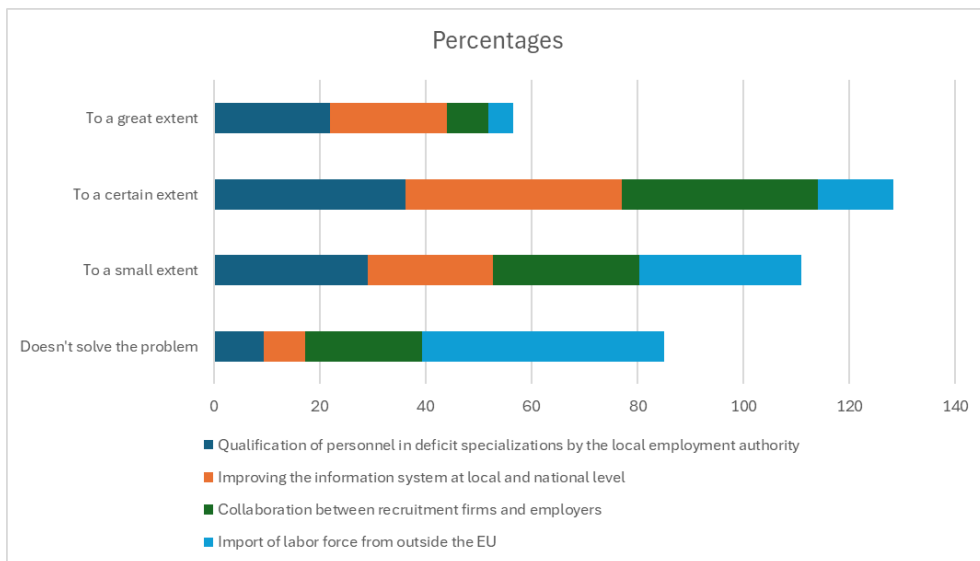


**Figure 18** Measures regarding employee retention (percentages).  
*Source:* research data



**Figure 19** Professional training at the workplace as a measure to alleviate labor shortage (percentages). *Source:* research data

Employers recognize the possibility of reducing problems related to the lack of staff through professional training at the workplace (see fig.15). We found no statistically significant results regarding the effect of employer size and workforce deficit on the variables in fig.15 ( $p > 0.005$ ).



**Figure 20** Employers' favoring extra-organizational medium-term policies to alleviate labor shortage (percentages). *Source:* research data

In fig.16, there were included variables regarding the opinion of the employers' representatives regarding the extra-organizational solutions with an impact on the labor force in the medium term. Employers' representatives consider that a better information system about the labor market and local employment authority could help alleviate labor

scarcity. There is some reluctance to involve recruitment agencies and a strong reserve regarding importing labor from outside the EU. Regarding the effect of employer size, there was a positive correlation with the variable that refers to importing labor from outside the EU as a solution for labor scarcity (Kendall's tau-b: 0.200,  $p=0.001$ ). This could mean that larger companies consider this option more. We did not find a statistically significant correlation between employer size and the other variables in fig.16 ( $p>0.005$ ). Workforce deficit does not have a statistically significant correlation with the variables in fig.16 ( $p>0.005$ ).

### **Conclusions**

Our theoretical premise about Romanian entrepreneurial culture, which does not separate the public and private domains clearly enough and assumes an approach based on the intuition and self-taught training of the entrepreneur, was partially confirmed by the answers received from the employers' representatives. The recruitment methods used and the way the employers inform themselves about the labor market confirm the characterization of the entrepreneurial culture, as the most utilized sources by employers to obtain information are specialized websites, the mass media, and local authorities. Regarding the recruitment methods used, employers mostly used direct contact (recommendations, head hunting), job announcements, and internal hiring. Employers were reluctant to collaborate with independent organizations such as recruitment companies or human resource associations, to recruit new employees from national or international markets, or to relocate their activities.

Regarding the hypothesis that employer size and worker deficit could be used as predictors for the adjustment process of the employers, it can be observed from chapter 4 that the variables "Employer size" and "Worker deficit" presented a series of correlations and associations with the variables that comprise the adjustment process, but these correlations are moderate to weak and inconsistent, so we have to reject the hypotheses that these variables are good predictors for the employer's adjustment process to the labor market in Bihor County. Our research emphasizes the importance of a sociological approach when there is no explanatory model that properly fits the problem at hand. We did not find a significant difference in the approach to the process of adapting to the labor market depending on the size of the employer or the labor shortage experienced, which emphasizes the lack of structuring of the employer's response to the situation, an aspect that makes the process of adjusting to the labor shortage workforce in Bihor County less predictable, while remaining dependent on state-led solutions.

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between Romania's post-communist entrepreneurial culture, evolving HRM practices, and the challenges posed by the current labor market. The reluctance of employers to engage with professional recruitment services or explore international labor markets suggests a persistence of traditional, parochial management approaches. This tendency, while potentially limiting in terms of access to talent, also reflects the strong local orientation of Romanian businesses. The study also reveals a significant mismatch between the skills demanded by employers and those available in the labor market, particularly in vocational and technical fields. This misalignment points to the need for closer collaboration between educational institutions and employers to ensure that training programs are better aligned with market needs.

Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of developing more sophisticated HRM strategies to address the ongoing labor shortage. While employers

recognize the value of workplace training, there appears to be less emphasis on other retention strategies such as competitive compensation or work-life balance initiatives. This suggests an opportunity for Romanian businesses to adopt more comprehensive and innovative HRM practices to attract and retain talent in a competitive market.

In conclusion, while the study provides valuable insights into the current state of HRM practices and labor market dynamics in Bihor County, it also highlights the need for further research to develop more robust predictive models for employer behavior in the Romanian context. Future studies could explore additional variables that might better explain the variability in employer responses to labor market challenges, potentially incorporating qualitative methods to capture the nuances of decision-making processes in different organizational contexts.

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