

DRIVING SUCCESS: UNVEILING KEY TRENDS IN EMPLOYEE TRAINING AND COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Trávníčková, H., Ostin, V., Mazurchenko, A.

Hana Trávníčková / Technical University of Liberec, Faculty of Economics, Department of Business Administration and Management, Liberec, Czech Republic. Email: hana.travnickova@tul.cz

Vasilii Ostin / Technical University of Liberec, Faculty of Economics, Department of Business Administration and Management, Liberec, Czech Republic. Email: vasilii.ostin@tul.cz

Anastasiia Mazurchenko / Technical University of Liberec, Faculty of Economics, Department of Business Administration and Management, Liberec, Czech Republic. Email: anastasiia.mazurchenko@tul.cz (corresponding author)

Abstract

Trends such as advances in digital technologies and diversity in talent management necessitate continuous learning in the workplace and make European employers think about what competencies of their employees, in addition to basic digital competencies, are most in demand both today and in the foreseeable future. Considering this, identifying the main trends in employee training and development in the automotive industry in Central Europe and their impact on current and future competency profiles becomes the main purpose of this article. Both primary and secondary data have been analysed. The qualitative methodology in this article is based on the processing of the primary data from eight semi-structured interviews conducted from June to October 2023 with human resource managers and learning and development managers of selected Czech companies related to the automotive sector. An essential secondary data source was Eurostat's Continuous Vocational Training Survey on employee training and development within European countries in 2020 among 113,000 businesses. The findings in this article demonstrate that digital competency and soft skills are currently the most important competencies for employee development within the automotive sector in Central Europe.

Implications for Central European audience: The results presented in this article emphasise the importance of adapting actual employee training and development programmes to technology trends influencing the automotive industry. It has been proven that employees' soft competencies are preferable today and will be in great demand in the next three years. This is because soft skills support the successful implementation of change and improve the competitiveness of the business in the long term, and both education and development managers and employees themselves realise this.

Keywords: Employee development; soft skills; European automobile manufacturers; workplace education; human resources

JEL Classification: O15, M53, J24

Introduction

Ensuring appropriate employee training and development in response to global modern trends and technological progress is one of the main challenges facing the automotive sector, which has shown its growing potential in recent years. Globalisation, technological progress, economic development and environmental and social indicators are thereby among the priorities for manufacturing companies eager to achieve sustainable progress in today's world (Rupp et al., 2021; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023; Kiciński & Chaja, 2021). In this case, employee experience, skills and knowledge about how to proceed in this direction are becoming necessary. This is particularly significant given that the automotive sector remains one of the primary sectors in the European economy, providing 13.8 million jobs representing approximately 6.1% of the total employment in the European Union. Furthermore, the automotive industry accounts for approximately 7% of the European Union's GDP in 2022, contributing more than one trillion euros (McKinsey, 2023). In the case of the Czech automotive sector, it provides direct jobs for 180 thousand employees and more than 300 thousand employees in the related areas of the manufacturing industry, which covers a significant share of employment in this country (Automotive Industry Association, 2022).

Although expectations and motivations of organisational management in the individual sectors inherently differ, the importance of employee training and development as a growing trend has not been shaken by the two-year COVID-19 pandemic austerity measures and continued to intensify (Seduo, 2022). However, employee learning has been slowed for a while after implementing the new norms and standards of work (Chi et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2022). According to Crowley and Overton (2021), only one in five employers believe that the human resource training and development strategies used thus far and the related investments will return to pre-pandemic levels. For this reason, continuous employee training and development in reaction to changing trends on the labour market and ongoing technological progress is considered the most helpful support (Association of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises and Crafts CZ & Ipsos Marketing, 2023). Furthermore, new education solutions and innovative approaches towards employee training and development have become a positive output of the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain employers' competitive position on the labour market (Kshirsagar et al., 2020).

By 2030, 16.0% of the global automotive workforce is expected to need retraining and reskilling to meet the changing needs of the industry as a significant engine of innovation and progress (Knoedler et al., 2020). Research studies published to date are mainly dedicated to new emerging job categories (Macpherson et al., 2022), business strategies in human resource management (Ahmad & Khan, 2023; Chapano et al., 2022) and technology management for innovation (Rajan et al., 2021) in the automotive sector. However, only a limited number of studies are devoted to the formation and forecasting of current and necessary skills of automotive sector employees in the foreseeable future, considering modern global trends (Mazurchenko & Zelenka, 2022; Pavlásek, 2020). This indicates a research gap that we consider possible to fill.

The main objective of this article is to present the primary trends in employee training and development in manufacturing companies in the Central European automotive industry, focusing on the current and future competencies required in response to these trends. The

major results of the systematic literature review of the scientific publications and secondary data surveys are presented in Chapter 1. The major research questions and qualitative research methodology based on semi-structured interviews with human resources managers and training and development specialists in selected companies in the automotive sector are presented in more detail in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 deals with the presentation of received and processed primary data. In further chapters, attention is devoted to discourse on the topic of this research and the definition of its main limitations and directions for future surveys.

1 Literature Review

In the contemporary business landscape, companies encounter diverse challenges and opportunities (Phuyal et al., 2020; Lopez-Vega & Moodysson, 2023). Despite this dynamic environment, the significance of employee competencies remains paramount in shaping a company's success and ensuring adherence to processes (Chi et al., 2020; Kacprzak et al., 2017). In the initial phase of historical development, competencies were viewed as individual characteristics necessary to achieve the desired level of employee performance. Hitt et al. (2016) viewed competencies as valuable, scarce and difficult-to-replace resources and abilities. In addition, competency focuses on an individual approach to the work task by considering different aspects of previously acquired knowledge and skills (Leung et al., 2016). The results of analysis of the competency components based on the opinion of the different authors for the last thirty years have shown that most often they cover the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values of individuals (Mazurchenko, 2023). Competence is an important element of the competitiveness of the European Union, as expressed in the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union (2018). Competence can also be understood as the ability to practically apply skills in solving different tasks (Rodrigues et al., 2021). In 2023, skills are a priority in the European Union (European Union, 2023).

Skills, in general, may be understood as the ability to perform certain processes and apply explicit and tacit knowledge to achieve results (Council of the European Union, 2018). Beyond technical and job-specific competencies, numerous authors underscore the importance of soft skills, especially within the automotive industry. *Soft skills* encompass individual characteristics, interpersonal proficiencies and communicative capabilities that foster productive engagement and cooperation in professional settings. These attributes are widely acknowledged as indispensable for thriving in the contemporary business landscape (Aquino & Garcia, 2023; Firmansyah & Soeharto, 2020). Holt (2018) classified fundamental *soft skills* within the automotive industry into five categories, emphasising personal qualities that enhance employee effectiveness. These categories include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, employee attitude and work ethic. According to Cimatti (2016), *hard skills* mean special abilities to do the defined job. Capranos and Magda (2023) observed a significant shift in employees' work processes in today's evolving business landscape. Thriving organisations now prioritise cultivating soft skills, with a remarkable 48% increase in demand for these skills since the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to a 33% decrease in demand for hard skills (Capranos & Magda, 2023; Jayathilake et al., 2021). This reflects a swift realignment of organisational priorities towards enhancing human potential within the workforce.

Digital competencies have been growing in importance since 2006, when they were specified as one of the eight key competencies for lifelong personal development, active participation in society, employability and sustainable lifestyles in the European Union (Brolpito, 2018). However, the definition of digital competency is not uniform in scientific literature, as different authors disagree on a universal approach to identifying it. The reason is that the concept of *digital competencies* is multifaceted and can be seen as a tool to support achieving organisational objectives, changes in the quality of jobs, innovative development and the organisation's competitiveness (Hubschmid-Vierheilg et al., 2020). Moreover, Bikse et al. (2021) suggested that *digital competencies* are closely linked to developing soft skills such as creativity, partnership and problem-solving. In contrast, Grevtseva et al. (2020) perceived *digital competencies* as combining technical, information and media, consumer and communication skills. In turn, *digital skills*, as a part of a comprehensive concept of digital competency, are usually more critical than the ability to use applications and digital devices to understand and create online content (Van Laar et al., 2020). This is because *digital skills* also include digital information processing and communication (Aesaert et al., 2014), critical thinking (Starkey, 2011), the ability to work on shared documents and projects in online collaborative platforms (Bălău & Utz, 2017), the skills needed to find creative solutions and transfer knowledge to new working conditions (Barak, 2018).

Belolipetskaya et al. (2020) focused on the issue of transformation of competencies based on data gathered from 700 companies in the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Russia in 2019. Respondents included employees at various managerial and organisational levels with decision-making authority or consultative authority over training and professional development for employees in their organisations. The outcome of this research is also a three-module model of competencies requiring differentiated approaches to the selection and development of an organisation's human resources. These modules include professional skills required for work, digital skills needed to use artificial intelligence, data analytics and machine learning and soft skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, emotional intelligence, cultural diversity and multitasking.

Belolipetskaya et al. (2020) pointed out that the needs of the business tend to change in the coming years, and, therefore, the list of skills within the model that will be in particularly high demand should be updated. This would also increase employers' demand for flexible, broad-based professionals.

1.1 Employee development trends and competencies in the automotive industry: secondary data analysis

According to the latest Microsoft survey (2023), among 31,000 full-time respondents from different industries across 31 countries, including the Central European region, more than half of employees need the relevant skills to do their work. At the same time, more than 80% of employers worldwide expect their staff to develop new skills due to rapid technological development. This need is also due to 65% of the jobs in which current students will be employed in the coming years not yet existing, which thereby creates new demands on the employees' competency profile (World Economic Forum, 2018).

The above-stated tendencies were also confirmed during the COVID-19 pandemic and indicated a persistent challenge for employers in finding candidates with the required skills. The data obtained by the Society for Human Resource Management (2019) and the professional

social network LinkedIn (2021) demonstrate the high share of employers facing difficulties filling job positions due to skill shortages (78% in 2019 and 80% in 2021) and underscore the ongoing nature of this issue. At the same time, the employees know the importance of developing their professional potential and skills. This is supported by data from the Deloitte & MIT Sloan Management Review survey (2020), in which 74% of respondents considered developing their skills and abilities crucial to their organisation's long-term corporate strategy.

Almost a third of the annual spending of the European automotive sector, which is about EUR 60 billion a year, comes from research and development (McKinsey, 2023). This high level of investment reflects the industry's commitment to technology development, sustainability and competitiveness, which makes ongoing employee training and development within the automotive industry vital. The fact that, based on the results of the survey (Deloitte, 2020) conducted among responders from different countries, a quarter of respondents have never attended training on new technologies and digital trends to enhance their efficiency at work is also noteworthy. In addition, 15% of respondents claimed that they had undergone such training at least two years ago, which indicates potential skill gaps while technological and digital trends are developing rapidly.

The latest studies on technological trends affecting the automotive industry are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 | Modern global technological trends transforming the automotive industry

Title	Authors, year	Trends
Key trends in the automotive industry: How should your business prepare	Randstad (2023)	Growth in electric vehicles, automated processes and robotisation, supporting continuous training and development, diversity in talent management
Driving toward the post-digital future: Accenture technology vision 2020 Automotive	Accenture (2020)	Consumers' customised experiences, human and AI collaboration, advances in robotics, sensors, speech recognition, 5G, acceleration innovations
How are digital technologies changing innovation? Evidence from agriculture, the automotive industry and retail	Paunov and Planes-Satorra (2019)	Car connectivity, autonomous driving, smart factories, Industry 4.0, after-sales services, new car ownership models, on-demand mobility services

Source: Paunov and Planes-Satorra (2019), Accenture (2020), Randstad (2023)

The abovementioned trends have substantially transformed work organisation, contributing to a fundamental change in the working environment and increasing demand for employees' abilities to quickly adapt and learn new things in the automotive sector (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Due to rapid technological progress, there is a growing demand for skills in collecting, analysing and processing big data and the ability to work with data networks, electrical engineering, artificial intelligence and robotics (Pavlásek, 2020).

Basic digital skills, critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills, achievement motivation and self-management have also additionally come to the fore and are highly valued by employers (International Labour Organisation, 2021). Apart from meeting the technical

requirements of a job, critical thinking and problem-solving skills are among the top competencies that employers expect from applicants, taking into account the changing requirements of the labour market (Society for Human Resource Management, 2019; LinkedIn, 2021).

The importance of improved education and professional development programmes is also caused by the reduced number of employees in the Central European automotive industry, as confirmed by data from Eurostat (2023). The parallel development of Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0 have increased the number of automated workplaces and raised demands on human capital's cognitive and creative skills (Melnik et al., 2021).

The data in Table 2 correspond to the specific NACE classification “C29 – Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers”, directly relevant to the automotive industry, and patterns and trends in this sector.

Table 2 | Numbers of employees within the automotive industry in Central European countries (in thousands)

Countries	2022-Q1	2022-Q2	2022-Q3	2023-Q4	2023-Q1	2023-Q2
Czechia	228.8	230.1	230.8	233.0	222.2	215.9
Germany	1,081.9	1,041.7	1,048.6	1,025.9	1,000.8	1,112.5
Hungary	142.1	142.1	140.1	137.3	138.5	139.0
Austria	39.8	39.9	39.0	41.1	34.3	35.9
Poland	287.4	272.9	267.7	312.0	319.9	288.1
Slovakia	143.6	139.0	131.3	132.2	127.2	123.9

Source: Eurostat (2023)

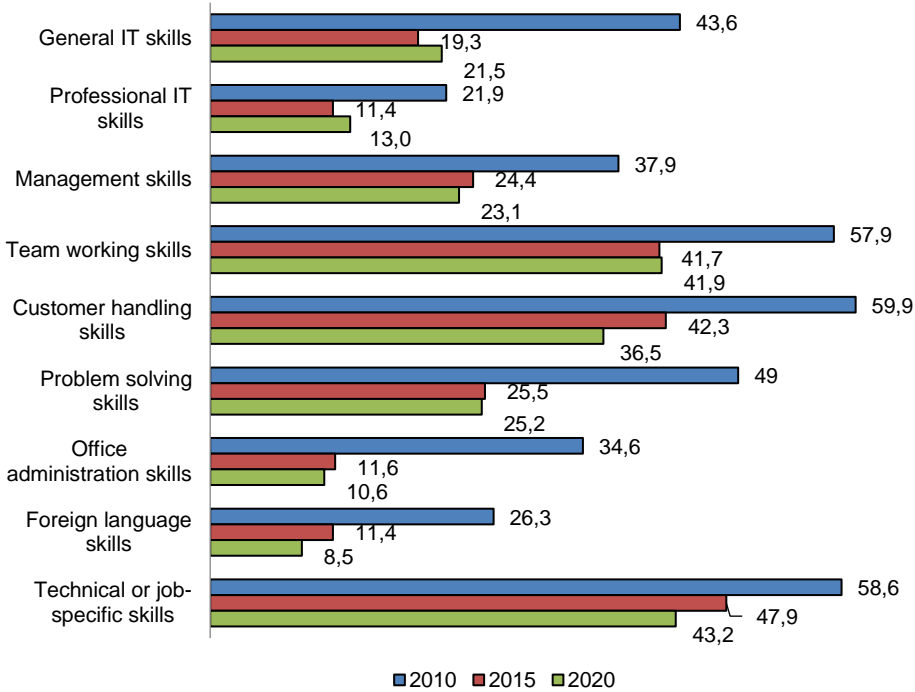
Of particular note are the results of the mandatory Continuous Vocational Training Survey (CVTS), which is conducted by Eurostat every five years among European companies in different sectors of the economy, including the automotive industry. The employee training and development data from the last survey in 2020 were released in January 2023, based on a net sample of 113,000 businesses with more than nine employees. The CVTS considers data on pre-planned and organised training and development activities with specific learning goals (Eurostat, 2023).

Even though the approach of European companies to employee training development varies from country to country, 67.4% of the employers surveyed offered their employees at least one development event in 2020. Most companies that offer development activities to their employees are in Baltic and Nordic countries (mainly Latvia, Norway and Sweden). The Czech Republic ranks fourth in the European Union and first in Central Europe, with 85.9% of companies offering development activities to their employees (Eurostat, 2023). Training and development in the Czech Republic are typically delivered through continuing vocational training, mainly group courses outside the workplace (Trávníčková & Maršíková, 2023). In contrast, other forms of training and development prevail in Latvia, such as e-learning and guided on-the-job training.

One of the most valuable gains of the CVTS research is that Eurostat explores the change in demand for employee skills in European Union companies and makes a three-year outlook on which skills are needed and have to be developed (Eurostat, 2023).

As seen in Figure 1, in 2020, most European companies expected that technical and job-specific skills (43.2%), teamwork skills (41.9%) and customer-handling skills (36.5%) would be most valuable in the next three years. Another study (Giffi et al., 2018) emphasised that 2.4 million unfilled jobs were expected to remain in manufacturing companies, including car manufacturing companies, between 2018 and 2028 due to a lack of staff skills supporting the introduction and use of new technologies. Critical thinking, programming and digital skills are all part of it.

Figure 1 | Top employee skills, 3-year forecast from European companies in 2010, 2015, 2020 (in % of all companies)



Source: Eurostat (2023)

Figure 1 also shows the reduced interest of European companies in developing the skills specified in the CVTS survey, in contrast to 2010. As can be seen, this is the case for all skills. This may indicate both a shift and the importance of a complex approach and a greater focus on other competencies. Nevertheless, there is an effort, for example, by the European Union to increase reskilling and upskilling, knowledge and especially key competencies (European Union, 2023).

2 Methodology

This research aims to introduce the leading trends in employee training and development in automotive manufacturing companies in the Central European region, spotlighting the employees' present and future competencies requirements in reaction to these trends. Our main focus was to find answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Which trends have the greatest impact on employee training and development in the modern automotive industry?

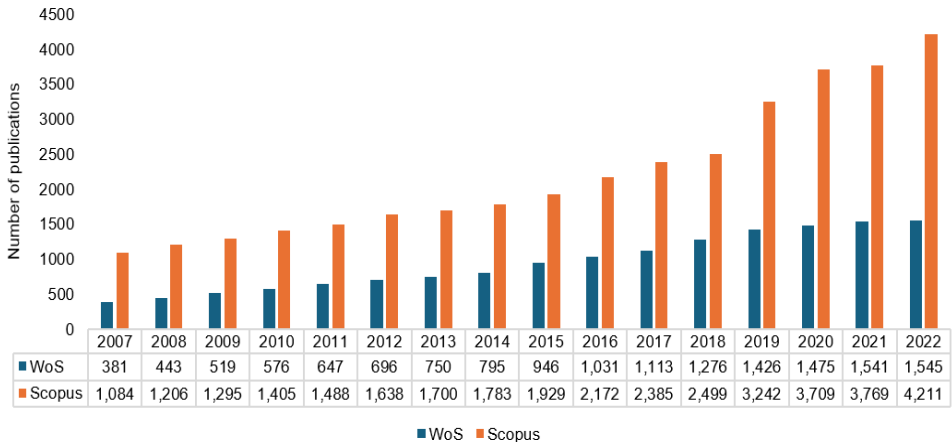
RQ2: What employee competencies are currently needed to be developed in the Central European automotive industry?

RQ3: How will the requirements for the employees' competencies in the Central European automotive industry change in the next three years in the automotive industry?

We applied a structured approach to the literature review to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implications of changes in employee training and development for the employees' competency profiles. To ensure a rigorous examination of the existing literature related to the topic, the search primarily took place in two well-established scientific databases, mainly Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus. This choice reflects our commitment to conducting an evidence-driven investigation, exploring the critical term "employee training and development" and ensuring that the research is relevant and contemporary.

Figure 2 shows the numbers of scientific publications in the WoS and Scopus databases whose title, abstract or keyword includes the critical term "employee training and development". We identified that employee training and development is the subject of numerous discussions among organisations, scientists and experts from many countries and noted a growing interest in this topic over the past 16 years. This upward trajectory demonstrates the importance of employee training and development in contemporary research, business and human resources landscape in enhancing organisational performance and well-being. There were 50,675 publications (articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, etc.) on this subject in 2007–2022, with 70% of them being evidenced in Scopus and 30% evidenced in WoS. The chosen timeframe encompasses a period marked by significant global events, including economic crises, accelerated advancements in digital technologies and the COVID-19 pandemic. This systematic approach provides a strong foundation for the subsequent literature review, enabling a more informed exploration of employee training and development from theoretical and practical perspectives. It is also worth noting that the data for the year 2023 from WoS and Scopus were not taken into account since, at the time of preparation of this article, they were still incomplete.

Figure 2 | Numbers of publications on employee development in WoS and Scopus databases as of 2023



Source: Authors

The search results indicate that a substantial publication increase primarily occurred from 2017 to 2018 (see Figure 2), demonstrating a surge in research and interest in employee training and development compared to the preceding years. The top publishing countries that displayed significant research output and engagement to the area surveyed were the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and China. Business, management and educational research were the primary research areas that covered publications on employee training and development in organisational and educational contexts.

The main results of the literature review were supplemented by an analysis of secondary data on the global trends of employee training and development and current and future requirements for employee competencies (see Chapter 1). Our choice of the automotive industry sector in the Central European region for a more detailed study within the framework of this article is justified in the introduction.

For a more holistic, detailed and up-to-date study on the area of employee training with a focus on competency development in the selected industry and region, a qualitative methodology, namely contextual semi-structured interviews, was chosen. Qualitative data were called on to bring business insight into this topic, reveal what employees' competencies are now developed in the automotive industry and open the discussion about possible future development directions. A detailed profile of respondents who participated in the interviews is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 | Characteristics of interviewed companies

Companies	Date of founding	Industry (CZ-NACE)	Company size (employees)	Interviewee	Responsible for training and development
Company A	2015	Automotive (29320)	Large (1,400)	HR manager	Department manager
Company B	2002	Automotive (29320)	Large (1,100)	L&D manager	Department manager
Company C	2014	Shared automotive services (620)	Large (300)	HR manager	HR manager
Company D	2003	Automotive, electronic (29300)	Large (330)	HR manager	HR manager
Company E	1990	Automotive (29320)	Large (8,000)	L&D manager	L&D manager
Company F	1991	Automotive (29320)	Large (2,000)	L&D manager	L&D manager
Company G	2014	Shared automotive services (620)	Small and medium (70)	HR manager	Team leader
Company H	2006	Shared automotive services (620)	Small and medium (60)	L&D manager	Team leader

Source: Authors

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with human resource (HR) managers and specialists in employee learning and development (L&D) in eight selected companies in the automotive industry from June to October 2023. The number should be adequate for a qualitative study (Dworkin, 2012). To get a complete picture of the current state of employees' professional development, car manufacturers and service providers for the automotive industry were among the respondents. An intense interest in and active approach to this topic was confirmed in all the interviewed companies, which served as the main criterion for their choice. These international companies are among the major employers in the automotive industry operating in the Liberec Region, Mlada Boleslav and Prague in the Czech Republic. Semi-structured interviews were also made possible thanks to the personal contacts of some authors of this article in the automotive industry. At the request of respondents, the names of the companies were anonymised and marked with the letters A-H for further study of the obtained qualitative data in this article.

We preferred the semi-structured interview to obtain as many open answers as possible, identify new trends in the surveyed topic and enable respondents to freely express their opinions without being limited by a systematically organised interview structure (Ahlin, 2019). The questionnaire was developed based on the literature review results and secondary data, especially the Continuing Vocational Training Survey conducted by Eurostat (see Chapter 1.1) in alignment with scientific recommendations (Kallio et al., 2016). Open questions in the questionnaire covered the following areas:

- the respondents' profile (brief history of the company, its size and industry and information about the person responsible for training and development);
- employees' competencies currently developed in the company and those required for the future;
- methods and techniques of employee training and development used;
- evaluation of results of training and development activities done;
- barriers to effective employee training and development in the company.

The duration of each semi-structured interview was one hour. Each respondent's verbal answer was recorded with a voice recorder and converted to text format in Microsoft Office Word editor. The answers were then translated using the online DeepL.com translator from Czech to English, ensuring and guaranteeing the anonymity of the data gathered as agreed with the respondents. The primary obtained data were coded and categorised manually and analysed systematically. The answers received to the same question from different respondents were compared between each other and with the results of the literature review and secondary data analyses and are finally presented in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

3 Results

This section primarily elucidates the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews. Our qualitative survey identified the main trends influencing employee learning in the workplace in the selected Czech automobile companies. Summary results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 | Top trends in employee training and development in interviewed companies

Companies	Key trends in employee education in the workplace	Competency development in reaction to digitalisation in 2023 (YES/NO)
Company A	Systematic and entrepreneurial approach	YES
Company B	Talent management	YES
Company C	Diversity, equity and inclusion	YES
Company D	Growth model, change management	YES
Company E	Customer orientation, soft skills, personal treatment	YES
Company F	Company culture, strategy and organisation value	YES
Company G	Creativity and social approach	YES
Company H	Company strategy knowledge, change management	YES

Source: Authors

The trends identified across interviewed companies offer valuable insight into the evolving dynamics of employee development. As we delve into the implications of these trends, several logical consequences and potential business directions come to the forefront.

Firstly, the emphasis on an additional systematic and entrepreneurial approach in a company environment, talent management, and diversity and inclusion initiatives underscores a strategic

focus on nurturing and retaining skilled individuals within the workforce. This signals a shift towards holistic employee development, recognising personal and interpersonal competencies. The prioritisation of customer orientation, soft skills and personal treatment suggests a customer-centric approach to employee development. This aligns with the broader trend of businesses, recognising the pivotal role of a customer-focused workforce in achieving sustained success and competitive advantage. The focus on company culture, strategy and organisational values indicates a recognition of the pivotal role of these elements in shaping employee behaviour and performance. This trend suggests a strategic alignment of employee development with broader organisational objectives and values. The further emphasis on creativity and a social approach to employee training aligns with the growing recognition of the importance of innovation and collaboration in the contemporary business landscape. This signals a shift towards fostering a work environment that encourages creativity and effective social interactions.

Digitalisation and the related need to develop digital competencies were mentioned to a greater or lesser extent in all the companies. This trend is also in line with the recommendation of the European Union, where digital competencies are part of the key competencies. If we focus on key competencies, we can not only increase the competencies of the individual and the nation, but also the overall standard of living across society, which is why the Council of the European Union declared 2023 as the Year of Skills (European Union, 2023).

The identified trends not only provide a snapshot of current practices, but also point towards strategic directions that businesses may consider in their employee development initiatives. From fostering adaptability and resilience to embracing customer-centric approaches and promoting a culture of innovation, these trends offer valuable cues for businesses seeking to thrive in the ever-evolving landscape of employee training and development.

The next part of the chapter bifurcates into two segments: the first concentrates on existing trends in employee competencies. In contrast, the second part delves into future and emerging competencies deemed critical for businesses.

3.1 Current key employee competencies

This study primarily focuses on analysing and evaluating current and future competencies. By delving into competencies, we aim to contribute valuable insight into the skills and attributes instrumental for businesses to thrive amidst the challenges and capitalise on emerging opportunities in today's ever-evolving business landscape.

Table 5 provides a structured view of what competencies the respondent companies consider key and what competencies will be essential for their company. In line with the CVTS methodology, a three-year view was adopted. As can be seen from the overview, soft skills and specialised knowledge associated with developing the technical area (hard skills) and digital competencies are significant themes for companies.

In terms of digitalisation, the situation in each interviewed company is specific. It corresponds to the degree of data digitalisation. The decisions of the parent companies often influence software use. For example, SAP software is used in company A, which is gradually being introduced into more company areas; here, digital competence is hidden under continuous improvement. In the case of company B, digital skills are mainly general competencies, for example, through a series of short online workshops. This international company also uses

SAP for its processes but tries to educate its employees in digital competence. Company C provides support services for factories across Europe, so digital competencies are already focused on specific technical knowledge related to the position, which they internally call hard skills. Excel is directly mentioned here in the case of Company D, which has 330 employees, due to its availability, low-cost solution and flexibility, allowing data handling and analytical activities to evaluate the data. However, it is still being determined whether this tool will align with Industry 4.0 and 5.0 in the future, where automation, online processing of large amounts of digital data and the increased need for the added value of human labour are more promoted. Compared to the CVTS survey outputs, the interviewed companies are already more engaged in digital skills. However, the question is whether, like company C, they need to consider digital competencies as a part of technical or position-relevant skills.

Table 5 below also shows the firms' clear objective to develop soft skills in their employees. It is often referred to generically, but some companies, such as companies A, C and D, are more precise, already focusing on their employees' leadership. However, each company is also developing individual soft skills for its current needs. Company A now sees a priority to strengthen the trainer's skills in addition to leadership at the masters level. Company B now sees the most significant benefit, besides leadership, in working with talent, especially at the managerial level – not only for those new to the position but also for more experienced managers. Companies C and D have around 300 employees each, but leadership is currently a priority even here. Given the international nature of their business, they additionally see the importance of language development to ensure their employees can better communicate with the parent company and other global locations.

Utilising insight from the semi-structured interviews, we discerned a spectrum of potential for the present and forthcoming business era. A primary emphasis was placed on the existing competencies deemed essential for contemporary businesses. Notably, the prominent competency of digitalisation emerged as a focal point, acknowledged by six of the eight companies interviewed. As highlighted in the literature review, steering employee development in the digital direction is pivotal in unlocking business success and capitalising on current market opportunities. In the primary phase of the interviews, a consensus among participants emphasised the imperative need for digital knowledge, encompassing fundamental comprehension of digital tools and more advanced proficiency in utilising Microsoft tools. Companies E to H underscored that more than mere familiarity with Microsoft Office is required, emphasising the need to expand and deepen expertise in this domain.

Table 5 | Current and future competencies required within interviewed companies

Companies	Employees' current key competencies	Key employees' competencies required in three years
Company A	Leadership skills at master level Adaptability and readiness to learn new things	Self-awareness Individualised soft skills Hard skills
Company B	Leadership skills Digital competencies	Readiness to learn continuously Responsibility for own development
Company C	Language skills Hard skills Leadership skills	Leadership skills Diversity, equity and inclusion competencies Communication skills Time management Resistance to stress
Company D	Leadership skills Language skills Data information processing skills	Leadership skills Flexibility, adaptability to changes Language skills Data information processing skills
Company E	Digital competencies Customer handling	Soft skills Human touch competencies
Company F	Product skills Company culture	Lifelong learning Individualisation of competency and skills Human (soft) skills
Company G	Creativity ESG competencies	Soft skills Change management Life learning competencies
Company H	Digital competencies Leadership skills Change management	Human knowledge (soft skills) Digitalisation Competition knowledge

Source: Authors (2023)

Furthermore, companies E and F are actively encouraging their employees to be educated to comprehend and engage in daily data analysis activities, mainly through tools such as Microsoft PowerBI or similar platforms. According to these interviews, data analysis is pivotal in gaining insight for steering future directions in employee development. Additionally, digital skills related to the forming and administration of learning management systems (LMS) were underscored. Given that a significant portion of the interviewees represented learning and training teams within their respective companies, there was a unanimous acknowledgement, especially from companies E and F, of the essential need to educate employees in basic digital skills to enable them to effectively format and work with LMS solutions in the future.

Another noteworthy set of results emerged from three out of the six interviewed companies, specifically E, G and H, where the foundation of soft skill development was emphasised for the future. This direction was reiterated and validated by the representative of company E, characterising the current period as a transformative phase towards enhancing human (employee) soft skills. The interviews highlighted that the present emphasis primarily remains on hard and product skills, focusing on service distribution. However, the evolving landscape is

prompting businesses, including companies E, F, G and H, to seek an optimal balance between hard and soft employee skill development.

Contemporary businesses are not merely prioritising the development of soft employee skills but are actively working to shift the overall company mindset. This transformation brings employees closer to the organisation's strategy and overall culture. Consequently, a discernible shift in the demand for employee skills is evident, emphasising knowledge related to company strategy (as observed in the case of company H) and familiarity with the company's culture, values and overall brand spirit (as exemplified by company F).

3.2 Future key employee competencies

The future trajectory of employee competency development is intricately linked with the present dynamics of the labour market and the orientation of businesses. The findings about the current employee competencies, as discussed above, shape the landscape for future development and transformations. A discernible trend is emerging from the insights gathered through our semi-structured interviews: contemporary businesses focus on soft skills rather than hard skills and competencies. Of the eight companies surveyed, six unanimously highlighted the imperative need to concentrate on cultivating soft skills in the future. This shift not only reflects a changing mindset but is also influenced by the rise of new generations assuming management and employment roles within present-day businesses.

A compelling illustration was additionally shared by the representative of company F, highlighting the evolution of training and development orientations over the years. At the onset of the 2000s, the predominant focus was on product knowledge, heavily emphasising hard skills, which constituted approximately 70% of all training and development activities. By the mid-2010s, there was a discernible shift towards a more balanced approach, with a 50-50 split between soft and hard skill training and development. As articulated by the interviewee, the current scenario and the company's future aspirations underscore a significant transformation. The forward-looking employee development strategy now envisions a blend of 70% soft skill and 30% hard skill development.

Soft skills are always mentioned in terms of the core competencies that the company wants to develop in the next three years. However, some companies (A, C, D) also plan to continue developing their employees' professional competencies. As the table shows, developing personal and leadership competencies will be a priority for all companies. It also illustrates the need for lifelong learning as a prerequisite for a successful company. The topic of leadership will also remain in the companies, but already more focused. For example, it will involve implementing a systematic leadership approach (company A) and taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions, as in the case of company B. Other companies include the growing aspect of Industry 5.0, which promotes a human-centric approach (human-centricity), diversity, a positive mindset and an attitude towards external influences. In the case of company C, they also see a need for more development of competencies related to stress, communication and time in the future. At the same time, company D refers to this more as working with change. Entrepreneurship, a proactive approach and taking responsibility for employees will be the priorities for competence development for companies A and B.

In addition to the pronounced emphasis on developing soft skills, a pivotal direction for shaping future employee competencies lies in individualising training and development activities and cultivating robust change management skills. The evolving nature of the business landscape, marked by constant shifts in market dynamics, evolving customer preferences and rapid technological innovations, underscores the imperative need for employees to possess adept change management capabilities. As highlighted by several interviewees, change management is becoming increasingly crucial as organisations seek to adapt and thrive amidst the uncertainties of the contemporary business environment. Leading and navigating through transformative changes has become a defining competency for future employees. In-depth insights from the interviews underscored the significance of fostering change management skills, with interviewees from companies E, G and H specifically acknowledging the need for employees to navigate organisational shifts seamlessly.

4 Discussion

The results underscore a notable shift in organisational priorities, highlighting the crucial role of human capital in shaping successful business environments (Oh et al., 2015). Present-day companies actively integrate prevailing trends, emphasising a well-rounded approach that values both soft and hard skills. This strategic reorientation recognises the transformative impact of investing in continuous employee growth and adaptability while aligning organisational strategies with contemporary insight (Sobotka, 2021). The findings of this research confirm the evolution of employee competencies and their adjustments to the market needs (Hartinger et al., 2021).

We primarily investigated three main directions. Based on the presented secondary and primary data outputs, it was possible to underline and structure the answers to the research questions.

The first research question focused on the investigation of current trends in employee development within the automotive sector. Through secondary data analysis and outputs from semi-structured interviews, several trended groups were identified, summarising the results obtained. The first group is “organisational effectiveness and strategy”. In this group, there is a systematic entrepreneurial approach, an emphasis on understanding and valuing company culture and values, as well as a focus on growth model orientation and change management, which characterises the dynamically changing global business environment. The second group describes “talent development and management”, with an orientation towards diversity development, creativity and a social approach. The third group of trends is characterised as “customer-centric orientation”, primarily focusing on a customer-oriented approach, the development of soft skills and personalised treatment of employees.

The second research question primarily investigated the current status of key employee competencies highly demanded by the European automotive industry. In the present era, the development of the automotive industry is notably characterised by the digital era. According to the interviews, it is evident that there is a crucial competency demand for digital proficiency among employees, ranging from basic to professional knowledge of digital solutions and tools. Furthermore, the automotive industry is emphasising the importance of achieving a balance between soft and hard skills. While hard skills remain vital for efficient business operations, there is a noticeable shift where soft skills are gaining prominence in society today. Companies are additionally increasingly integrating environmental, social and governance (ESG) competencies and are actively working to develop initial skills among their employees. Based

on the insight from the semi-structured interviews, it is apparent that the ESG topic has moved beyond being a mere trend. Instead, it is becoming an integral part of the work environment, essential for future business success and contributing to increased customer satisfaction.

The last research question focused on competencies for the future, anticipated within the next three years, and reflects the influence of current trends on existing employee skills. Our findings highlight that the primary focus for future company directions is the development of soft competencies. The principal finding of this research underscores the growing significance of soft employee skills and their ongoing development. Companies increasingly recognise the vital role that soft skills play within their organisations. Insight derived from the semi-structured interviews reveals a consensus among the observed companies, viewing this phenomenon as a noteworthy trend beneficial for both employees and employers. Consequently, this strategic shift enables companies to implement diverse training and development programmes to effectively foster soft skill development. The emphasis on cultivating soft skills among employees enhances individual job satisfaction and is a pivotal factor in boosting organisational motivation (Hartinger et al., 2021). As highlighted by Akla and Indradewa (2022), the interconnected nature of employee motivation and soft skills directly and positively affects individual performance, consequently contributing to the organisation's overall success. Our research comprehensively explored the significance of analysing and observing soft skills within the Central European region, using the Czech Republic as a noteworthy case study. Based on the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews, a comparative analysis revealed the optimal employee development directions for future success. The insight gained through these interviews offers valuable guidance on strategic choices for fostering individual and organisational growth.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to underline the evolution of employee development trends, highlighting the shift from a historical emphasis on hard skills to the contemporary importance placed on soft skills. While soft skills are now considered extremely important for companies, employees' hard skills remain valuable. The evolving landscape underscores the need for a balanced approach, recognising that soft skills enhance teamwork while hard skills provide the necessary technical foundation. Achieving harmony between the two ensures a well-rounded, high-performing workforce ready for collaborative and technically demanding tasks. The development of skills needed in European companies also shows the reduced interest of European companies in developing the skills specified in the CVTS survey. There is a declining interest in skills that were in demand only decades ago. This may indicate both the shift and importance of a complex approach and greater focus on other competencies. Nevertheless, there is an effort, for example, by the European Union to increase reskilling and upskilling, knowledge and especially key competencies (European Union, 2023).

The presented assertions find resonance in parallel studies, with Deloitte's 2017 research highlighting the burgeoning growth of jobs demanding robust soft skills. This foresight mirrors the strategic vision articulated by company F during the interview, outlining a trajectory where training and development investments tilt 70% towards soft skills and 30% towards hard skills. This strategic alignment encapsulates a nuanced understanding of the ongoing significance of soft and hard skills in shaping the dynamic contours of employee development. It underscores the intricate interplay between these skill sets, acknowledging their collective impact on

organisational resilience and success in a rapidly evolving professional landscape (Deloitte, 2017).

Moreover, in addition to the development of soft competencies, a notable emphasis on lifelong learning, continuous learning and employees taking ownership of their own development was identified in the interviews. This shift reflects the acknowledgment that the rapidly evolving landscape of the automotive industry requires individuals to stay abreast of new technologies, industry trends and changing customer expectations. Companies are increasingly fostering a culture that encourages employees to proactively seek out learning opportunities, both formal and informal, to adapt to the dynamic nature of the sector. This proactive approach to learning aligns with the broader industry push towards agility, adaptability and a workforce that can readily embrace innovation and change. As the automotive landscape continues to evolve, the cultivation of a learning mindset becomes pivotal in ensuring that employees remain well-equipped to navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Even though our research makes a tangible contribution to the disclosure of the topic of employee training and development in the automotive industry following global trends, it has several limitations. Firstly, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted, which is relatively little given employment in the Czech automotive sector. Secondly, the qualitative primary data study and secondary data review only target one selected sector of the economy and do not represent the current situation in other economic sectors. Thirdly, we mainly paid attention to Central European countries, and therefore, the results obtained cannot be generalised to the entire global automotive industry. Considering the above, conducting a quantitative study in the Czech Republic and other countries of the European Union can greatly enrich and increase the understanding of trends in the further development of employee competency profiles. Comparing trends in employee training and development in other industries and testing the statistical relationship between the required employee competency profile and the industrial sector is one of the possible directions of future research.

The analysis of current and future competencies and trends within the automotive industry provides crucial insight for managers, researchers and HR professionals. Understanding the dynamic landscape and the skills in demand empowers stakeholders to make informed decisions regarding human capital development, training initiatives and strategic planning. This comprehensive awareness is fundamental for not only cultivating a workforce proficient in existing requirements but one that is also poised to navigate forthcoming transformations and challenges. In the automotive sector, where technological advancements and market dynamics shape the industry, staying attuned to evolving competencies ensures a workforce that is not just competent but also resilient and adaptable to the industry's ever-evolving demands.

Conclusion

The research presented herein underscores the dynamic nature of contemporary Central European markets. This dynamism necessitates a keen focus on securing and retaining adept and loyal employees, recognised as fundamental to business viability. Consequently, it becomes imperative to assess existing competencies while gauging the trajectory of future skill requirements, aligning with market competitors. Central Europe, notably entrenched in automotive industries, witnesses significant developmental strides, particularly in employee expertise. Hence, diligent monitoring of industry trends and continuously enhancing of employee competencies become paramount.

The research underscores the significance of fostering employee competencies while delineating future trajectories for automotive enterprises. The identified vital competencies serve as foundational benchmarks for extant businesses, guiding the initiation of diverse channels within employee development programmes and evaluating their qualification pathways. Moreover, contemporary managers can make use of these competencies to steer their workforce towards future opportunities. Concurrently, this study offers the academia valuable insights by addressing the research gap concerning employee development in the automotive domain.

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