

HUMAN RESOURCES INTEGRATION METHODS USED IN BIG ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE PROJECTS

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the scientific basis for an appropriate selection of human resources integration methods by considering the socio-psychological aspects (“soft factors”). The focus of this paper is the presentation and analysis of methods used for human resources integration (such as the introductory text, check-list, storytelling, and action learning), which support properly the individual employee integration (after being transferred and integrated in a new organizational context due to a merger and acquisition process). The case study used demonstrates a feasible way to establish the most adequate human resources integration method. This is achieved by analysing adequate benefits when applying the human resources integration methods in organizational practice. It is shown that psychologically oriented integration methods have the most benefits and the adequate design of the human resources integrated methods have to be aligned with the characteristics of the M&A project.

Keywords: complexity management, merger and acquisition (M&A), change management, human resources integration

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's new economy, corporations are increasingly facing new challenges. Escalating competition in a globalized market, shrinking corporate resources, maturing markets, rapid shifts in technology, the recruitment, retention of talented and skilled people are just a few of these challenges. In addition corporations are constricted by the need to show short-term results no matter what circumstances exist. The pressure for month-to-month increases can be overwhelming. Organizational dynamics is well recognized not only by practitioners, but also by scientists. Dynamics is determined by the external environment change (actors and the relations between them is in continuous change) together with the organization's internal environment changes (related to all company's fields as: production, operations, financial-accounting, research and development, human resources, information and communication system etc.). In addition, the organizational change approaches (including the related processes and activities) are often assimilated with a complex project management approach.

In this context, the merger and acquisitions (M&A) and outsourcing processes are high complex projects, and one of the most difficult approaches is related to human resources change management aspects. The project management perspective has to be considered as useful and necessary in this case (Stoltenberg & Heerlen, 2009, p. 1). This represents a crucial competitive factor (Krebs, 2009, p. 43). Besides the legal and labour aspects the receiving company has to face the challenge to use appropriate human resources methods and tools to integrate the new staff with the new organizational context.

The basis for the qualified implementation of the human resources and the integration methods that could be applied are always based on the needs assessment, which relies on the human resources evaluation and investigation by the company. Because of the tight time frames specific to the M&A projects the individual needs assessment is only possible in a very limited form. Aspects concerning the individual, such as infringement of the psychological contract, the employee's lacking commitment towards the company and the lack of company identification are only occasionally taken into consideration in practice by some prestigious consulting firms.

The focus of this paper is the debate and identification of human resources methods and tools, which support a proper individual employee integration (in the case of those human resources transferred and integrated in a new organizational context). In order to find the appropriate methods for human resources integration, models from different socio-economic fields, such as change management, labour and organisation psychology or human resources management were taken into consideration. In the context of the research only the "soft factors" (socio-psychological) that positively affect the transferred human resources and support their integration process in the new organizational context have been considered. "Tough factors" as remuneration policy and working time flexibility were not included in the research approach.

It has been recognized that the M&A management encompasses the process and the result of the strategically motivated purchase, respectively the merger of companies or parts of a company and their subsequent integration or resale. Connected to this is a transfer of authority in ways of leadership, power of control and of disposition (Writs, 2003, p. 12). The main target of the M&A projects is the sustainable safeguarding and increasing of the company value as well as of its competitive position (Schramm & Hans Meyer, 2011, p. 5).

Till the year 2000, publications of different scientist and practitioners on the M&A transactions implementation success evaluation have underlined that the desired targets and effects were often not achieved (Unger, 2007, p. 874). According to (Unger, 2007, p. 875) research, only 30% of the analysed 232 M&A transactions improve their return on sales and actually only 21% have achieved an enhancement in value on the stock exchange. More recent studies prove that the currently evaluated transactions were more successful than those at the beginning of the nineties (Unger, 2007, p. 875). The recognizable and decisive factor is sustainability built upon M&A competences and adapted to strategic focus (Hornell, 2010, p. 107). Unger has observed through a research results survey, that both the strategy definition phase and the post-merger-integration phase are of particular importance for the M&A success (Unger, 2007, p. 875). The key here is being especially the overcoming of cultural differences as well as mastering the integration process effectively (Unger, 2007, p. 876).

In order to evaluate the performed personnel instruments, a corporate study was performed in a large company during 2013. The results have not been published for reasons of confidentiality but will be described in detail hereinafter: The evaluation assignment means the assessment of selected personnel instruments regarding their benefit for the integration process of the new employees in a M&A situation. As the study was conceived as an evaluation of the results, it shows the extent to which the personnel instruments have generated changes (output) and the degree to which these instruments have contributed to success (intervention) (Gollwitzer & Jager, 2009, p. 26).

The human resources methods used were individually assessed and they are part of the employees' integration program. The detailed analysis was performed within the evaluation of changes. The method of retro-gnosis will be applied, by comparing the current situation (the moment of evaluation) to a moment from the past (the employee's first day in the new organizational context) with regard to quantity and/or quality. Based on the personnel instruments applied in practice an empiric study will be performed with the help of a structured interview.

2. HUMAN RESOURCES ASPECTS IN M&A PROJECTS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Human resources aspects

Typical phases of the M&A project are: (1) strategy analysis and concept phase (pre-merger phase); (2) transaction phase (merger phase); (3) integration phase (post-merger phase). This three-phase model describes the perspective of the buying company. Hereby the chronological order is not rigid; each phase may overlap with another (Piehler, 2007, p. 15). The transaction process and the merging of the organization during the integration phase are crucial for success (Kaltenbacher, 2011, p. 17). Furthermore, according to (Unger, 2007, p. 880) a study there has been underlined that the top management has turned their attention towards other issues too early during this phase and has left the tasks in hand to the middle management. As a frequent consequence, the human resources oriented aspects have not been prioritised enough. Especially aspects related to human resources integration have been discovered as very important for the success of the M&A process (Horzella, 2010), since the human factor is the key element of know-how, engagement and identification with the company are either the reason or the decisive element in a successful takeover process (Kienbaum, 2010, p. 64).

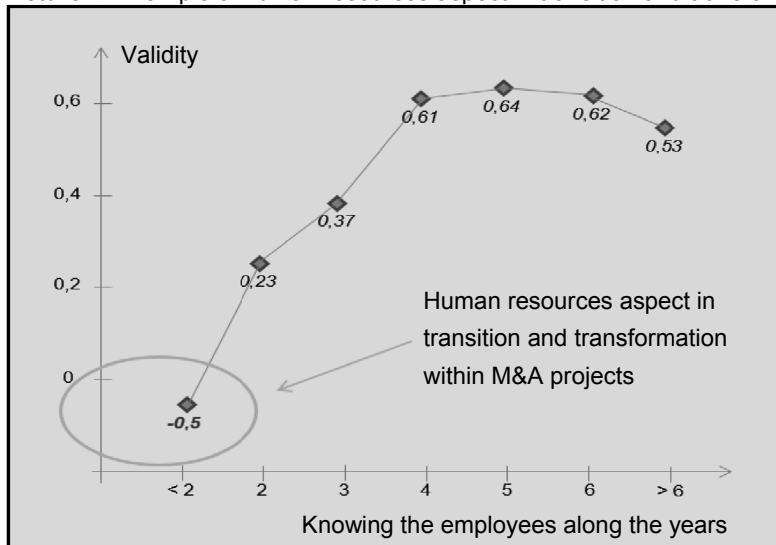
Merger syndrome

On the M&A situation, sale of companies or similarly, the human resources processes are particular challenges for management; they represent the central factor of success within the resource oriented approach (Faller, 2006, p. 15). The major importance of the staff in the present is to be attributed to the difficulty in substituting staff, due to their increasing specialisation and customer focus (Nagel, 2003, p. 369). Furthermore, staff is important because the fusion can be successful only when the employees are willing to cooperate with their new workmates (Nagel, 2003, p. 369). Beyond that highly qualified employees cannot be replaced in the short term, as they are rather scarce within M&A projects (Faller, 2006). In the same context, employees are sometimes the main actors of the failure of many M&A projects. Reasons therefore can be: organisational incompatibility, dwindling productivity or flight of skilled personnel and executives to the competition (Picot et al., 2000, p. 64).

Furthermore, an error analysis within the post-merger management shows that the insufficient integration of the personnel with 31 % can be considered in this case, that is the greatest error, but other errors, like ineffective communication strategy (27%), a focus on costs instead of growth (19%), bad planning of the integration process (18%), insufficient observance of organizational culture (17%), high losses of know-how through human resources fluctuation (14%) and a lack of career planning and perspective (13%), are directly or indirectly related to human resources management aspects. It becomes obvious that especially the integration of the staff and the internal communication with all categories of human resources is of vital importance. These central points are to be identified with success factors, which is why the corporate management should manage them in a precautionary way and in a targeted fashion (Unger, 2007, p. 877). A modern human resources management should assist the company in the merger process, to raise its awareness for the needs of change, increasing thus its ability to learn (Kienbaum, 2010, p. 4). Therefore it is necessary to identify and to foster key human resources, to avoid drain of know-how (Deller & Klendauer, 2008, p. 40). In order to improve human resources integration in the company, to raise the staff's satisfaction and the fluctuation rate, carefully selected personnel instruments should be applied and harmonised (Unger, 2007, p. 891).

The challenge and the difficulty of M&A situations resides in the fact that the assessment of the human resources development is very difficult to achieve because of the narrow time frame allotted in the merger phase (very low validity). (Schuler, 2007) brings this in the connection within the scope of the organisational psychological research, as it can be seen in Picture 1.

Picture 1: Example of human resources aspect in transition and transformation within M&A projects



Source: Schuler, 2007, p. 327.

Psychological and/or inner contract of the employee during the merger phases

A general definition of the term *psychological contract* is not yet available in literature (Daser, 2009, p. 133). Nevertheless, one can resort to the manifold characterisations and attempts of defining this type of contract. Ringlsetter and Kaiser (2008, p. 166) advance the following definition: “the psychological contract is defined as a contractual relationship, which comprises the perception of the mutual expectations and obligations within the employee-employer relationship”.

The psychological contract underlies the assumption, that not all relevant areas and aspects of an employment relationship can be covered by a formal labour agreement (Daser, 2009, p. 134). For the employee, besides the bonuses secured by contract, there have to be considered other important factors, too: the working conditions, the regulation of the intensity of labour, appreciation, opportunities to influence the organisation, support from the employer, as well as security against excessive overload or under-load (Litscke et al., 2012).

The daily interaction of the employee with his workmates and superiors creates a *net* of mutual expectations (Daser, 2009, p. 133). Psychological contracts usually include the following features: an informal agreement not recorded in writing concluded between an employee and the company; the expectations with the regard to the granted incentives and the demanded loads; the expectations that were generated, anticipated and recorded by the employee; it is grounded on monetary, socio-emotional and value-based considerations (Ringlsetter & Kaiser, 2008, p. 169).

This compliance based on the literature review is referred to the psychological contracts as *implicit agreements*. While the employee is granted a series of rights through the psychological contract, the employer is interested in the employee’s emotional commitment to the company and to enhance his motivation to devote himself to the organisation (Daser, 2009, p. 133).

The psychological contract will be stabilised by the fair balance between rights and obligations within the employment relationship, thus indirectly developing its efficiency. As this type of contract is taken as a basis of the employee-employer commitment, its breaching is of particular importance. Furthermore, if the employee should be convinced that certain rights are refused to him despite the performance of his duties and if he defines the relationship as being unfair, the psychological contract is breached (Daser, 2009, p. 133). In case of companies reorganisation or M&A processes the danger of such breaches of the psychological contract is very high (Ringlsetter & Kaiser, 2008, p. 157).

The employees' reactions differ from an individual to another, as one and the same situation can be subjectively differently perceived. Depending on preference order and personal value systems, the effects upon the psychological contract and consequently upon the commitment may vary considerably (Daser, 2009, p. 138).

Commitment

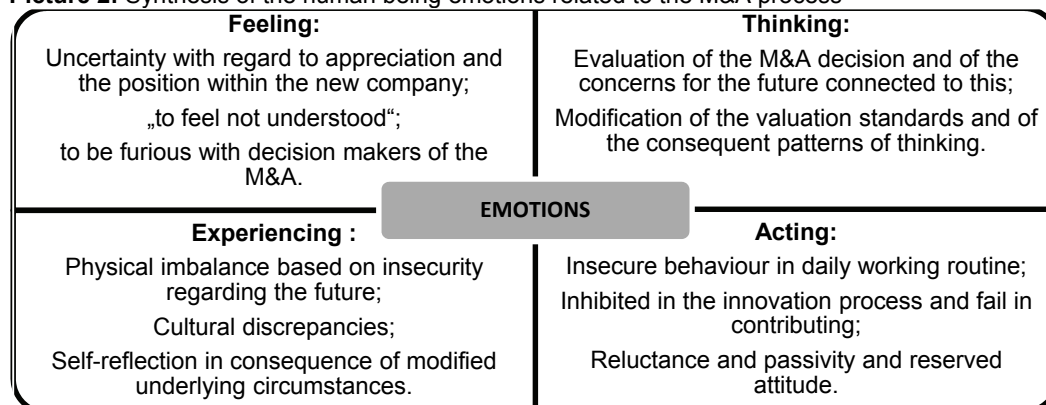
The concept of commitment can be interpreted as a form of engagement, diligence or also, as bond or attachment (Gabor, 2011, p. 29). The status of the commitments describes the relationship between a person and a company (Ringlsetter & Kaiser, 2008, p. 157) and accordingly the intensity this person feels bound and appurtenant to the organisation or its parts (v. Dick, 2004, p. 3). According to Allen and Meyer's approach three forms of commitment can be distinguished: (1) *affective commitment* which is a strong emotional bond of the employee to the organisation, as well as the feeling of belonging to the organisation as part of a family; (2) *normative commitment* that described a moral-ethical bond of the employees to the organisation, (3) *sequel-based commitment* which is a cost-related bond to the organisation, referring to costs which may occur in the case of an employee leaving the company (e.g. by relocation or loss of position) (Allen & Meyer, 1990; v. Dick, 2004, p. 3). Persons with an affective commitment on emotional grounds remain within the organisation because they personally believe in it and want this. Employees having a normative commitment remain within the organisation out of moral obligation because they personally believe in it and want this, too. Eventually employees, who remain within the organisation because of a sequel-based commitment, rely on rational reasons because they have to (Moser, 1996, p. 45). A positive commitment on the employees' side will therefore be a factor of success and competitiveness (Krebs, 2009, p. 44).

Employees' commitment has a positive effect on the company's internal environment, as it triggers a higher productivity and proficiency, less absence and an increasing diligence within the organisation. The strongest effect of the presented components is that of the affective commitment. According to (Ringlsetter & Kaiser, 2008, p. 158), two objectives are to be taken into consideration: (a) enhancement of the engagement by exploiting individual potentials; (b) increase of bonding effects and avoidance of fluctuation.

Emotional basis of the involved parties

There is hardly a concept of human resources integration, where issues like *merger syndrome* and *emotional viruses* do not focus the discussions. Frequently these phenomena are visualised by the iceberg-model, which shows approximately 80% under water surface as hidden soft factors or *immaterial reality*. Precisely in M&A situations, this large hidden part of the company reality could be considered as a unique challenge (Ringlsetter & Kaiser, 2008, p. 171). Modern brain research shows that there is no more emotional creature than the human being, who is largely dominated by emotions. By psychological definition there are four transitional internal dimensions of the human being that could be particularised in the case of a M&A process, as: feeling, thinking, experiencing and acting (Breuer & Frot, 2012, p. 39). For a better understanding of the emotional dimensions, Picture 2 presents them in synthesis.

Picture 2: Synthesis of the human being emotions related to the M&A process



Source: Breuer & Frot, 2012, p. 41.

The action of proper dealing with emotions is very important for the change management, since processes of change always come along with vivid feelings: from anxiety and reactance over anger

and rage up to engagement and enthusiasm (as has been recognized by Winfried Berner and his team in: Berner, 2006). According to the modern neuroscience approaches there can be distinguished between positive and negative emotions. Persons in a *positive emotion* are more creative, cooperative and are rather prone to find integrative solutions: they unconditionally help, they act without first thinking at their own interests or at costs and other disadvantages (Breuer & Frot, 2012, p. 41). *Negative emotions* on the other hand induce stress and frustrations (Köppel, 2007, p. 84). Organisational stress factors, such as uncertainty in staffing, which inevitably appears during reorganisation, have a strong effect in this context (Breuer & Frot, 2012, p. 54).

The merger syndrome in the emotional environment

The term merger syndrome is debated by the scientists in the field of organisation psychology as a matter of behaviour which may appear as a reaction of the merger projects development. The best known behaviour attributes are: inhibition, increase of times absent, stress reactions, loss of identity, internal dismissal, lack of orientation and reduced loyalty. At the company level the merger syndrome makes employees themselves felt especially in a sharp decline, in the output and an obvious increase of the fluctuation rate (Breuer & Frot, 2012, p. 54).

2.2. Methods used for human resources integration

In almost all midsize and larger companies new employees are introduced in the company in accordance with the plan actions established by integration programs. For the purpose of the present research study, there have been selected four methods: two classical and two psychological oriented methods used in the human resources integration process. The selected methods showed the best adequacy for a large organization, as the research results from the year 2013 have underlined.

Introductory texts

These classical human resources integration method serve orientation purposes and contain basic and substantial information on the company (e.g. the corporate policy and history, mission statements, training and development opportunities, working hours and social services). These are individually structured and dimensioned, depending on the type and size of the company and on other available information. The advantage of this method consists in information absorption without a direct feedback to be expected or necessary from the newly hired employee.

Check-lists

As another classical method used for accelerating the human resources integration but in a structured way is the check-list. It consists of the necessary steps to introduce a new employee to the new working environment, and elements that have to be considered (checked) such as the application for data access to the enterprise information technology systems, but also general data like contact persons, time registration and corporate structure. The advantage for the new employee is that she/he has a defined guideline for the administrative dominant topics that could be very useful during the integration process.

Storytelling

This psychologically oriented method is a narrative method, which makes certain issues easier to understand as the participants are asked to tell stories about their daily working routine. The Storytelling method considers human resources in the centre of project processes. Some successful users of this method emphasize as a matter of priority the emotional effect of storytelling, other primarily point out the knowledge content of the proffered stories. Storytelling means to use stories in a conscious, purposeful and skilful manner in order to convey important contents, to sustainably support the audience's learning and creative thinking, spreading of ideas, to encourage intellectual involvement thus adding a new quality to the organization's internal communication.

Action learning

Another psychologically oriented method links the experience and wisdom gained and the learning process to solve real problems within a company. For this perspective, the work processes to attend properly the established tasks and the learning processes must be well geared to each other and there must be enough time for reflection and knowledge, wisdom accumulation. Action learning follows the general assumption that development is only possible by self-development. The participants learn from complex holistic activities that are associated with solving problems in association with intensive brains confrontations, but also feelings and will, believe and the whole employees' personalities'

interactions. Since this method does not rely on fiction problems but on real challenges for the company, it can purposefully be used for topics directly linked to the M&A situation. It is highly recommended that established employees should work together with new ones in the context of the method exploitation.

2.3. Preliminary conclusions

The selected human resources integration methods will differ from a company to another by considering their practical implementation. Factors of difference are the specifics of business line and the company environment, the experience already gained in similar situations in the company's history, the M&A project objectives and the interests of management representatives who are in charge with the M&A project and human resources assessment. In the following research it will be analysed in a case study what the most adequate human resources integration method is to apply in a company during a M&A process.

3. CASE STUDY – A WAY TO ESTABLISH THE MOST ADEQUATE HUMAN RESOURCES INTEGRATION METHOD

3.1. The research methodology

In the context of the article the research results of a survey based on questionnaire developed in a large company (800 employees) are presented, in order to evaluate the efficiency and the benefit of the performed human resources integration methods. The research context is related to the M&A projects in which the large company was involved and during which many new employees had to be integrated in the new organizational environment.

The company that benefits from the human resources allocation (receiving staff) has to face persistently the huge challenge to integrate these new employees in the existing organisational environment with the support of the target-oriented personnel methods. The integration process has to be developed within only a few months. It should be noted that the new employees are totally unknown, except for some key data, as for instance wage, age and level of education.

The relevant evaluation criterion for the human resources integration methods is the successful transfer and integration of human resources that could be described by: the extent to which the selected human resources integration methods are qualified for application; the extent to which the employees' integration will be supported; the possibility to transfer in practice the knowledge mediated by the human resources integration methods.

The human resources integration methods have been individually assessed by calculation of the benefit quotient (NQ), which represents the ratio of the benefit and the implementation costs (investments) of a specific method, expressed in percentage.

The evaluated aspect of the benefits and effects of all human resources integration methods are adopted from the Jahn and Hofstetter's model (2008) and the components of this model are described in Picture 1. The *satisfaction benefit* describes the employees' degree of satisfaction with the scheduling, performing and post-processing of the applied human resources integration methods. The *learn benefit* describes the degree of achieving the learning goals during the human resources integration methods has been performed. In this context, knowledge acquisition triggers cognitive changes focussing on declarative knowledge.

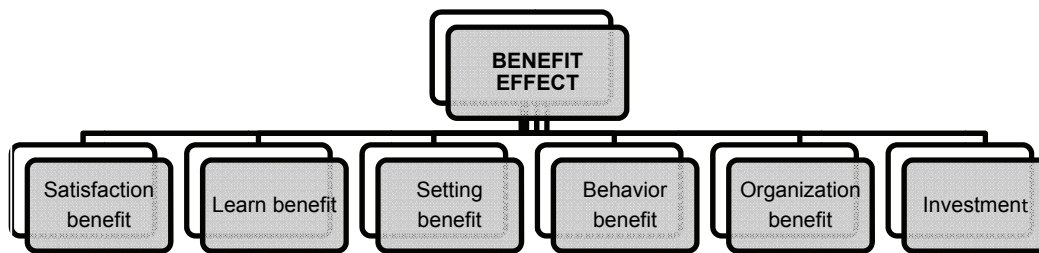
The *setting benefit* describes the degree of positive changes in the transferred employee's individual attitude towards the new organisation (during his/her integration process). In addition to the knowledge acquisition process, this dimension describes the transferred employee's personal attitude towards the basic working conditions, the specific work content and the methods (in the sense of willing).

The *behaviour benefit* describes the degree of positive changes in the employee's individual behaviour within the new organisational context. The individual's social behaviour and social action have priority in the integration and harmonization process within the new organisational culture.

The *organisation benefit* describes the degree of employee's contribution to the process or activity improvement by his/her active, purposeful and effective participation in the new organisation. In this category are included cognitive and motivational aspects and the employee's ability to cope with altered basic organisational circumstances and to transfer his/her experience, expertise, the way of thinking and acting in the organisation's processes.

The *investment* dimension holds a special position in the research because the respondents (employees) were not able to provide information about this aspect. Within the investigation all investments (in terms of costs, expenditures that occurred) have been estimated based on various perspectives and were valued with the actual costs per employee in each case of the human resources integration method that was evaluated.

Picture 1: Variables considered for the satisfaction, benefit, effect evaluation



Source: Jahn & Hofstetter, 2008, p. 16.

From benefit and effects dimensions described in Picture 1, the appropriate criteria were derived in order to define the survey structure and the questionnaire used in the research.

The questionnaire contains one evaluation question for each benefit and effect dimension that have to be answered in the context of each human resources integration method (altogether 70 closed questions, with one valid answer at a time define the questionnaire). The answers are collected by a interval scale with the clearance of 1. The selection criteria for the interviewees resided with the Human Resources, which has selected the subjects within a partial survey.

At the time of the investigation, (data collection period) the subjects that were interviewed have been employed for about one year in the new organisation. The interviews were conducted as a bilateral, individually designed and in a open atmosphere. The *investment* dimension was not evaluated by the questionnaire and through the employees collected opinion, but it was estimated together with Human Resources Management Department within the large company where the research survey have been developed.

In the research sample, three relevant groups of employees were investigated: the first group of five employees, who have already passed through the integration process; the second group of five superiors related to the first group employees; the third group that consists of employees of the Human Resources Management Department that were responsible with the design and implementation of the human resources integration policies and the associated methods. In a first research phase, all participants were introduced to the goal and the problems related to the interview and they were subsequently questioned (structured interviews).

3.2 Research results analysis and findings

The research results are presented after the questionnaire answers (in the case of different types of employees involved in the research sample). Furthermore, the research results were grouped in order to characterize each selected human resources integration method (presented earlier) from a practical perspective. Table 1 presents a synthesis of the research results and the calculations done.

Table 1: Averaged overall of all interviewees

Personnel instruments	Dimensions							
	Satisfaction benefit	Learning benefit	Setting benefit	Behaviour benefit	Organization benefit	Total score	Investment value	NQ %
Introduction writings	8	5	6	4	5	28	150,00 €	18,67
Checklists	7	6	4	5	6	28	165,00 €	16,97
Storytelling	4	8	8	8	6	34	650,00 €	5,23
Action Learning	4	9	8	9	6	36	690,00 €	5,22

Classic personnel instruments
 Psychologically oriented instruments

As it can be seen in Table 1, in the case of the analysis of the *introductory texts* the satisfaction benefit dimension shows the highest values. The introductory texts definitively support the relevant contents to become acquainted with and to understand them. With regard to act safe and free of fear this is of great importance. The more unknown the target company is and the more it differs from the former organisation their importance increases.

In the case of the *check-list* analysis (Table 1), the satisfaction benefit dimension ranks first. On the grounds of the multitude of initially operative and administrative challenges within a large organisation, the benefit of providing a structured check-list will be emphasized in particular. The employees are definitely aware of the fact that active participation in a new organisation becomes possible only when the appropriate access to the enterprise information technology system, communication opportunities and other topics are regulated. With the check-list method application, the employee expressed their confidence when using this method.

As can be seen in Table 1, in the case of the *storytelling* analysis there have been identified highest values of the NQ indicator for the dimensions of: learning, setting and behaviour benefits. The multitude and the individuality of the versions developed during the design phase for this method is reflected in the answers given that reveal high values. When the storytelling method has been performed, not only content topics are transmitted to a high degree, it also serves as orientation regarding existing value patterns and cultural aspects in the new organisation. Of a great interest in this context is the low value in satisfaction benefit that is to be interpreted in the manner that unlike the classical methods (as the introductory text and the check-list are) in this case the employees are not anticipated to have proper expectations.

In the case of the analysis of the *action learning*, there has been registered the value 9 for the dimensions: learning and behaviour benefits that show the employee's perception when the method is applied. The positive values are related to the effect that the employee may act in simulation of a specific problem; thus a multi-dimensional reflection of his/her own perception when interacting with the new organizational context is developed. The specific situations clearly facilitate the strengthening of the commitment towards the organisation and the development of a positive psychological attitude of the new employee in contract with the new organisation.

3.3 Preliminary conclusions

The results show the effects as adequate benefits when applying the human resources integration methods in organizational practice. The classical instruments, as the introductory text and the check-list support the employees especially in their orientation and overcoming uncertainties in the new company. It is therefore recommended that these methods should be applied very early in the human resources integration process. The psychologically oriented human resources tools (as the storytelling and the action learning methods) are adequate to be implemented by taking into consideration their medium-time and long-term effects. Furthermore, they should be performed later in the human resources integration process, because a negative influence in the form of uncertainties and fears in the case of new employees could appear.

4. CONCLUSION

Psychologically oriented human resources integrated methods definitively support on long term the employees' satisfaction during their integration phase and have a major contribution in the avoidance of the merger syndrome. The research presented there demonstrates that the adequate design of the human resources integrated methods have to be aligned with the characteristics of the M&A project. Of great importance are an early scheduling and a permanent assessment of the measures taken in respect to the involved employees, as well as to create an appreciative and supportive culture, in order to pay appropriate attention to the new employees' integration.

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