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# APPROACH TO INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS IN WORKPLACE AND WORK ENGAGEMENT

## Introduction

Conflict in companies can have various underlying reasons concerned with the work itself, the organization or interpersonal relationships. They involve parties representing various interests of groups, superiors, and subordinates or equal parties in a work relationship [Pondy, 1967; Rahim, 2001]. Conflicts take over 20% of managers' working hours regardless of their position in the organizational structure and hierarchy [De Dreu et al., 2003].

Despite the fact that conflicts are normal at work and they cannot be eliminated altogether, it is worth stressing that they cause an array of negative phenomena in the employees that are brought into them, such as depression and lowered self-esteem [Frone, 2000]. Other negative effects of conflict are stress, psychosomatic problems, and burnout. This is especially the case when conflict is interpersonal in character [De Dreu et al., 2004]. Conflicts also influence one's willingness to change a job [Bergmann, Volkema, 1994].

De Dreu and Weingart [2003] carried out a meta-analysis of studies on interpersonal conflicts and concluded that they always negatively affect job satisfaction of the conflict participants. Research on Polish employees offered conclusions suggesting that good atmosphere and good relations with the co-workers, respectively, were of greatest importance among the sources of job satisfaction [Sypniewska, 2014]. Conflict, in turn, has a devastating impact on both working atmosphere and relationships with the co-workers. Moreover, work engagement is also hard to achieve when unresolved conflicts come into play.

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\* Tomasz Gigol, Ph.D. – SGH Warsaw School of Economics.

Therefore, the author of this article found it to be an interesting research problem to examine the correlations between the preferred conflict management method in the workplace and the staff's work engagement. We sought for the correlations between work engagement and the most frequent way of managing conflict in the workplace. Additionally, the influence of these phenomena on job satisfaction was examined.

## 1. Conflict in an organization

During the conflict's research, its definition has been expanding. Conflict can be the result of incompatible objectives or disagreements that arise in response to the distribution of limited resources [Schmidt, Kochan, 1972]. Conflict understood in these terms unfolds according to the zero-sum game where one party in a conflict must lose in order for the other to gain something. Thomas [1976] concluded, however, that for conflict to emerge, the presence of an incompatibility of goals is not necessary and it is enough for one party in conflict to perceive a negative (and not necessarily real) influence of the other party on something that the first party wants. For conflict to be provoked, it is actually enough for the other party to only just be intending to exert this negative influence.

Conflict is defined even more broadly by Rahim [2002] who claims that it is an "interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (e.g., individual, group, organization)". Conflicts may thus be of organizational, intergroup, and interpersonal nature; they can involve whole organizations, company sectors, groups of people or individuals [Wall, Callister, 1995].

### 1.1. Types and sources of conflict

The sources of organizational conflict usually regard: competition for limited resources, striving for autonomy or a discrepancy between the goals of different company sectors [Pondy, 1967; Rahim 2001]. Some organizational structures develop far-reaching autonomy and pursue their own goals by introducing their own norms of conduct as well as compete with the other units to a certain extent [Corwin, 1969]. Conflicts at work increasingly arise from the growing pressure to introduce changes and innovations and the necessity for employees to constantly adapt while simultaneously being more and more burdened but having no guarantee of employment [De Dreu, Gelfand, 2008].

Intergroup conflicts arise from human nature as humans are social creatures. The need for social identity makes people prefer inequality among groups – they favor their own groups and discriminate other. The aim of doing that is protection of social hierarchy and one's own position within it [Tajfel, Turner, 1979]. The key

factors influencing prejudices and escalation of intergroup conflict include: sense of group identity; size and strength of the group; perception of a threat to the group; asymmetry of perception of positive traits of the members of one's own group and negative traits of people from outside the group; personality; and individual differences among group members [Hewstone et al., 2002].

In turn, sources of interpersonal conflict differ depending on whether it is task or relationship conflict [Guetzkow, Gyr, 1954]. Task conflict is concerned with allocation of resources, procedures as well as opinions on or interpretation of facts and thus it is rooted in disagreement with the decisions and actions related to organization management. A large proportion of these conflict types is concerned with difficult situations that require organizational changes. The essence of task conflict is a dispute among group members arising from decisions that have been made and it is concerned with a difference of views or ideas [Jehn, 1995].

On the other hand, relationship conflict is related to values, viewpoints, behavior or tastes [De Dreu, Weingart, 2003]. It is an emotional conflict and usually gives rise to tensions, irritability, and resentment among group members [Jehn, 1995]. Task conflicts are mainly concerned with work or a task in contrast to relationship conflicts that focus on various issues not related to the task itself [Jehn, Bendersky, 2003].

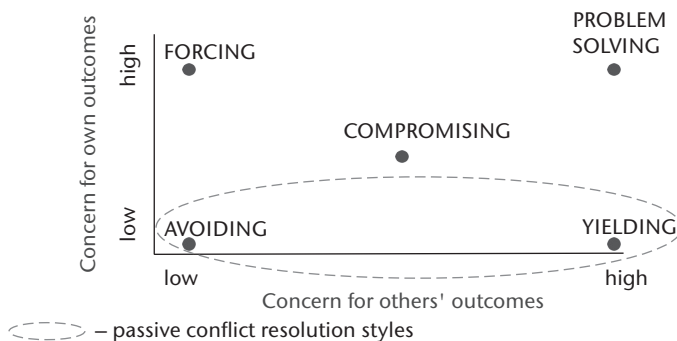
## 1.2. Conflict management styles

Conflict management is an attempt at tackling a conflict situation and selecting a coping strategy. The concepts of the participants' approach to conflict management described in the relevant literature are based on a matrix of two variables that set out four extremely different conflict resolution strategies. Kilmann and Thomas [1975] developed a matrix where the variables are assertiveness and willingness to cooperate. Depending on the intensity of a given variable, four fundamental conflict management styles unveil: avoiding (where willingness to cooperate is low and assertiveness is low); collaborating (where willingness to cooperate is high and assertiveness is high); competing (where willingness to cooperate is low but assertiveness is high), and accommodating (where willingness to cooperate is high but assertiveness is low). The fifth style of conflict management is located in the centre of the matrix. And the fifth one is called compromising where willingness to cooperate as well as assertiveness are average.

Rahim [1983] offered a somewhat different matrix of conflict management styles. The variables he focused on include: concern for oneself and concern for others. The styles in the resultant matrix are: avoiding (where concern for oneself and others is low), integrating (where concern for oneself and others is high), dominating (where concern for oneself is high but concern for others is low), obliging (where concern for oneself is low but concern for others is high), and compromising (where both concern for oneself and concern for others are average).

Another matrix of conflict management styles was developed by De Dreu et al. [2003] and was based on the following variables: concern for own outcome and concern for others' outcome. It is presented in Figure 1. The fundamental styles that unveil are: avoiding, yielding, problem solving, forcing, and compromising.

Figure 1. Conflict management. Dual concern model



Source: De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, De Best-Waldhober [2003], Dijkstra, De Dreu, Evers, Van Dierendonck [2009].

Dijkstra with a team [2009] indicate that both avoiding and yielding conflict management styles are passive approaches to conflicts, which has been marked with a dotted line in Figure 1. Passive approach to conflict causes high psychological tension and mental exhaustion, which leads to psychosomatic issues and occupational burnout. Whereas active approach to conflict, even including the forcing style, gives rise to much less negative reactions [Dijkstra et al., 2009].

### 1.3. Personal consequences of conflict

Personal consequences experienced by people taking part in interpersonal conflict, especially when they choose a suboptimal conflict resolution strategy, manifest themselves as negative phenomena such as stress, depression, lowered self-esteem, psychosomatic problems, and burnout [Frone, 2000]. Negative personal effects occur along with both types of interpersonal conflict though they are more intense during relationship conflict [De Dreu et al., 2004]. Interpersonal conflict also negatively affects sharing knowledge among employees [Lu et al., 2011].

## 2. Work engagement, job satisfaction

Work engagement can be understood in several ways. Kahn [1990] sees it as a link between one's occupational role and identity. Schaufeli et al. [2002] believe that engagement is a sense of high energy and vigor combined with identifying with one's job. According to Britt, the essence of engagement is the sense of responsibility for one's job [Britt, 1999]. Whereas Maslach and her co-workers [2001] claim that engagement is at the polar extreme of occupational burnout.

In line with Schaufeli and his co-workers' proposal [2002], "engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption". Vigor is perceived as experiencing a high level of energy and readiness to make an effort at work. It also combines with the willingness to carry out the assigned work even in the face of obstacles and difficulty. Dedication to work is the enthusiastic approach to working and having a sense that it is important and taking pride in it. Absorption in work is a state of increased concentration and involvement in work while still having the possibility to stop doing it. An engaged employee can assiduously work for a long time, enjoy his work, and not turn into a workaholic or face job burnout [Schaufeli et al., 2008].

Job satisfaction is defined as an employee's emotional reaction to work consisting in comparing the desirable results with the actual outcomes [Cranny et al., 1992]. Job satisfaction understood in these terms is an employee's internal and subjective feeling related to their expectations towards work. Other definitions broaden the understanding of satisfaction and talk about it not only in terms of positive and negative feelings but also attitudes related to the employee's occupational duties [Vroom, 1964].

Job satisfaction is connected with work engagement and these terms overlap to some extent [Schaufeli, Bakker, 2010]. Although it is possible to experience job satisfaction in the absence of work engagement, there is no engagement without satisfaction [Schaufeli, Bakker, 2010]. Engagement is something more than satisfaction as it involves, for example, enthusiasm, alertness, and excitement [Schaufeli, Bakker, 2010].

## 3. Approach to conflict management versus work engagement

Research findings suggest that emotions experienced in a group play an important role in the process of conflict management. Conflict management styles oriented at cooperation are correlated with a positive intra-group emotional state, whereas conflict avoidance is correlated with exclusively negative emotions [Syna Desivilya, Yagil, 2005].

The results of this study indicate that emotional states occupy the central position when it comes to determining preferences as to intra-group conflict management.

Conflict management is shaped by the culture of conflict resolution in a given organization or part of it [Springs, 2015]. Active or passive conflict management is also dependent on the quality of leadership in a company or part of it [Gigol, Sypniewska, 2019]. Dijkstra et al. [2009] claim that passive approach to conflict management leads to occupational burnout which is the polar opposite to work engagement [Maslach et al., 2001]. Research results also demonstrate that relationship conflict depletes work engagement [Chen et al., 2011]. Hence the following hypothesis has been put forward.  
*H1 Active approach to interpersonal conflict management in the workplace positively influences work engagement.*

## 4. Approach to conflict management versus job satisfaction

De Dreu et al. [2004] found that avoiding conflict and yielding in the face of conflict, which are passive approaches to interpersonal conflict management, [Dijkstra et al., 2009] may negatively affect job satisfaction. When the burden of unsatisfied expectations becomes too heavy, job satisfaction lowers and the likelihood of displaying withdrawing behaviors or intentions to leave one's job increase [Egan et al., 2004]. In turn, other research findings show that the integrating style of conflict management, which is oriented at cooperation, is positively correlated with job satisfaction [Chan et al., 2006]. Chen with a team [2012] also concluded that the integrating and compromising conflict management styles are positively correlated with job satisfaction. Various researchers suggest that the level of conflict is a factor predicting job satisfaction [De Dreu et al., 2004; De Raeye et al., 2008]. Therefore, the hypothesis provided below has been formulated.

*H2 Active approach to interpersonal conflict management in the workplace positively influences job satisfaction.*

## 5. The study

### 5.1. Work engagement

The study of the respondents' work engagement was carried out with the use of the UWES 9 test – Utrecht Work Engagement Scale [Schaufeli et al., 2006; Schaufeli, 2013]. In Poland, there are also other versions of this questionnaire in use [Pollak et al., 2017].

Study involved 786 participants. Table 1 provides the frequency distribution of the respondents' age and sex. The majority of the respondents were between 20 and 29 years old. There were 66% women in the sample.

Table 1. Frequency distribution – participants' age and sex

Age of the respondents	Sex					
	female		male		total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
20–29 years old	405	77.6	169	64.0	574	73.0
30–39 years old	71	13.6	63	23.9	134	17.0
40–49 years old	34	6.5	27	10.2	61	7.8
50–60 years old	10	1.9	5	1.9	15	1.9
60 years old and above	2	4	0	0	2	3
Total	522	100	264	100	786	100

n – number of participants, % – percentage of the sample

Source: own study.

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of positions occupied by the respondents. The largest number of the respondents worked as experts.

Table 2. Frequency distribution – position occupied by the respondent

Position	n	%
Manager	144	18.3
Expert	198	25.2
Blue collar worker	102	13.0
White-collar worker	182	23.2
Trader	108	13.7
Other	50	6.4
No data	2	0.3
Total	786	100

n – number of participants, % – percentage of the sample

Source: own study.

In Table 3 illustrates the frequency distribution of the respondents' period of employment. The majority of the respondents have been working for a period of 1 to 3 years.

Table 3. Frequency distribution – respondents' period of employment

Period of employment on-the-job	n	%
No data	3	0.4
Less than a year	219	27.9
1–3 years	294	37.4
3–5 years	121	15.4
5–10 years	99	12.6
10 years and longer	50	6.4
Total	786	100

n – number of people; % – percentage share of the sample

Source: own study.

## 5.2. Conflicts in the workplace

Table 4 presents the frequency distribution of the respondents' approaches to conflict at work. The respondents could have selected more than one option. The majority of the participants in the study indicated collaboration as their preferred style of conflict management. Compromise was the second choice but third and fourth positions were taken by different forms of conflict avoidance (see Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency distribution – conflict management style at work

Conflict management style at work	n	%
Ignoring conflict	157	20.0
Pretending that everything will work out somehow	170	21.6
Backing out of conflict	120	15.3
Familiarizing with conflict	102	13.0
Collaborating in conflict resolution	278	35.4
Compromising	169	21.5
Fueling conflict situations	57	7.3

n – number of people; % – percentage share of the sample

Source: own study.

The respondents were divided into two groups. The first group comprised (n=300) respondents who indicated that their workplace was characterized by a passive approach to conflict (i.e., they only selected ignoring conflict, pretending that everything will work out somehow, or backing out from conflict). The second group comprised (n=453) people who indicated that an active approach was also present



in their workplace (i.e., they selected at least one of the three options: familiarizing with conflict, cooperating in conflict resolution or compromising).

### 5.3. Approach to conflict management in the workplace versus work engagement

Table 5 shows mean values and standard deviations of the indicators of work engagement in the group of employees in workplaces characterized by a passive approach to conflict and the group of employed in workplaces characterized by an active approach to conflict. The juxtaposition is supplemented with a test of statistical significance of differences.

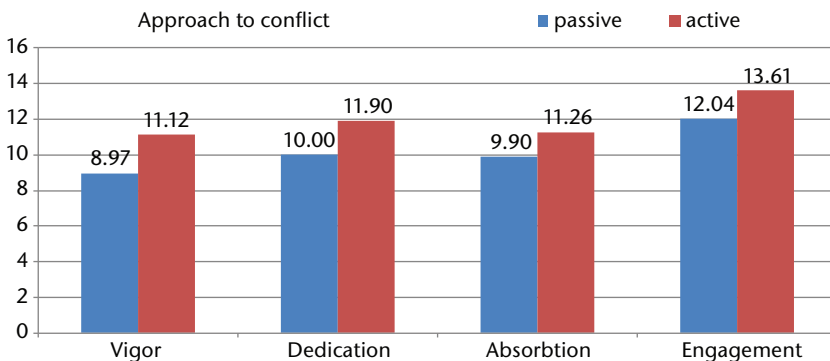
Table 5. Mean values of the work engagement indicators in the workplace characterized by passive conflict management and in the workplace characterized by active conflict management along with the statistical significance test results

Variables	Approach to conflict				Statistical test		
	passive		active		t	df	p
Vigor	8.97	4.24	11.12	4.05	-6.99***	750	0.001
Dedication	10.00	4.66	11.90	4.24	-5.67***	597.25	0.001
Absorption	9.90	4.49	11.26	4.28	-4.18***	751	0.001
Work engagement	12.04	3.73	13.61	3.51	-5.85***	751	0.001

t – test statistic; df – degree of freedom; p – two-tailed statistical significance; \*\*\* – p<0.001

Source: own study.

Figure 2. Mean values of the work engagement indicators in the workplace characterized by passive conflict management and in the workplace characterized by active conflict management



Source: own study.

Statistically significant differences among all work engagement indicators have been found. Mean values on these scales were high in the group of employees in the workplaces characterized by active conflict management (cf. Figure 2).

#### 5.4. Approach to conflicts in the workplace versus job satisfaction

Table 6 presents the frequency distribution of job satisfaction depending on the approach to conflict preferred in an organization. The juxtaposition was supplemented with the results of the independence test  $\chi^2$ . Statistically significant correlations are highlighted.

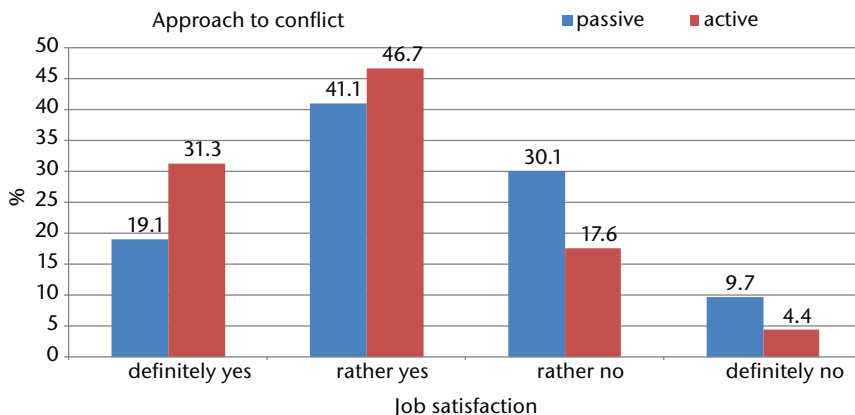
Table 6. Frequency distribution – job satisfaction depending on approach to conflict at work

Job satisfaction	Approach to conflict						Statistical test		
	Passive		Active		Total		$\chi^2$	df	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%			
Definitely yes	57	19.1	141	31.3	198	26.4	31.58***	1	0.001
Rather yes	123	41.1	210	46.7	333	44.5			
Rather not	90	30.1	79	17.6	169	22.6			
Definitely not	29	9.7	20	4.4	49	6.5			
Total	299	100	450	100	749	100			

n – number of people; % – percentage of the group;  $\chi^2$  – test statistics; df – degree of freedom; p – statistical significance; \*\* –  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* –  $p < 0.001$

Source: own study.

Figure 3. Percentage frequency distribution – job satisfaction depending on approach to conflict



Source: own study.

Statistically significant correlations between approach to conflict and job satisfaction have been discovered. Job satisfaction was greater in a group of people working in the organization characterized by active approach to conflict (cf. Figure 3).

### 5.5. The respondents' work engagement versus job satisfaction

Table 7 presents the Spearman's  $\rho$  coefficients of correlation between job satisfaction and the results achieved in work engagement scales. Statistically significant correlations are highlighted.

Table 7. Spearman's  $\rho$  coefficients of correlation between job satisfaction and the results achieved in work engagement scales

Work engagement	Job satisfaction	
	$\rho$	p
Vigor	0.598**	0.001
Dedication	0.701**	0.001
Absorption	0.602**	0.001
Engagement	0.588**	0.001

$\rho$  – Spearman's  $\rho$  coefficients of correlation; p – two-tailed statistical significance; \*\* –  $p < 0.01$

Source: own study.

Statistically significant positive correlations between job satisfaction and all the work engagement scales have been found.

## 6. Discussion

Hypothesis No. 1 has been confirmed. Active approach to interpersonal conflict management in the workplace influences work engagement. Statistically significant differences among all work engagement indicators have been found. Mean values on these scales were high in the group of people working in the workplaces characterized by active conflict management (see Table 4). Active conflict resolution style exerts the strongest influence on vigor. According to some researchers, vigor is the key factor in engagement. Shirom [2011] believes that vigor is the only pure factor in the concept of engagement that was adopted in this paper as it reflects the sense of physical strength, emotional power, and cognitive arousal.

The second hypothesis has also been confirmed in the course of the study. The number of people who chose the options "definitely yes" and "rather yes" in response to the question about job satisfaction was considerably higher in the case of the

respondents working in organizations characterized by active approach to conflict resolution (see Figure 4). It is an important finding due to the fact that studies on similar correlations were so far mainly carried out in Asia where approach to conflict is completely different than in our culture [Ting-Toomey et al., 1991].

Once again it has also been empirically demonstrated that the terms job satisfaction and work engagement are correlated (see Table 7). This may be significant in further conceptualizations of terminology related to employee attachment to their workplace.

## Conclusions

So far the literature on interpersonal conflict at work has been focused on its negative influence on employees or positive influence on the results of work as far as task conflict is concerned [Tjosvold, 2008]. This study has demonstrated a positive influence of active approach to interpersonal conflict resolution on employee work engagement. It is known from other sources that engaged employees who experience job satisfaction positively influence the results achieved by companies [Christian et al., 2011]. Thus, a postulated practical conclusion from the study is that active conflict management should be taught in training programs for managers and in academic courses for future managers. Simultaneously, it is worth conducting further more detailed studies on optimal conflict management methods used in the workplace and their influence over employee well-being.

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### Abstract

Interpersonal conflict at work causes negative consequences such as lowered self-esteem, stress or burnout that intensify when passive approach to conflict is preferred. Therefore, we decided to examine the correlations between the preferred method of conflict management in the workplace and work engagement. We formulated a hypothesis that an active approach to interpersonal conflict management in the workplace influences work engagement. We conducted a quantitative questionnaire study on a group of 786 respondents. As regards conflict

management, the theoretical basis was the dual concern model by de Dreu et al. [2003] supplemented by the papers by Dijkstra et al. [2009]. In the study, the concept of engagement by Schaufeli et al. [2002] was adopted. It seems that examination of conflict management methods in an organization as a factor that affects work engagement is pioneering and expands knowledge on work engagement. What is more, the influence of conflict management on job satisfaction and the intercorrelations between work engagement and job satisfaction were studied. A hypothesis concerning the influence exerted by the active approach to interpersonal conflict has been confirmed in research. A statistically significant influence of active conflict management over all work engagement components, that is, vigor, dedication, and absorption, was noticed. Examination of satisfaction, in turn, confirmed previous studies in this respect. Research results reinforce scepticism about the frequent conflict management style through avoiding or yielding. If employee engagement is a desirable state in an organization, active conflict management should not be disregarded. A postulated practical conclusion from the study is that active conflict management should be taught in training programs for managers and academic courses for future managers.

**KEYWORDS: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, WORK ENGAGEMENT, JOB SATISFACTION**

**JEL CLASSIFICATION CODES: J24, J28**

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## PODEJŚCIE DO KONFLIKTÓW INTERPERSONALNYCH W MIEJSCU PRACY A ZAANGAŻOWANIE W PRACĘ

### Streszczenie

Konflikt interpersonalny w pracy powoduje negatywne skutki, takie jak: obniżenie poczucia własnej wartości, stres czy wypalenie, które potęgują się, gdy preferuje się pasywne podejście do konfliktów. W związku z tym podjęto badanie zależności między preferowanym sposobem zarządzania konfliktem w miejscu pracy a zaangażowaniem w pracę. Sformułowano hipotezę, że aktywne podejście do konfliktów interpersonalnymi w miejscu pracy ma wpływ na zaangażowanie w pracę. Przeprowadzono ilościowe badania ankietowe na grupie 786 respondentów. Podstawą teoretyczną w zakresie zarządzania konfliktem był model dualnej troski de Dreu i in. [2003], uzupełniony o prace Dijkstry i in. [2009]. W badaniu przyjęto koncepcję zaangażowania Shaufeliego i in. [2002]. Wydaje się, że badanie metod zarządzania konfliktem w organizacji jako czynnika wpływającego na zaangażowanie w pracę jest pionierskie i stanowi wkład w wiedzę na temat zaangażowania w pracę. Ponadto zbadano wpływ zarządzania konfliktem na satysfakcję z pracy oraz interkorelacje między zaangażowaniem w pracę



a satysfakcją z pracy. Hipoteza o wpływie aktywnego podejścia do konfliktów interpersonalnych znalazła potwierdzenie w badaniach. Zanotowano istotny statystycznie wpływ aktywnego zarządzania konfliktem na wszystkie komponenty zaangażowania w pracę, tj. wigor, oddanie i zaabsorbowanie pracą. Natomiast badania nad satysfakcją potwierdziły wcześniejsze badania w tym zakresie. Wyniki badań wzmacniają sceptycyzm co do spotykanego stylu zarządzania konfliktem, przez jego unikanie lub uleganie. Skoro zaangażowanie pracowników jest stanem pożądanym w organizacji, to nie należy zapominać o aktywnym zarządzaniu konfliktem. Postulowanym praktycznym wnioskiem z badań jest uczenie aktywnego zarządzania konfliktem w programach szkoleniowych dla kierowników i w kształceniu akademickim przyszłych menedżerów.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: ZARZĄDZANIE KONFLIKTEM, ZAANGAŻOWANIE W PRACĘ, SATYSFAKCJA Z PRACY**

**KODY KLASYFIKACJI JEL: J24, J28**