



EMCC case studies

Networks, partnerships and corporate social responsibility in Poland: Autokreacja Association

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This case study is available in electronic format only.

Introduction

Poland is undergoing a fundamental process of industrial change and restructuring. For years, the country has had the highest level of unemployment in the European Union. In 1995, 15 major companies with offices in Poland, including Sheraton of the Starwood Hotel Group and British Petroleum (BP), have joined forces in an attempt to combat the country's high levels of unemployment. The companies have united under an initiative called the Autokreacja programme, headed by the Autokreacja Association and supported by the International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF). This programme is based on a network of companies and partnerships with local labour offices and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and has proven successful in its approach to helping unemployed people secure a new job.

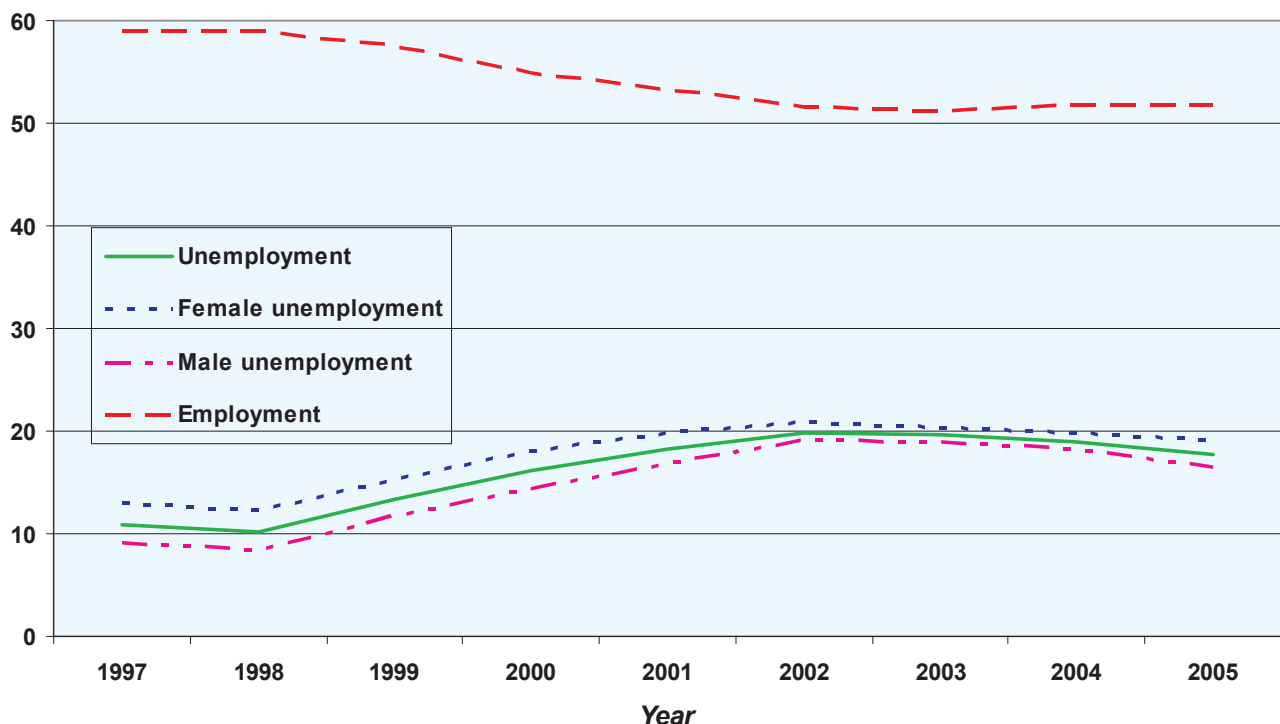
Corporate social responsibility is a central concept in the Autokreacja programme. This makes it one of the few projects in central and eastern European countries in which corporate strategies on social responsibility are put into practice in an effective, visible and inclusive manner. The Autokreacja programme represents an interesting and innovative solution in the struggle to reduce unemployment in Poland, whether it is related to the restructuring of specific companies or the need for regional development.

This case study sets out the employment situation in Poland and the country's approach to restructuring, providing the socioeconomic context for the analysis of the Autokreacja programme. It then goes on to describe the development, implementation and results of the innovative Autokreacja programme in Poland.

Unemployment in Poland

Following years of high unemployment levels (19.9% in 2001), Poland's unemployment rate started to fall in 2002. The positive developments in the labour market were also reflected in the fact that the employment rate began to rise slowly again in 2004.

Figure 1: *Employment and unemployment in Poland, 1997–2005, %*



Note: *Employment in 2005 is based on calculations for 2004.*

Source: Eurostat

However, Poland's unemployment rate still remains the highest in the EU and is considered to be the country's most serious national problem. In December 2005, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the EU was 8.5%, with the highest rates recorded in Poland (17.2%) and Slovakia (16.1%). Furthermore, the unemployment rate among young people, which was 18.4% in the EU25, was highest in Poland (35.5%) and Slovakia (30.4%) (Eurostat, 2006). The high level of unemployment is largely attributed to an extensive industrial restructuring process in Poland (World Bank, 2002).

Moreover, over 50% of all unemployed Poles have been out of work for more than 12 months. In addition, the situation of long-term unemployed people and those at particular risk of social exclusion (on account of their age, health, education, gender and/or ethnic origin) has worsened in the Polish labour market. Increasing the country's employment levels thus constitutes a major challenge for the Polish economy and one that is closely linked to the country's capacity to manage industrial restructuring (EMCC, 2004).

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), most of the joblessness in Poland appears to be structurally related, therefore indicating a need for several policy initiatives. Among the initiatives required, the OECD recommends extending efforts to 'increase firms' propensity to hire the out-of-work, by lowering the costs of low-skilled labour, reducing associated administrative and regulatory costs and in the longer term by providing graduates with more relevant skills'. One of the main policy recommendations is to improve the level and relevance of formal education by, among other things, reducing regional inequalities in access to quality education. This would, in turn, serve to improve employment prospects and income levels for school leavers (OECD, 2004). The problem of improving human capital is further discussed in a report by the Polish Ministry of Economy and Labour, which underlines the shortcomings of the Polish education system in failing to develop students' initiative and problem-solving skills. A negative trend on the demand side is the low level of participation among low-skilled Poles (aged 25–64 years) in continuous education or adult learning courses (EIRO, November 2005).

Education represents a key factor in determining workers' success in the labour market: unemployment rates are higher among people who are less educated, many of whom also tend to remain unemployed for longer periods (ibid). According to a World Bank report (2002, p. 66), more than 70% of unemployed people in Poland have only a complete or incomplete primary education or basic vocational training, while just 2.5% of this group have a higher education. Moreover, the proportion of unemployed people with either a partial or fully completed primary education has been increasing since 1992. This indicates not only a declining demand in the economy for lowly-qualified workers, but also the fact that the unemployed population consists of a growing proportion of people with limited opportunities for occupational reactivation.

When explaining the high unemployment levels, the World Bank report points to a mismatch of employee qualifications in Poland, highlighting how the prospects for improvement in the short term are not good, since many young people in Poland have not benefited from educational reform. Furthermore, the education offered to them, aimed at adapting their skills to the needs of the labour market, is considered to be 'highly imperfect at best' (World Bank, 2002, p. 71). The need for improvements in qualification levels is also emphasised in a recent report on Polish industry; it underlines the mismatch between the requirements of employers and the low-skilled labour supply in Poland, which in turn results in low occupational and geographical mobility (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Labour, 2005).

Regional differences

One of the main characteristics of the Polish labour market is the disparate unemployment rates in the different regions (*voivodships*). Such variations are primarily attributed to differences in the economic structure of these regions – that is, the relative importance of agriculture, industry and services in the regional economy. Between 1995 and 2002, the highest unemployment rates were found in the regions stretching from the west to the northeast of the country in Lubusz (*Lubuskie*), West Pomeranian (*Zachodniopomorskie*) and Warmian-Masurian (*Warmińsko-Mazurskie*). Conversely, the

lowest rates of unemployment were recorded in Podlasie (*Podlaskie*), Lublin (*Lubelskie*), Masovian (*Mazowieckie*), Greater Poland (*Wielkopolskie*) and Lesser Poland (*Małopolskie*) (European Commission, August 2004). Figure 2 shows the average unemployment rates for the Polish voivodships.

Figure 2: Average unemployment rate in Polish regions, 1995–2002



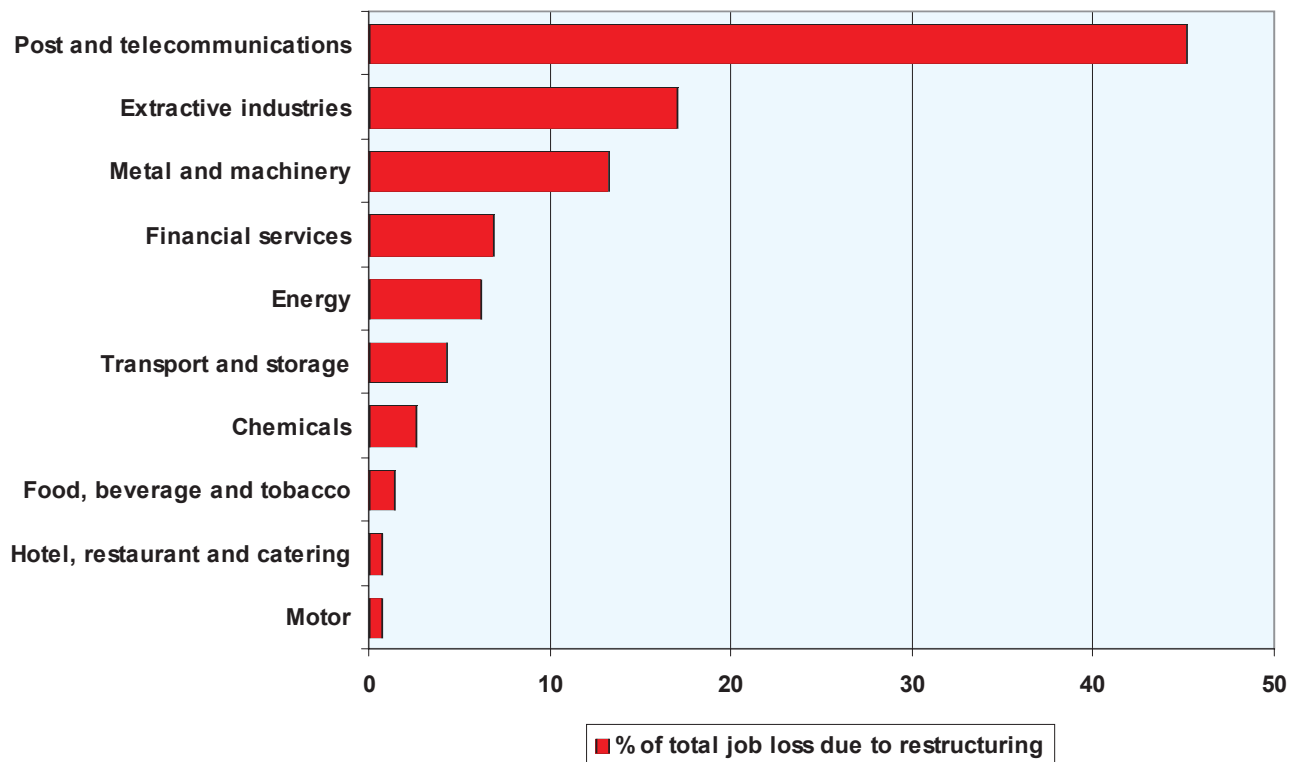
Source: *European Commission, August 2004, p. 13*

Industrial restructuring in Poland

The high level of unemployment in Poland reflects the fundamental socioeconomic changes underway in the country, particularly in relation to industrial restructuring aimed at making Polish companies more competitive in the global market. Such restructuring processes potentially result in increased unemployment due to job cuts, at least in the short term, although increased competitiveness in the longer term should result in the creation of new jobs.

According to European Restructuring Monitor (ERM) data, some 76,393 people lost their jobs due to internal restructuring in Poland since January 2004; this is the equivalent of 79.8% of the total number of job losses resulting from restructuring. The job losses arising from internal restructuring were mainly concentrated in the post and telecommunications sector, in which 45.2% of all the job losses were due to internal restructuring.

Figure 3: Percentage job loss due to internal restructuring in top 10 sectors, 2004–2006

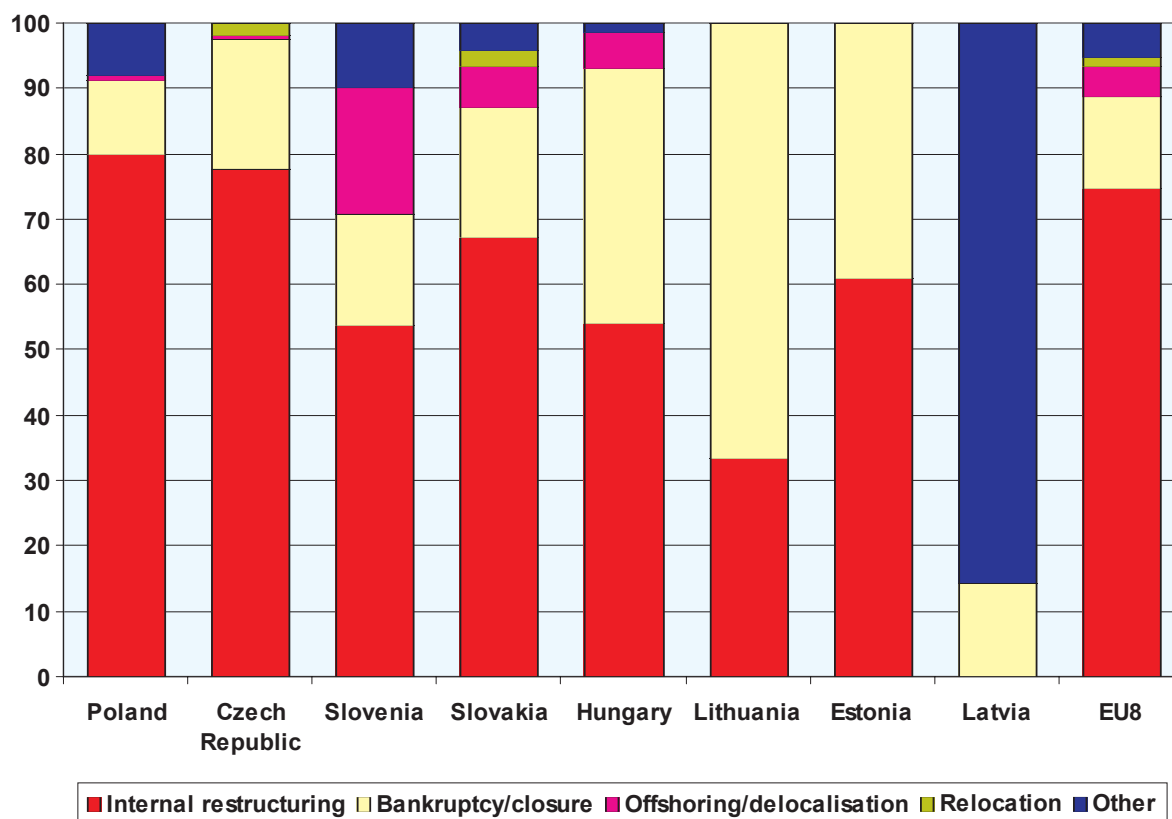


Note: Due to the data collection method used by ERM, the data do not necessarily provide a full picture of the actual cases and number of job losses resulting from restructuring in Poland. However, it is the best available data on this subject. Data covers the period from January 2004 to April 2006.

Source: European Restructuring Monitor (ERM), 2004–2006

Job losses resulting from internal restructuring in Poland constitute a larger proportion of the total number of jobs lost due to restructuring than in the other central and eastern European new Member States (EU8). On the other hand, job losses related to bankruptcy or closure, offshoring or delocalisation, or relocation are not as prevalent. Nonetheless, considering that almost 11,000 job losses (11.4% of total job losses due to restructuring) in Poland were lost due to bankruptcy or closure, this type of restructuring still accounts for a significant proportion of the jobs lost.

Figure 4: Percentage job loss by type of restructuring in EU8



Note: Job loss is expressed as a percentage of the total national job loss due to restructuring. Data covers the period from January 2004 to April 2006.

Source: ERM, 2004–2006

Involvement of social partners

There are three main trade unions in Poland: the Independent and Self-Governing Trade Union *Solidarność* (*Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy Solidarność*, NSZZ *Solidarność*), the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych*, OPZZ) and the Trade Unions Forum (*Forum Związków Zawodowych*, FZZ). The four main organisations representing employers in Poland are as follows: the Confederation of Polish Employers (*Konfederacja Pracodawców Polskich*, KPP), the Polish Confederation of Private Employers (*Polska Konfederacja Pracodawców Prywatnych*, PKPP), the Association of Polish Crafts (*Związek Rzemiosła Polskiego*, ZPR) and the Business Centre Club (BCC). None of the employer organisations existed prior to 1991, and initially they were unable to play as important a role as the trade unions did. However, employer organisations are gaining strength as a result of a new legal framework and due to economic changes (EIRO, September 2002).

Although the level of unionisation has slightly increased since 2004, compared with previous years, the general perception among activists is that union representation in Poland is in crisis (EIRO, July 2005a). According to EIRO data, around 17% of the Polish workforce were members of trade unions in 2004. This places Poland among the group of European countries with the lowest levels of unionisation (European Commission, 2004, p. 18). In effect, the unions cannot claim to be sufficiently representative of Polish employees. Furthermore, union competition in Poland is very strong due to ideological differences between the unions and their involvement with opposing national political parties (European Commission, 2004, p. 53). In fact, the politically motivated conflicts between the trade unions have in some cases hampered social dialogue between the social partners in Poland (EIRO, October 2002). According to Rafał Towalski of the Institute of Public Affairs at the Warsaw School of Economics, the power of trade unions in the Polish

economy as a whole is decreasing, with the Polish mining sector being the only exception to this general trend due to a strong tradition of union activism (EIRO, May 2005).

Restructuring and social dialogue

Restructuring in Poland has mainly revolved around state-managed restructuring, which has largely occurred at sectoral rather than company level. In addition, restructuring activities are strongly regulated by legislation. One example is the regulation of restructuring in the hard coal-mining sector between 2003 and 2006, which provided for considerable severance benefits for the redundant employees, paid vacations for those of pre-retirement age, along with training and retraining, and vocational and social counselling (EMCC, 2004). A 2006 report, published jointly by the European social partner organisations, analyses the main challenges with regard to restructuring and social dialogue in Poland (ESPO, 2006). According to the report:

- Poland has a very high unemployment rate, particularly among young people with low education or skill levels;
- Polish workers often lack a proactive attitude in shaping their professional lives, according to an employer representative;
- the education system does not provide the competencies needed in the labour market;
- the quality of the education system is low compared with other OECD countries and thus needs to be improved considerably;
- a big challenge for Poland will be to increase the geographical mobility of its workers in order to improve their flexibility in the labour market;
- Poland still faces restructuring processes in a number of politically sensitive industrial sectors;
- restructuring processes in Poland receive negative evaluations by some of the social partners due to the lack of effective re-qualification programmes or business start-up support measures. Employer organisations, on the other hand, point out that guaranteeing benefits such as early retirement packages in restructuring processes slows down the overall process and increases the costs of restructuring;
- social dialogue in Poland is weak but improving.

Over the years, the Polish government has taken several initiatives aimed at strengthening social dialogue in Poland, through the establishment of consultative bodies comprised of government representatives and representatives from the employer organisations and trade unions (ESPO, 2006). The main body is the Tripartite Commission for Social and Economic Issues, established in 1994 as a forum for national social dialogue.

In addition, nine sectoral tripartite bodies have also been established. These bodies are actively involved in restructuring issues at sectoral level, devising 'social packages' in relation to the restructuring of specific sectors. An example is the activation package for the metal melting industry, which was agreed in 2003 (EIRO, 2003). This package included the following labour market activation measures:

- training contracts;
- vocational counselling and one-off training events;
- a one-off conditional severance payment for those who terminate their training contracts ahead of time;

- conditional severance payments for employees qualifying for retirement benefits or commencing a business activity in their own name;
- specialised and general vocational training;
- partial reimbursement of wages paid out by employers in other sectors that recruit former iron and steel workers.

While the social partners value the sectoral tripartite bodies, they complain about the government's unwillingness to implement the proposed solutions (ESPO, 2006, p. 29).

In a further attempt to address the social consequences of restructuring, 16 regional social dialogue commissions – one for each administrative region (*voivodship*) – were established in 2001. These commissions are expected to ensure the comprehensive inclusion of restructuring issues in regional affairs.

Finally, restructuring issues are, to a limited extent, dealt with at company level in the so-called 'works councils', in accordance with **EU Directive 2002/14/EC**¹ establishing a general framework for informing and consulting employees in large enterprises (European Commission, 2004, p. 171). According to the draft statute approved by the lower chamber of the Polish Parliament *Sejm* in March 2006, works councils are to be established in enterprises employing more than 50 people. The employer will be legally obliged to present information concerning the operations and the financial status of the company to the works councils, and to consult with the council in relation to proposed changes to the employment structure and work organisation (EIRO, 2006).

Evolving role of social dialogue

In Poland, social dialogue at national level has, in recent years, evolved in a positive direction towards increased cooperation rather than conflict. Nonetheless, political differences continue to put a strain on relations between the social partners. This was especially evident in the run-up to the Polish elections in 2005, when the social partners were engaged in political clashes similar to those that characterised industrial relations in Poland after 1989 – which for many years had paralysed attempts to promote social dialogue among the social partners. However, according to Jacek Sroka of the Institute of Public Affairs at Wrocław University, it is possible that the gradual formal and legal institutionalisation of social dialogue will slowly but steadily distance industrial relations in Poland from the political arena (EIRO, August 2005).

While social dialogue at national level is considered to be improving, despite the abovementioned setbacks, social dialogue at local level is still considered weak. A particular source of criticism has been the commissions' purely consultative nature. As the commissions do not have any statutory mission, they are prevented from moving beyond purely 'theoretical' discussions (European Commission, 2004). Also, there is only sporadic contact between companies and the commissions, along with a lack of cooperation between companies, trade unions and local and regional authorities (EIRO, July 2005b). According to a study by the Warsaw School of Economics, the local authorities, for the most part, have limited understanding of the problems pertaining to industries and are reluctant to learn more about such issues. At the same time, company directors have little insight into what the local authorities are up to or what they are planning (EIRO, July 2005b). Moreover, the commissions are composed of both local authorities representing the ruling government and representatives from the opposition parties, resulting in a risk of restructuring matters becoming politicised (EIRO, August 2005).

¹ http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=32002L0014&model=guichett

On the other hand, the commission of the *Świętokrzyskie* region has demonstrated the potential of these bodies. The region's commission played a key role in the restructuring process of the coal industry by bringing together the social partners and by providing a forum in which they could devise a restructuring plan for the industry. In addition, the commission conducted the negotiations with a Spanish investor who decided to buy the company in 2003, and who signed an agreement with the trade unions on social conditions. The commission has also started cooperating with the German **Friedrich-Ebert Foundation**² in order to define and carry out a regional restructuring programme, which could receive support from European funds (European Commission, 2004, p. 170).

Need for alternative approach

Although the situation is changing for the better, Poland still faces serious challenges in relation to improving social dialogue and particularly in its handling of restructuring processes. Moreover, the country's serious unemployment problem indicates that other approaches to restructuring and unemployment are needed. The Polish Autokreacja programme constitutes one such approach.

The latter programme is run by a group of company managers and aims at increasing job opportunities for young unemployed people, by improving their professional and personal skills. Although the Autokreacja programme is not directed at restructuring, it is unique in its network and partnership approach. Such an approach could also prove successful in the restructuring of individual companies, reducing the often severe and negative social effects that such processes have on local communities. In this context, the programme could provide an innovative solution to present and future restructuring cases.

Autokreacja programme

With major support from a range of companies including Levi Strauss, DHL, Xerox and Smirnoff, the Polish section of the **International Business Leaders Forum**³ (IBLF) initiated the Autokreacja (meaning 'self-creation') programme in Poland in 1995. The programme is based on a similar programme called the Recharge Programme, run by the Prince's Trust in the United Kingdom.⁴ Table 1 outlines the range of companies that have participated in the Autokreacja programme since its inception.

Text Box 1: *Companies participating in the Autokreacja programme*

3M	Coca Cola	Nestlé	Smirnoff
ABB	Commercial Union	PricewaterhouseCoopers	Era GSM
Arka Invesco	DHL	Procter&Gamble	Spectrum Accounting Systems
Bovis Lend Lease	Grant Thornton	Sheraton Hotel and Towers	TIME Magazine
BP	ICL	Tesco	
British Aerospace-Mielec	Levi Strauss	Xerox	

² <http://www.feswar.org.pl/index.htm>

³ <http://www.iblf.pl/>

⁴ The IBLF was formed in 1990 by HRH the Prince of Wales, and the organisation is active in more than 50 emerging and transitional economies worldwide. The organisation is supported by large international companies and local companies, and works closely with the World Bank, the United Nations (UN) and the EU.

The Autokreacja programme consists of a series of one-week courses in which participants receive intensive training aimed at improving their chances of finding a job. The courses are organised and run by representatives from major international companies located in Poland.

The programme focuses on the training of disadvantaged, unemployed young people, building their confidence and increasing their chances of finding work or of accessing further training. It also seeks to help young unemployed people to find constructive and socially responsible ways to spend their time while they are unemployed, for example by taking part in volunteer work in an NGO.

Background

The IBLF became involved in promoting community economic development in 1993, at a time when Poland was facing severe economic and social problems in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the difficult transition to the market economy and to democracy. During this time, the Polish section of the IBLF was formed and has ever since been active in the fields of community economic development, helping to improve job opportunities for unemployed people, creating links between students and managers, promoting corporate social responsibility and anti-corruption measures, and supporting entrepreneurship. The initiatives are all based on the existing network between Polish business leaders and managers and realised through partnerships with public sector actors, such as government agencies and local labour offices, and NGOs.

In 2002, a group of company managers from BP Polska, Sheraton, ABB and Commercial Union formed the Autokreacja Association; all of these managers have been active in running the association since its inception. The managers wanted to expand the Autokreacja programme by increasing the frequency of the training courses and by making the programme available nationwide. Essentially, the association's mission is to promote and support responsible business practices that benefit both businesses and society and that help to achieve social, economic and environmentally sustainable development. Fifteen major companies are members of the association, all of which pay a membership fee covering the administrative costs of the organisation.

The network of companies, which includes large multinational companies such as BP, Nestlé and Procter&Gamble, and partnerships with local labour offices and NGOs constitute the building blocks of the Autokreacja programme. Participating companies are not just passive sponsors but play an active role in the courses held, by conducting lectures and providing access to HR specialists who conduct training sessions such as mock interviews.

Financial support for the specific courses is provided by companies, public authorities and NGOs, but only after the association applies for funding. In some cases, courses have received financial support from the Norwegian Embassy, the British Know How Fund, the World Bank and the International Women's Group. The most costly part of the programme relates to the logistics involved in gathering participants who are coming from many different regions in Poland.

Text Box 2: *Involvement of Sheraton Warsaw Hotel*

The Sheraton Warsaw Hotel and Towers is part of a hotel chain owned by Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc – one of the largest hotel and leisure companies in the world, employing over 120,000 people globally. Sheraton Hotel in Poland has played an active role in the Autokreacja programme since its introduction in 1995. Its involvement is a reflection of the Starwood corporate values, which include the maxim ‘we improve the communities in which we work’, as one of its core values.

Head of Public Relations (PR) for Sheraton Hotel in Poland and Vice-president of the Autokreacja Association, Katarzyna Gontarczyk, became involved in the Autokreacja programme as a result of her own company’s membership in the IBLF, which first introduced the programme to Poland. Ms Gontarczyk has been involved since the introduction of the programme and was part of the group that founded the Autokreacja Association in 2002.

Although combining the constant fundraising and networking with her own job as PR Manager can be quite overwhelming, Ms Gontarczyk enjoys being part of the programme: ‘It gives me a lot of personal satisfaction.’ However, she highlights that it can be difficult finding the resources needed, and the network of companies still has to be further expanded if the ambition of increasing the number of projects is to be realised. Ms Gontarczyk is therefore continuously on the look-out for potential partners and EU funding that can contribute financially to the implementation of future projects within the programme.

Organisational structure

The main body of the association is the board, which is comprised of one president, two vice-presidents and three board members. The President of the Autokreacja Association, Dorota Adamska, has been involved in the programme since the very beginning. Other key business people who have played a leading role in the association are Grazyna Goslings from the Commercial Union and Katarzyna Gontarczyk from Sheraton Warsaw Hotel.

The business involvement is balanced by the support from NGOs and public authorities. Key members include Witek Kochan, the current governor (*voivod*) of the Lesser Poland (*Małopolskie*) region, who adapted the original Scottish programme for Poland, and Barbara Borowicz, a psychologist and expert working for the Labour Office, who has been director of the two recent programmes.

Although none of the business leaders have any formal knowledge of assisting young unemployed people, because of their professional background and personal experience they have a good insight into the type of skills that are required by companies. Furthermore, through their participation in IBLF activities and especially in the Autokreacja programme, they have an extensive network of business contacts. In addition, the board members from the public sector all have expert knowledge of the Polish job market and are very aware of the difficulties involved in securing a job due to their professional backgrounds. Thus, the combined skills and knowledge of the key members in the Autokreacja Association provide a good starting point for helping young and long-term unemployed people to enhance their job finding skills.

Target group and participants

The Autokreacja programme targets people who have been unemployed for at least one year and who are actively looking for a job. Since 1995, over 400 people have participated in the programme, and the courses are held at locations throughout Poland.

In 1995, some 50 long-term unemployed Poles between the ages of 18 and 25 years participated in the pilot programme, which focused on enhancing their job-searching skills and on developing constructive social activities.

Table 1: *Main target groups of Autokreacja programme*

Year	Target group
1994	Twenty Poles take part in the Recharge Programme organised by the Prince's Trust in Great Britain
1995	Young unemployed people from southeast Poland take part in pilot programme
1996	International edition of the Recharge Programme held in France; young unemployed people from France, Denmark, Great Britain and Poland take part
1997	Participants include young unemployed people from southeast Poland and from a region damaged by flooding
1999	Young unemployed persons from northeast Poland
2000	80 unemployed persons
2001	Young unemployed people, unemployed women over 35 years of age and young Roma people
2002	Young unemployed people
2003	Young people from high unemployment regions

The specific target groups and regions are selected by the board members on an ad hoc basis. Board members usually suggest potential target groups or projects and are then responsible for specific initiatives. The target groups selected are usually in accordance with the association's mission and thus typically consist of young people or women from regions with high unemployment levels.

The individual participants are selected by the Local Labour Office on the basis of their motivation for participating in the programme and their personal qualities. The labour officers also monitor the participants' progress after they have attended the training course.

Courses and trainers

The Autokreacja programme caters for 50 to 80 participants at a time, who are divided into groups, each of which has its own leader from the local area. Participants take part in a one-week course held at a resort or hotel in Poland. During the course, the participants are taught key skills such as how to look for a job, how to write a CV, and how to present themselves during an interview. They also take part in short computing courses and lectures. These activities are combined with social activities. A course targeted at women over 35 years of age also included a consultation with a professional beautician and hairdresser in order to help the women enhance their personal image. NGO workshops and communications workshops have been a successful element, as they open up possibilities for young people to develop organisational and communication skills that could be relevant for potential future employers.

Local employment offices select the participants and also act as group leaders during the programme. In addition, local NGO partners prepare workshops for the participants on issues such as NGOs as a potential employment opportunity, how to set up and run an NGO, self-presentation skills, basic computer skills, and entrepreneurship. Training sessions are also conducted by professional trainers, such as psychologists and actors, and business managers who run mentoring sessions and mock interviews. Typically, the course is coordinated by a course director, a course administrator, 10 group leaders and four trainers.

The group leaders and members in charge of the training sessions attend a course prior to the Autokreacja course. This course, 'Training the trainers', aims at preparing the trainers for the Autokreacja initiative by focusing on key topics such as: the formalities of recruitment and selection, administrative issues relating to the course, health and safety issues, job-seeking techniques, interview techniques, telephone skills, monitoring participants, running the follow-up programme. The preparatory course is based on training manuals developed by the IBLF.

Publicity is also an important part of the programme and is used as a means of increasing awareness of the programme among potential sponsors and participants. PR activities are based on a partnership with different media including *Business Week*, *Twój Styl*, and the Warsaw Voice. One specific PR activity involves a press conference held for each of the courses. This provides the programme participants with an opportunity to present themselves and their activities to the wider public.

Results and future perspectives

The success of the Autokreacja programme is measured according to how participants perform after their participation in the programme and the personal benefits they have gained in terms of increased quality of life. Within two months, nearly two thirds of the young people who had participated in the pilot programme had either found work or accessed further training. On average, 50% of all the participants (1995–2002) found a job no later than six months after their participation in the course, while others re-entered the education system.

The participants are not the only people who stand to benefit from the programme, as the sponsors can also gain something positive from the initiative. According to Ms Gontarczyk, the partners involved in the different projects can use the opportunity to spot highly motivated potential employees among the participants. Furthermore, the programme can be used by companies to enhance their profile as socially responsible companies.

In addition to the Autokreacja programme, the Autokreacja Association is also involved in a range of other projects aimed at helping unemployed people find new jobs and at building a bridge between students and the business community. A common thread running through all of these activities is their focus on skills development. In addition to this focus, the association has begun to introduce a healthy lifestyle dimension to its portfolio of activities.

Text Box 3: *Personal account of programme participant*

Twenty-eight year old Dariusz Augustyn, a financial controller at Valeo Lighting Systems Poland, participated in the Autokreacja programme in 2001.

Dariusz's participation in the programme marked the first time that he had ever had contact with companies and professional HR managers. Coming from the city of Tarnow located in the Lesser Poland (*Małopolskie*) region, this provided him with a unique opportunity to develop key skills required to find a job (for example, how to behave during a job interview) and to gain a better understanding of what companies are looking for when hiring new employees.

Dariusz heard about the Autokreacja programme through his local labour office and decided to apply for the course. He was subsequently invited for an interview with a local Autokreacja representative. In the interview, he was asked about his background and ambitions for the future, and on the basis of this exchange was selected for the programme.

The course that Dariusz participated in was held in 2001 at a resort located near Warsaw; all expenses including travel costs were paid by the Autokreacja Association. Around 60 to 70 young people from different towns participated in the programme, and the group included a mixture of well-educated and less well-educated people. As part of the programme, Dariusz received training in CV writing and job interview skills. He also participated in lectures outlining what companies expect from potential employees, as well as vital skills and recruitment procedures. Furthermore, Dariusz developed his computer skills and developed his personal appearance with the help of a mentor who, among other things, taught the participants how to control their nervousness during job interviews. At the end of the course, the participants took part in social activities and also had the opportunity to talk to a psychologist to help improve their self-esteem and the way they present themselves, thus removing personal barriers preventing them from entering the job market.

Text Box 3: *Personal account of programme participant (Cont'd)*

Dariusz's own entry into the job market was facilitated by the Autokracja course. During the course, he had the opportunity to talk to representatives from BP who suggested that he send a formal application to their HR department. This resulted in an internship at BP and subsequently a full-time job. Dariusz worked at BP for two years and then moved to Canada for a six-month language course. After his return to Poland, he worked full time at ABB for one year, after which he secured a job as a financial controller at Valeo Lighting Systems.

According to Dariusz, the Autokracja programme provided a valuable source of support in helping him launch his career, particularly in terms of the knowledge, contacts and training he acquired to help him overcome the difficult process of finding a job.

Currently, the association is developing the programme further by increasing the number of projects. However, this requires additional funding that can be difficult to find. One possibility would be to secure greater resources from EU funding and to develop closer contacts with local partners to assist the association in its fundraising activities.

Lessons learnt

Holistic approach

Autokracje teaches participants technical competencies, such as information technologies (IT), language, communication and organisational skills. However, developing formal skills is only one part of the process in helping people find a new job. For example, increasing participants' self-esteem constitutes a key part of the association's mission. Conducting the courses in a stimulating environment is also important, as a negative environment may affect people's motivation; therefore, the courses are conducted in locations outside of the participants' home town.

The focus on the participant's life situation reflects the comprehensive and holistic approach that the programme takes in helping people find a job. This approach implies that, along with teaching people formal skills, there also needs to be an emphasis on improving their motivation and on finding solutions to personal problems that could constitute a barrier to entering the job market. Therefore, the opportunity to talk to a psychologist represents an important component of the programme.

Barriers and opportunities

According to Ms Gontarczyk, the main barrier to achieving the programme's goals is the lack of resources. Although the network of companies includes 15 large companies, the ambition to broaden the programme's scope of activities requires an expansion of the network and more external funding. Nonetheless, the range of courses and success of the participants to date have demonstrated that relatively limited resources can achieve very positive results in improving the job situation of participants.

Motivation as a key to success

One of the main lessons learnt from the programme is that motivation is the key to success. By selecting the participants who are the most motivated for the programme, the course managers are in a better position to contribute to the participants' personal development during the course.

Flexibility and experimentation

The courses of the Autokracja programme do not follow one standard formula; instead, each course is designed to meet the specific needs of the participants. The involvement of companies and HR specialists in the planning and implementation of the courses ensures that the courses are focused on skills that are relevant to job searching,

applications and interviews. This focus has not, however, excluded the experimental nature of the courses. The inclusion of sessions on volunteer work and communications in the courses – one of the major innovations of the programme – demonstrates how the Autokreacja programme takes a very broad approach to skills development, which can in turn increase the participants' chances of finding a job.

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