

# Managing Knowledge in Non-Profit Organisations

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**Abstract:** This article aims to present the impact of knowledge management on non-profit organizations. The collected empirical evidence clearly indicates the need to change the employment policy and include volunteers in knowledge management. The article is based on organizations operating in Poland, which narrows down the research to be able to transfer it to not-for-profit organizations operating in other European Union countries. However, it allows you to join the debate on knowledge management and its inclusion in the management system of non-governmental organizations.

**Keywords:** Knowledge management, Non-profit organization, Social economy entities

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## 1. Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the literature on knowledge management, especially knowledge management in non-profit organisations. Differences can be noticed between individual NPOs due to different approaches to knowledge. NPOs in Poland face many problems and barriers. Most often these are financial barriers, but knowledge management in these organisations has not been properly researched. Few studies published in this area address the lack or inability to diagnose human capital problems and knowledge linkages. While source literature in the field of management emphasizes the importance of knowledge as a strategic resource for organisations in the economic sphere, there is a lack of literature on knowledge management in the non-profit sector. Few publications (Kong 2007, 2008; Sillanpää et al. 2010, Massingham 2018) on the use of intellectual capital (IC) for strategic positioning of non-profit organizations emphasize the need for further research on this subject. A better understanding of resource allocation through knowledge management will contribute to increasing the social and economic performance of these organizations. However, we believe that despite the different paradigms on which both organisations are built: not for profit and for profit, they both need to consider knowledge as a determinant of effective management.

The article is divided into a theoretical and research part. The theoretical part presents literature in the field of knowledge management and the opportunities offered by its use in non-profit organizations. The practical part, based on statistical data, was aimed at diagnosing the cause of the problems of incompetent knowledge management. The focus was on the forms of employment of employees and volunteers of these organizations as ICs. Based on the analysis of the literature on the subject, a research hypothesis was formulated assuming that knowledge management in non-profit organizations, especially in the Polish economy, is insufficient, which results in the organization's inability to acquire and retain knowledge from people involved in the activities of NGOs, which results in unstable forms of staff employment.

In this paper, the terms non-profit, non-government organizations (NGO), not for profit, and the nomenclature of the legal form of these organisations, i.e. Associations and Foundations, are used interchangeably.

## 2. Literature Overview

Knowledge in organisations constitutes an intangible resource that has an impact on the broader economic and business performance of a company. In our considerations, knowledge management concerns not for profit organisations whose economic efficiency translates into implementing the activities for which these organisations were set up. Knowledge as a resource constitutes an indispensable part of creating added value to any organisation, which is why research into knowledge management by non-profit organisations, whose activities are focused on both social and economic aspects, is so important. The use of solutions that come directly from the enterprise sphere is not suitable for NGOs, therefore it is urgent to develop a knowledge management framework for this sector.

### 2.1 Knowledge Property

The term knowledge management is used to refer to the practices, implicit or explicit, used by an organisation to acquire new knowledge and to reorganize and disseminate existing knowledge. The term also includes strategies to prevent an organisation's own knowledge from "leaking out" or to encourage its dissemination to partner entities as well as others from whom the NGO can mutually benefit due to its exchange (Hall, Mairesse, 2006). The following facts result from the property of knowledge:

- It is often embedded in the workforce,
- it is partly a public good, and
- there are frequent difficulties in buying it on the market.

A significant part of knowledge is embedded in human capital, employees and/or volunteers who acquire it consciously as part of their duties or unconsciously along with other activities they perform. This fact has several implications for knowledge management: firstly, human resource management (HRM) becomes very important because current employees and volunteers are not easily interchangeable with others outside the organisation. In fact, NGOs take advantage of the local knowledge of volunteers to help reduce the start-up costs (Haugh, 2005). Secondly, it is the protection of the subject rather than the ownership of the person of such knowledge that may require active management of such knowledge and the transformation of forms of tacit knowledge into a codified formula that can be transferred to other people (Cowan et al., 2000). By the time volunteers leave the organisation, the tacit knowledge may disappear because it is not stored in a central repository. In some cases, it is not even transferred to other people. That is why knowledge can be lost. IT solutions are more and more often integrated into this process to transfer tacit knowledge into a network of bit links (artificial intelligence) activated when required. However, such a solution is related to high costs and NGOs often cannot afford it. The third aspect of knowledge management is the organisation's ability to absorb knowledge - that is, to acquire and use the knowledge of its employees and volunteers in order to create social added value. Seeing how not for profit organisations are small and operate on markets that are poor in resources, they do not have access to quality resources or advanced knowledge management tools. According to Maalaoui et al. (2020) knowledge management in social enterprises bases on a kind of collective bricolage, defined as a continuous process of creating and taking advantage of practical knowledge (Duymedjian and Ruling, 2010) based on unused or low-value resources, in unconventional or non-obvious ways. However, according to Baker and Nelson (2005), the overuse of collective bricolage based on sharing knowledge as well as acting in common environments and organisations and a shared worldview, can lead to a lack of opportunities to discover and acquire new knowledge, resulting in no development and not creating new knowledge. Selective bricolage can become the equivalent of this, thanks to which new resources can be created to help companies avoid the spiral that leads to less professionalism in operations and the many resulting negative consequences (Rönkkö et al., 2013).

Another issue arising from knowledge ownership is the responsibility of the entities and the products they produce. Knowledge, as a public good, is both non-competitive and non-excluding (at least not to be easily excluded). Hence, the conclusion is that knowledge creators should consider both the positive and negative effects of disseminating the services and solutions that their organisation has created (Lhuillery, 2006). The property of knowledge consists in its uniqueness and, as the most valuable resource, it is difficult to be purchased. Research by Negassi et al. (2019) shows that the public research sector is "innovative", while the private sector appears to be "catching up". Hence, the conclusion is that the uniqueness of knowledge is more dependent on mutual open cooperation than competition in the industry, where cooperation may lead to fears of loss or uncontrolled transfer of knowledge in joint activities. In activities carried out by NGOs, one can notice in-depth knowledge concerning the local environment and experiences as well as locally available resources to meet local social needs on a small scale and connections to the community. They share common characteristics of social entrepreneurs, including skilfully managing unexpected opportunities, spontaneous innovation, improvised risk-taking, and rearranging resources to create social value (Bacq and Janssen, 2011 ; Zollo et al., 2018; Scuotto et al, 2023). The limited nature of purchasing knowledge on the market leads to imitation or an inability/impossibility to make effective use of it through lack of adaptation and integration into the organisation's structures, of which non-profit organisations are unfortunately a frequent example. Even though Malsch, and Guieu (2019) have shown that knowledge plays a key role in social entrepreneurship it is often not used as a knowledge management tool in social entrepreneurship networks. Resources and knowledge are acquired and managed in the course of a learning process, and social entrepreneurs are able to manage knowledge and resources and do more with less, despite a scarcity of resources. According to Granados et al. (2011), not-for-profit organisations develop knowledge management capabilities that are based on a culture of trust, knowledge sharing and learning in decentralized and flexible structures, rather than on information systems and external motivation. Taking advantage of this in a collaborative network of not-for-profit organisations would allow for better social and economic results, thus leading to excellence. The strategic nature of unique knowledge constitutes a source of competitive advantage for a company in general and non-profit organisations in particular, so the latter must protect it. In fact, Uygur and Marcoux (2013) believe that social entrepreneurship ventures show additional complexity. When managing their knowledge, or more precisely when trying to protect their knowledge concerning the responsibility of their actions and

identity, they must always take into account a double bottom line, namely social and economic. Access to knowledge forces these organisations to control their actions in protecting the general and practical knowledge developed in the course of their operations, and dispersing this knowledge among the various stakeholders results in extreme difficulties and fear of uncontrolled disclosure or transfer.

## 2.2 Knowledge Management

Coordinating activities resulting from the ownership of knowledge requires a systemic approach. KM has been defined as a strategy for managing organizational knowledge as a corporate asset (Cardoso and Meireles, 2010) and harnessing processes such as creation and acquisition, storage, share and dissemination, retrieval (Cardoso and Gomes, 2011) and use of tacit and explicit knowledge (Civi, 2000). Lettieri et al. (2004) demonstrated that knowledge management enables excellence in the non-profit sector. Whereas, Granados and Rosli (2020) pointed out that the legal form of NGOs strengthens their credibility and the trust of external stakeholders for whose favour these organisations compete. Therefore, the competition between them constitutes a following challenge that these actors have to face. Particularly intense competition for donor funds can lead to inefficiently high fundraising expenditures and drawing resources from development projects (Kim and Lim, 2017, Zhang 2016), because sources of capital are limited or unstable, while fierce competition for capital between organisations usually results in barriers to their own development. Examples were provided by Khieng and Dahles (2015) who found that competition for resources led to the collapse of many organisations. According to Maalaoui et al. (2020) there are six main clusters of knowledge that need to be managed effectively in non-profit organizations, i.e. accounting/administrative knowledge related to the economic and legal aspects of non-profit organizations, teaching and training knowledge related to the training and skills of volunteers and staff, managerial and organisational knowledge related to human resource management, fundraising and public relations, marketing knowledge related to the knowledge required to manage relationships with key stakeholders such as partners and sponsors, operational knowledge related to daily operations, and finally knowledge gained from external sources such as volunteers, which is often neglected. Such an approach has made it possible to systematize knowledge concerning the units in which this knowledge is generated and will help to propose a general knowledge management system. The strategic dimension of knowledge management consists of the following stages: selecting the possessed knowledge that is available from various sources, then codifying the knowledge, and the final stage which consists in getting rid of knowledge that is redundant and inadequate in terms of the organization's needs. The aim of the organisation is to exploit well-defined knowledge. Thus, a strong emphasis in the concept of knowledge management on knowledge selection skills. Codification of knowledge, meaning recording it in various forms to protect against its loss when an employee or volunteer leaves. The final element of the strategic dimension of knowledge consists in eliminating redundant and useless knowledge that creates confusion and information noise in the organisation. (Dolińska, 2010)

## 2.3 Knowledge Management Systems

The knowledge management system must be aligned with the organisation's mission, vision, and development strategy to ensure its effective use. Building a system requires the formation of an organisational culture focused on collecting, creating, distributing, and using knowledge to fulfil the social and economic purpose of the non-profit organisation. The knowledge management model proposed by Lettieri et al. (2004) (Fig. 1) indicates how knowledge should circulate in NGOs.

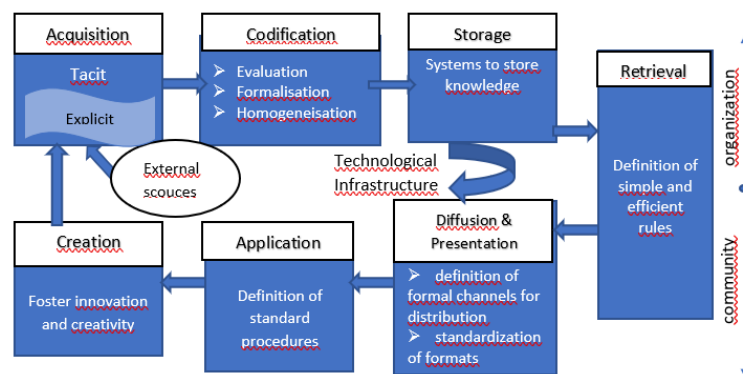


Figure 1: The Cycle of Knowledge Management in NGOs

The authors divided the process into 7 steps. The first step consists in acquiring knowledge, i.e. knowledge should be acquired and brought into the organisation from various sources, e.g. everyday experience, external information, know-how of operators, volunteers, and community input. This step includes all activities carried out at both the individual and group level aiming to collect and take advantage of knowledge before it is codified and disseminated throughout the organisation. Due to the barriers associated with maintaining knowledge in a tacit form and sharing it through informal and/or personal contacts, NGOs often do not take the next step - codification. Such behaviour can result in low levels of sharing, imprecise exploration, and high dispersion. The codification activity aims to bring together available knowledge using common formats, previously assessed and validated. Often it constitutes the initial verification of the usefulness of knowledge, and the transformation of that knowledge into explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge can always be encrypted so that it is not generally available, but limited to individuals or a targeted group. Once codified, knowledge can be stored in specific repositories (databases, archives, manuals, etc.) and then reused according to user needs. This activity should be simple, fast, and precise so that the knowledge is truly accessible and used within the organisation. The following step consists in the distribution and presentation of knowledge. Distributing knowledge means making it available to anyone who can use it. In this case the form of presentation is important: defining standard and easy-to-use formats in order to make the best possible use of the knowledge present in the organisation. Knowledge can then ultimately be applied, i.e. transformed into action and used by NGOs. In this way, the organisation gathers new experience, interacts with other actors and generates new ideas, so that it is able to create new knowledge that invigorates and restarts the entire process. In this sense, creative activity also includes the integration of knowledge. In general terms, the knowledge pathway is indeed a cyclical process that activates and restarts itself. Different members of the non-profit organization community may have been involved at each stage of this pathway, but typically activities such as knowledge acquisition, codification, storage, and retrieval are managed at the operational level, while dissemination, application, and creation activities should involve all of the organization's members. (Lettieri et al., 2004).

Despite the spectrum of issues related to knowledge management in NPOs presented in this part of the paper deals with those aspects that are most frequently addressed in the source literature, they are also crucial for creating social added value by these organisations. However, the empirical studies carried out by researchers so far do not fully clarify how non-profit organizations manage knowledge, and researching the relationship between knowledge management and staff working for NPOs has not yet been confirmed by sufficient empirical evidence in a satisfactory manner.

### **3. Methodology**

The study was based on data from the Central Statistical Office in Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny - GUS), as well as supplemented and extended by research conducted by the Klon/Jawor Association. The data carried out by GUS is conducted as part of the tasks of official statistics, whose activities consist in collecting and compiling data received from entities operating in Poland.

Techniques used to communicate statistical data:

- Internet (Reporting Portal, e-mail),
- direct interview (taking advantage of a paper form or the CAPI method by means of an interview recorded on a portable electronic device),
- telephone interview (traditional or using the CATI method via computer-assisted telephone interview).

The studies used in the article are from 2008, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2018, and 2020. However, the year 2020 has been analysed in a special way.

The social sector in Poland is made up of organisations that are neither profit-oriented nor part of the state structure<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, the names non-government organizations, community organisation, non-profit, not for profit, or NGO are used interchangeably. And the totality of these organisations is referred to as the social

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<sup>1</sup>According to definition, a non-profit organisation is: A legal person or an organisational unit without legal personality which is granted legal capacity by a separate act, including a foundation or an association, which meets the conditions: 1) it is not a unit of the public finance sector, within the meaning of the Public Finance Act, 2) does not operate with the intention of achieving profit, from the Act of 24 April 2003 on public benefit activity and voluntary work. Place of publication: (Journal of Laws 2020, item 1057).

sector or third sector (while the first sector consists in state institutions and the second sector is business). Social sector organisations in Poland can take advantage of various legal forms. The most typical legal forms of NGOs are foundations and associations. These organisations are the focus of the study. It is worth noting that, apart from foundations and associations, there are also other types of organisations that can be classified as part of the broader social sector, but they have been omitted in this study.

The statistical division of Poland into macro-regions was used in the course of the study, as it allows observing changes in the regional distribution of NGOs, which could result in the migration of employees and beneficiaries of these organisations or social changes in the studied field.

In Poland, according to the data of the Central Statistical Office, in 2020 there were 113.9 thousand actively operating foundations and associations (Fig. 2).

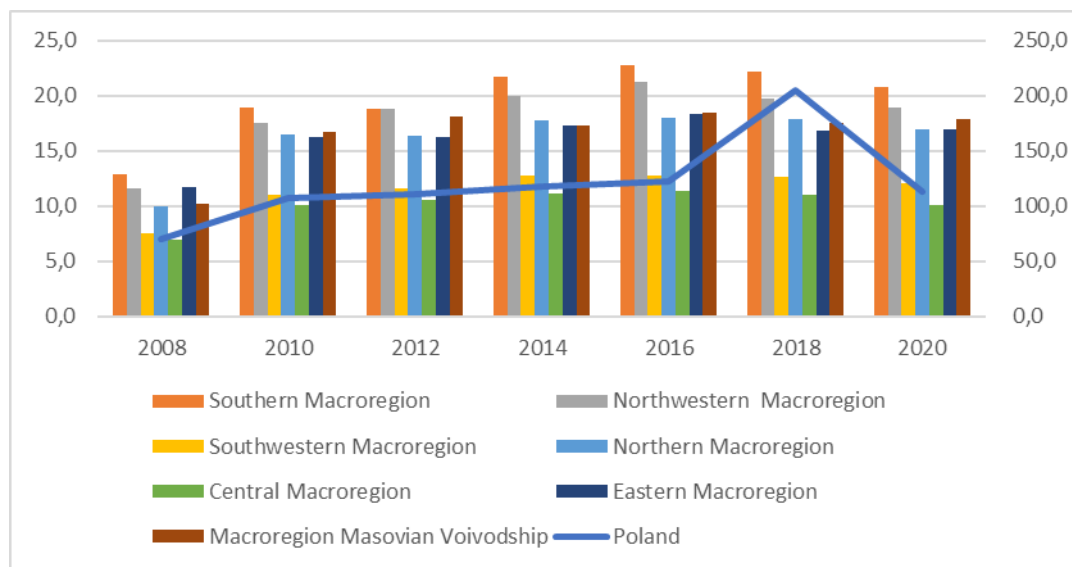


Figure 2: Number of Active Associations and Foundations 2008-2020 (thousands pcs)

The leader in the number of most registered Associations and Foundations is the Southern Macroregion and has not changed over the studied period. The data also shows that the number of registered foundations and associations has increased by 60% since 2008, despite the fact that 2016 marked the highest number of actively operating organisations. During the studied period, no differences in the increase in the number of organizations across the regions were noted. Each region has successively increased the number of NGOs. Seeing how the situation concerning regional changes has not changed, only Poland in general can be taken into consideration as a representative value for all regions.

From the point of view of knowledge management, the legal personality of NGOs associated is important (Table 1), because it strengthens the credibility of the organization in the eyes of donors, and gives a sense of security to stakeholders - recipients of NGO's products or services.

Table 1: The Division of Associations and Foundations by the Legal Personality of the Associated Persons

Poland Years	Organisations of individuals (thousands)	Organisations of legal entities (thousands)	Organisations of individuals (%)	Organisations of legal entities (%)
2010	69.7	5.9	92.2	7.8
2012	71.2	6.2	92.0	8.0
2014	74.2	5.4	93.2	6.8
2016	74.7	5.8	92.8	7.2
2018	70.2	5.8	92.4	7.6
2020	76.1	3.6	95.5	4.5

In Poland, the dominating forms are organisations of individuals. The highest number of organisations of individuals was recorded in 2020, while that for legal entities in 2016 and 2018. The decreasing number, both percentage and quantity, of organisations of legal entities is not the result of establishing organizations of individuals but rather is the result of consolidating legal entities which clearly translates into the number of organisations of legal entities. Active NGOs bringing together both groups work in other areas of the social economy and their activities are not mutually exclusive.

An important factor in terms of knowledge management is job stability. From the knowledge management point of view, the possibility of systemic knowledge sharing in both groups should be considered. If we take into account the dispersion of tacit knowledge in organizations associating natural persons, employment stability becomes an important factor in knowledge management in this regard. In Poland, non-profit organizations did not employ employees, which is shown by the data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland from 2018 and 2020. It was respectively 63% (GUS, 2018) and 61.6% (GUS, 2022) of NGOs. Whereas, if there are employees then civil contracts constitute the dominant form of employment (Table 2).

**Table 2: Forms of Employment of People in NGOs**

Poland Years	total persons employed on a contract of employment as at 31 December (thousands)	Median	total persons employed on a contract of employment basis as at 31 December (%)	total persons employed on the basis of civil law contracts (thousands of persons)	Median	total persons employed on the basis of civil law contracts (%)
2008	70.8					
2010	132.5	3	25.4	389.9	4	74.6
2012	147.0	3	28.1	375.4	4	71.9
2014	150.4	3	27.5	397.3	4	72.5
2016	162.4	3	28.4	410.1	3	71.6
2018	173.4	3	28.2	441.2	4	71.8
2020	181.2	4	31.5	393.4	3	68.5

The trend of NGOs employing staff on the basis of civil contracts has been practised throughout the entire studied period, while the median distribution for both contracts is similar at 3-4 people employed by an organisation. The study included only those organisations that claimed to employ people.

The following step consists in comparing the forms of employment in an organisation by Association and Foundation (Table 3). The critical determinant of KM's success is the human factor. Researchers emphasize that personal commitment to the mission, values, strategies and goals of the organization, as well as encouraging and strengthening it, are crucial for the creation of knowledge, both explicit and tacit. In order to carry out KM activities, a lasting relationship must be built between the organization and the staff. Such a relationship requires a legal act in the form of a contract. Therefore, it is important to analyze the forms of employment in the surveyed NGOs.

**Table 3: Paid Work in Associations and Foundations in 2020**

SPECIFICATION		Associations and social organizations	Foundations	Total	
a – in thous. b –percentages of the numbers mentioned in the row 1 c –percent of the total number of persons employed on the basis of employment contract d – in persons					
1		2	3	4	
<b>TOTAL ORGANIZATIONS</b>		a	31,1	16,0	47,1
		b	100,0	100,0	100,0
<b>Organizations without paid employees</b>		a	18,5	7,1	25,6

	b	59,6	44,3	54,4
<b>Organizations with personnel employed only on the basis of civil law contracts</b>	a	7,6	5,0	12,6
	b	24,4	31,4	26,8
<b>Organizations with personnel employed on the basis of employment contract</b>	a	5,0	3,9	8,9
	b	16,0	24,3	18,9
<b>1 - 5 employees</b>	b	8,5	16,3	11,1
<b>6 - 19 employees</b>	b	4,4	5,0	4,6
<b>20 employees and more</b>	b	3,2	3,0	3,1
<b>of which organizations employed at least one person with disability</b>	b	2,5	4,8	3,3
<b>Total persons employed on the basis of employment contract as of 31.12.2020</b>	a	82,5	39,8	122,3
<b>of which persons for whom the organization was the main employer</b>	c	80,5	84,2	81,8
<b>of which women</b>	c	61,8	64,1	62,6
<b>of the total employed on the basis of employment contract:</b>				
<b>pre-working age</b>	c	0,6	0,0	0,4
<b>working age</b>	c	90,4	93,8	91,6
<b>mobility age</b>	c	57,2	64,5	59,7
<b>on-mobility age</b>	c	33,2	29,3	31,9
<b>post-working age</b>	c	9,0	6,2	8,0
<b>Average<sup>a</sup> number of persons employed on the basis of employment contract as of 31.12.2020</b>	d	17	10	13,5
<b>Median<sup>a</sup> number of persons employed on the basis of employment contract as of 31.12.2020</b>	d	5	3	4
<b>Average<sup>a</sup> number of persons employed on the basis of employment contract in full-time jobs in 2020</b>	a	67,3	32,4	49,9
<b>Average<sup>a</sup> number of full-time jobs within organizations employing on the basis of employment contract in 2020</b>	d	13	8	10,5
<b>Median<sup>a</sup> number of full-time jobs within organizations employing on the basis of employment contract in 2020</b>	d	4	2	3
<b>Total persons employed on the basis of civil law contracts in 2020</b>	a	141,5	107,5	249,0
<b>of which women</b>	c	83,7	58,5	58,8
<b>of which persons for whom the organization was the main employer</b>	c	19,5	11,8	12,8
<b>Average<sup>a</sup> number of persons employed on the basis of civil law contracts in 2020 for whom the organization was the main employer</b>	d	12	8	12,9
<b>Median<sup>a</sup> number of persons employed on the basis of civil law contracts in 2020, for whom the organization was the main employer</b>	d	2	2	2
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	

<b>Organizations benefiting from work of volunteers</b>	a	28,7	14,3	43,0
<b>of which:</b>	c	98,9	96,4	98,1
<b>members of the organization</b>				
<b>external volunteers</b>	c	29,4	44,5	34,4
<b>volunteers having volunteer contracts</b>	c	16,5	24,9	19,3
<b>Total volunteers</b>	a	1459,5	345,4	1804,9
<b>of which members of the organization</b>	c	88,0	13,9	63,5
<b>of which women</b>	c	55,1	54,5	54,9
<b>Average number of volunteers</b>	d	51	24	42,1
<b>Median number of volunteers</b>	d	8	4	7

In 2020 54.4% of the foundations and associations had no employed staff and 12.6% employed people only under a civil contract. Abusing civil contracts is the domain of non-profit organisations. Organisations that create full-time positions for employees constitute only 18.9%. Individuals whose primary employment consists in that for associations and foundations account for 80.5%, of which 84.4% are employed on contract of employment and 12.9% on civil contracts. It should be assumed that people working in organisations are committed to their work and willing to share their knowledge. It is also important to note that organisations most often (11%) employ up to five people. Meaning that NGOs are small organisations, often lacking sufficient human capital and thus finding it difficult to manage knowledge. If we take the knowledge management cycle into consideration, there are not enough employees to handle every element, so the people employed probably handle the entire cycle simultaneously. This also proves the higher competence of those working for NGOs. To a large extent, the desire for social action motivates these people to work and act for these organisations. However, treating people inappropriately does not work in favour of building trust in the organisation and building the potential in sharing their knowledge. NGOs most often employ women of working age (they account for 60% of those employed).

According to a study by GUS, in 2020, 91.3% of organisations took advantage of community service. A following 34% were volunteers and only 19% signed a volunteering agreement. According to the GUS study, 74.1% of organisations used exclusively social work. A following 13.1% pay for work irregularly (on the basis of individual civil law contracts), which constitutes a barrier for knowledge management in non-profit organizations. Employees in such organisations do not feel safe, and it should be emphasized that working in such organisations may result from a desire to acquire competences and leave the organisation, but it also indicates a need to act in the social sphere. Treating the staff in such a way is the reason for knowledge retention problems in non-profit organisations. People working in such organisations do not feel comfortable in sharing knowledge, and the contacts with the beneficiaries of these organisations are often individual and limited. Knowledge sharing and management should be prioritized in order to better and more effectively carry out activities in the social sphere.

#### 4. Discussion and Contribution

This paper reviews the literature in the field of knowledge management and adapts it to the needs of non-profit organisations, thus filling the research gap. The findings of the study concerning knowledge management in NGOs are worrying. KM as a critical success factor of the organization requires the involvement of people who are associated with the organization. Knowledge is a human domain, and thanks to acting and sharing it, organisations are prepared to meet demands, needs, and expectations. Knowledge is the domain of man, and by acting and sharing it, organizations are prepared to meet the requirements, needs and expectations. Unfortunately, NGOs often face staff shortages - only 18% of organisations employ paid staff. The interaction between the competences of individual organisations and knowledge management is very strong and that is why these organisations should focus more strongly on investing in human capital. By introducing knowledge management components to their management, they increase their competitiveness in relation to stakeholders. Thanks to our findings, the knowledge on the impact of employment stability (forms of staff employment in NGOs) on KM has been supplemented.

Non-profit organisations often benefit from the community work of both their members and external volunteers. Introducing volunteers into the social space of these organizations often constitutes a form of

filling staff shortages. Whereas, using the volunteers is not included or is even ignored in the knowledge management system. The source literature, as well as this paper, points to a great research gap that should inspire researchers. Future research and analysis should be completed in terms of the growth of competences and skills of volunteers as well as their impact on organisations in the social space in the area of knowledge management.

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