

## The Relationship Between Leadership Style and Lifelong Learning of Employees

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### Abstract:

**Research Question (RQ):** Lifelong learning is the basis of today's business. All employees, and their managers, in modern times, need to continuously learn and work on developing their abilities. Nevertheless, lifelong learning requires certain efforts, and support is needed throughout the process. The main problem of the research was the influence of different leadership styles on lifelong learning. The main question was leaders and leadership styles influence the lifelong learning of their employees and followers?

**Purpose:** The main purpose of the research was to examine the relationship between leadership styles and lifelong learning of employees. The purpose was to see which leadership styles were most supportive of lifelong learning, that is, which leadership styles lead to the greatest motivation when it comes to lifelong learning of employees.

**Method:** In the theoretical part of the work, previous research related to this topic were consulted. Empirical research has been done on a sample of 30 companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, an analysis of leadership styles in the analysed companies, an analysis of lifelong learning methods, and the relationship between leadership styles and lifelong learning was examined.

**Results:** The research results indicate that the most represented leadership style in small and medium enterprises is democratic (56.7%). When it comes to supporting employees in the context of additional learning, the research results indicate that autocratic leaders are most often willing to support their employees through financial investments, while democratic leaders are more willing to provide their employees with days off to improve professionally. Also, the research results show that the approach to learning among employees is the most studious and better in cases where the leader is an autocrat, but the avoidance of learning is most present in cases where the leader is laissez-faire.

**Organization:** Through the research, it was determined which leadership styles contributed most to the motivation for lifelong learning, and insight into such results could be an input for leaders (or those who intend to become leaders) on how to adapt their style in the context of the greatest motivation of employees towards lifelong learning.

**Society:** More knowledge, or learning, surely leads to greater social responsibility. Through lifelong learning, not only employees' benefit, but also managers, clients, consumers, and the wider social community.

**Originality:** Research of this type is one of the most important in this region, where the connection between leadership styles and lifelong learning is sought on a sample of small and medium-sized enterprises.

**Limitations / further research:** Research limitations refer to difficulties in the process of forming a sample and obtaining data. Recommendations for future research refer to the inclusion of additional variables in the existing constellation, among which are change management, quality, formal education.

**Keywords:** lifelong, learning, leaders, leadership, managers, styles, recommendations, influence.

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## 1 Introduction

Lifelong learning is inseparable from the development of people, but also the development of companies today. It is unreasonable to expect social development without education. However, the demands on employees today are much greater than the demands placed on employees in the 70s and 80s, in the context of learning. This is quite logical, because modern times bring a lot of new information, science and technology are constantly developing, and accordingly, employees have more knowledge and skills that they need to accept when performing their daily tasks. It can be said that the time of learning only at school or college has passed, and that lifelong learning, as a sociological and psychological construct, has long been alive and has its place in society. The paradigm of learning in school or college has been overcome, therefore employees today learn both at work and after work, in order to remain competitive and to meet the demands of the job. The paper will investigate how different leadership styles affect the lifelong learning of employees, i.e. which styles are the most supportive of lifelong learning, and which leadership styles are the least stimulating to employees in the context of their motivation for lifelong learning.

The main purpose of this kind of research is to examine the will of employees for lifelong learning in the context of different leadership styles. The paper will examine whether different leadership styles contribute to a higher level of employee motivation in the context of lifelong learning. Based on these results, we will have information about which leadership styles contribute most to the motivation of employees in the context of lifelong learning, and a signal will be given for the potential correction of leadership styles in order to increase the level of willingness, motivation and readiness of the respondents towards lifelong learning.

## 2 Theoretical foundations

Learning is not limited to reading, writing and arithmetic. Lifelong learning can be seen as a set of organizational and procedural guidelines for educational practice with the aim of encouraging learning throughout life. Such learning can be called intentional learning. (Iqbal, 2009, p. 5). The term “lifelong learning” was used as early as the late 1920s, but there are different interpretations of the term in different countries. In the United States, it is often understood as a synonym for adult education and associated with alternative educational activities, such as educational mediation. In Europe, the term is more related to the integration of learning and work, especially through programs that include paid educational leave or continuing education. In South Africa, the trade union movement, especially within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), is developing the concept of lifelong learning as part of a broader education and training system that should meet the needs of equity and development. Adrienne Bird from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) explains that the goal of lifelong learning is the gradual improvement of workers through a combination of formal and informal learning, including on-the-job learning. In the

global educational context, lifelong learning has become a key mantra of educational policy in the new millennium (Verma, Singh, 1995, p. 558).

Lifelong learning was therefore set as a way of working in each new generation of employees that comes. However, it is believed that the need for learning has never been greater than in this modern and turbulent time. Previous research indicates that Generation Z is the generation that is currently facing major challenges related to learning after formal education, and needs support along the way (Olejnik, 2022, p. 15).

Organizational learning can be influenced by several different items, and one that is extremely important is definitely the leadership style. This has been researched before.

When talking about leadership styles, the most common division of them is autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire leadership style. Autocratic leadership is a style in which the leader makes all decisions without involving employees, often maintaining a significant distance from the team. This style of leadership is usually imposed on the organization, and decision-making is almost completely under the control of the leader. Although employees may be asked for their opinions during the decision-making process, these opinions are rarely taken into account. Autocratic leaders rely on their own judgments and ideas, and rarely accept advice or suggestions from their team. In autocratic leadership, the leader maintains strict control over the group, dictating how tasks should be done and not trusting employees with important decisions or responsibilities. Group members usually have little or no influence on the decision-making process and are expected to follow orders without question. This leadership style is often perceived as authoritarian and controlling. However, although the above sounds like a style that is doomed in advance, in real life, this style is very successful (Chukwusa, 2019, p 19). Democratic leadership is a style that emphasizes participation, cooperation and joint decision-making within the group. A democratic leader encourages the participation of team members, actively including them in the decision-making process. This leadership style improves morale, as it creates an environment where individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute their ideas and opinions. Democratic leaders lead their teams, provide support and ensure that everyone has a voice in shaping the direction of the group. One of the key benefits of democratic leadership is its ability to increase employee satisfaction, engagement and commitment. By delegating authority and giving employees the responsibility to make decisions, democratic leaders help build trust and confidence among team members. This approach not only leads to higher productivity but also helps create an inclusive and cooperative organizational culture (Sharma, Singh, 2013, p. 3). Laissez-faire leadership is generally understood as a leadership style in which managers rarely attend the activities of their team, avoid making decisions and do not actively participate in work processes. Unlike other leadership styles, this style is characterized by minimal involvement and guidance by the leader. Research on this leadership style is rarer (Desgourdes et al, 2023, p. 37).

The authors Sánchez-Rodríguez et al (2024, p. 193) in their research examined the influence of leadership style on learning in the organization, and the research results support the fact that

organizational learning is largely determined by leadership style. The leadership style, according to the research results of these authors, contributes to building good organizational practices, which are very necessary for organizations in the context of their progress. Also, the authors of Sabir et al (2011, p. 145) proved in their research that organizations meet their expectations with hard-working employees, who, along with learning, contribute to the greatest results. Similar results were recorded in the research of Batista-Taran et al (2009, p. 16), where it was concluded that the overall commitment of workers is related to the leadership style in the company.

In their research, authors Kotur and Anbazhagan (2014, p. 103) examined the relationship between lifelong learning and leadership style. The research found that the democratic style of leadership is the most dominant on commitment to lifelong learning. According to Chandra and Priyono (2016, p. 19), leadership styles have an impact on many other things beyond the lifelong learning of respondents, such as the work environment and employee satisfaction with work. So, it can be concluded that leadership styles shape a very large number of items in an organization.

Authors Siddique, M., & Saadat, A. (2024, p. 187) in their research conducted on a sample of employees in higher education in Pakistan, determined that each leadership style brings a specific form of motivation to employees, and that not every leadership style is adapted for every organization. In their research, the authors Ong et al (2020, p. 19) determined, through SEM analysis during data processing, that leadership styles have a positive effect on organizational culture, employee learning and job satisfaction.

On a sample of 234 respondents in Kenya, the authors Lumumba et al (2021, p. 22) investigated how much leadership styles have an impact on lifelong learning. The research results indicate that the laissez-faire and autocratic styles have a negative impact on lifelong learning, while the democratic style has a positive impact. Similar results were recorded in the research of Foong (2024, p. 48), where it is indicated that leaders are in fact initiators of changes for the better when it comes to lifelong education.

Authors Sokolić et al (2024, p. 15) examined the influence of leadership styles on employee motivation exclusively in the public sector, on a sample of 383 employees. Research results indicate that there is a high correlation between leadership styles and a high level of motivation, suggesting that leaders who adopt new knowledge are more engaged and have a supportive approach towards employees, and in this way can significantly improve organizational performance. Similar results were recorded by Udin (2023, p. 1), according to whom it is the leader who is responsible for creating an adequate organizational culture that will support organizational learning.

In the context previously stated, according to Shahid (2024, p. 30), leaders must anticipate organizational changes, but also market changes, and consequently have a continuous commitment to organizational learning. According to Ho et al (2019, p. 19), leaders should play

an intermediary role between learning and employees. In their research, on a sample of 514 respondents, they confirmed that leadership has a positive effect on organizational lifelong learning. According to Qin (2022, p. 15), mid and senior leaders in China greatly influence employee performance, and this includes, among other things, commitment to lifelong learning. De facto, leadership is the link in an organization that basically has employees and everything related to them. Leaders are the most important organizational influencers, who have an influence on the organizational culture, work performance, image of the organization, and in this connection also on the lifelong learning of employees.

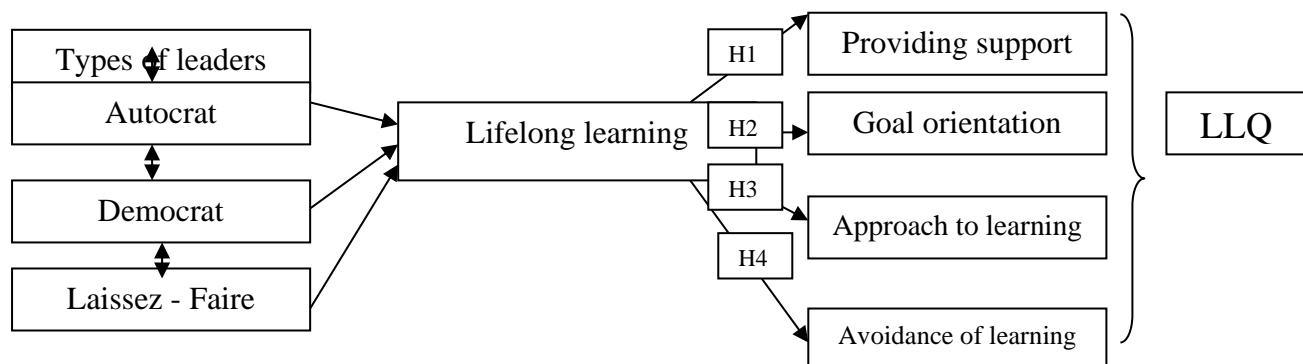
### 3 Methods

The study collected data from a sample of 30 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Balkan region. It focused on examining leadership styles, methods of lifelong learning, and the relationship between the two. Data were gathered using a questionnaire. To qualify for participation, respondents had to meet the following criteria: they had to be employees (not managers or directors), work in an SME and be familiar with the concept of lifelong learning, which had to be actively promoted in their company.

The primary tool used to assess lifelong learning was the Lifelong Learning Questionnaire (LLQ), developed by Cournoyer (2014, p. 73) and later used by Ho et al. (2019, p. 48). The LLQ includes 13 items and evaluates three aspects: goal orientation, learning approach, and learning avoidance. The instrument demonstrated a reliability of 0.70 and a validity of 0.50.

In addition to data on lifelong learning, the questionnaire also collected basic sociodemographic information about respondents and their companies, as well as details about their leaders—such as leadership type and the extent of support for lifelong learning. A graphical representation of the research model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
Research model



The collected data were processed in the SPSS statistical data processing program. The basic statistical methods used are the method of descriptive statistics, as well as the t test, which tests

whether there are statistically significant differences between the samples. Four key hypotheses were set, namely:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference between leaders in the context of providing support for lifelong learning.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference between goal orientation in the form of lifelong learning, among employees, considering the type of leader in the organization

H3: There is a statistically significant difference in the approach to learning among employees, considering the type of leader in the organization.

H4: There is a statistically significant difference in the avoidance of learning among employees, considering the type of leader in the organization.

## 4 Results

The sample consisted of 30 respondents, who are employed in small and medium-sized enterprises. Out of the total number of respondents, 21 persons are male (70 %), while 9 respondents are female (30 %). When it comes to age, 8 respondents are between 18 and 25 years old (26.7 %), 11 are between 26 and 35 years old (36.7 %), 9 are between 36 and 45 years old (0 %), while 2 respondents are between 46 and 55 years old (6.7 %). There were no respondents over the age of 55 in the sample. When it comes to the level of education, 6 respondents in the sample have completed secondary vocational education (20 % of respondents), 19 of them have completed the first cycle of studies (63.3 %), 4 people have completed the second cycle of studies (13.3 % of respondents) and only one person in the sample has completed the third cycle of studies (3.3 % of respondents). When it comes to the position in the organization, 100 % of respondents stated that they are employees, therefore, there are no owners/directors in the sample, which was also one of the sampling criteria, because based on the data obtained from employees, a clearer picture of the leader and his actions in the context of lifelong learning is obtained. Therefore, this sampling criterion is met. Exactly 50 % (15 respondents) stated that they were employed in small companies, while the remaining 15 were employed in medium-sized companies. All respondents in the sample stated that they are familiar with the concept of lifelong learning. Based on these results, it can be concluded that all sampling criteria are met, that is, that the sample is relevant. When it comes to the support of leaders towards lifelong learning in the organization, the research results indicate that 13 leaders (43.3 %) prefer financial support for their employees in the context of lifelong learning, and even 50 % of them (15 leaders) prefer stimulation in the form of days off for their employees, according to their views.

Table 1  
 A form of leader support towards lifelong learning in the organization

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Financial support</b>	13	43.3	43.3	43.3
<b>Free days/Time</b>	15	50.0	50.0	93.3
<b>Somenthing else</b>	1	3.3	3.3	96.7
<b>No support</b>	1	3.3	3.3	100.0
<b>Total</b>	30	100.0	100.0	

When it comes to the type of leaders in the analyzed organizations, the research results indicate that, according to the views of the respondents, in their organizations there are 7 autocrats (23.3%), 17 democrats (56.7 %) and 6 leaders characterized by laissez-faire (20 % of respondents).

Table 2  
 Types of leaders

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Autocrat</b>	7	23.3	23.3	23.3
<b>Democrat</b>	17	56.7	56.7	80.0
<b>Laissez - Faire</b>	6	20.0	20.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	30	100.0	100.0	

First of all, it was examined whether there was a statistically significant difference in support for lifelong learning, according to the type of leader.

Table 3  
 Types of Leaders vs Support of Leaders

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
<b>Types of leaders</b>	16.109	29	.000	1.96667	1.7170	2.2164
<b>Support of leaders</b>	12.836	29	.000	1.66667	1.4011	1.9322

The test results indicate that  $t=16.109$  with  $p=0.000$  ( $p<0.05$ ), from which it follows that there is a statistically significant difference between leaders in the context of providing support for lifelong learning. The research results indicate that autocrats provide the greatest support exclusively in the form of financial support, while democrats and laissez-faire leaders provide support for lifelong learning in other ways, e.g. in the form of days off.

Table 4  
 Types of leaders vs. Goal orientation: Lifelong learning

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
<b>Types of leaders</b>	16.109	29	.000	1.96667	1.7170	2.2164
<b>GO:Lifelong learning</b>	11.854	29	.000	3.03333	2.5100	3.5567

The test results indicate that  $t=16.109$  with  $p=0.000$  ( $p<0.05$ ), from which it follows that there is a statistically significant difference between goal orientation in the form of lifelong learning, among employees, considering what type of leader is in the organization. The research results indicate that goal orientation when it comes to lifelong learning is most pronounced in those organizations where the leader is an autocrat, and the lowest goal orientation is in those organizations where the leader is laissez-faire.

Table 5  
Types of leaders vs. Approach to learning

	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b>	
					<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
<b>Types of leaders</b>	16.109	29	.000	1.96667	1.7170	2.2164
<b>Approach to learning</b>	16.155	29	.000	2.70000	2.3582	3.0418

The test results indicate that  $t=16.109$  with  $p=0.000$  ( $p<0.05$ ), from which it follows that there is a statistically significant difference in the approach to learning among employees, considering what type of leader is in the organization. The results of the research indicate that the approach to learning among employees is the most studious and better in cases where the leader is an autocrat, and the least studious when the leader is a democrat.

Table 6  
Types of leaders vs. Learning avoidance

	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b>	
					<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
<b>Types of leaders</b>	16.109	29	.000	1.96667	1.7170	2.2164
<b>Learning avoidance</b>	14.699	29	.000	1.53333	1.3200	1.7467

The results of the test indicate that  $t=16.109$  with  $p=0.000$  ( $p<0.05$ ), from which it follows that there is a statistically significant difference in avoiding learning among employees, considering what type of leader is in the organization. The research results indicate that the avoidance of learning is most present in cases where the leader is laissez-faire, while the least avoidance of learning is present in cases where the leader is an autocrat.

## 5 Discussion

In the previous research, 30 respondents, employees of small and medium enterprises who expressed their views and thoughts related to the leader's attitude towards lifelong learning. The results of the research indicate that leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina support their employees in various ways when it comes to additional training, and most often it is support in the form of free days (in 50 % of cases) or some form of financial support (43 % of cases). In the largest number of respondents, 56 % of them, the leader is a democratic, while autocratic and laissez-faire as a form of leader appear less often in the sample.

The research results indicate that autocrat leaders most often support their employees financially, while other forms of leaders (democratic, laissez-faire) most often provide support for additional education in the form of days off. Previous research indicates that there are differences in the context of lifelong learning, with regard to the type of leader in the organization. This was recorded in earlier studies by the authors Davis and Cosenza (2002, p. 43), Garcia (2014, p. 629) and Gijselinckx and Janssen (2017, p. 314), but also in this study. Different types of leaders have different approaches to the organization itself, its life and development, and accordingly, they have different views on lifelong learning. Each style of leadership is characterized by certain specificities, which include a view of how and in what way, with which strategies and actions, to guide and motivate your employees towards lifelong learning.

There are differences between leaders and employees when it comes to goal orientation in terms of lifelong learning. Obtained results agree with the results previously recorded by Salanova and Schaufeli (2008, p. 21) and Birdi et al (2016, p. 807). It is interesting to point out that the results in this sample prove that the greatest orientation towards lifelong learning is in those organizations where the autocrat is the leader. These results destroy the old paradigm that the autocratic regime of work in an organization is harmful for the organization and its employees, because it is precisely in these organizations that the greatest orientation towards learning is present on the part of the employees.

The research results also indicate that there are differences between employees and leaders in terms of approach to learning. The same was noted in the research by Joo (2010, p. 1179), in which the impact of leadership on employee performance was examined. Indeed, in this hearing it was also shown that a lot depends on the leader, and that he is the one who, through his actions, ultimately determines the very approach to lifelong learning among employees.

Finally, in the research process it was concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in avoiding learning among employees, considering what type of leader is in the organization. The same was also investigated in the scientific work of Ghosh and Reio (2013, p. 165). At the very end of this part, it can be concluded that all the hypotheses set at the very beginning have been confirmed through the research process.

## 6 Conclusion

Based on the analogy of previous research, and empirical validation, on a sample of 30 examinees, useful knowledge was obtained about the ways and methods of support of different types of leaders to their employees in the context of lifelong learning. The results recorded on the sample confirmed the set hypotheses, and indicate that there are significant differences in the support of leaders towards employees in the context of lifelong learning. The research results recorded in this paper support the fact that employees' attitudes towards lifelong learning, approach and avoidance of learning may depend on the type of leader. The autocratic

style stands out as the one that best influences the development of the concept of lifelong learning in the organization.

The main contribution of this research is reflected in the theoretical and applied sense. In a theoretical sense, the work provides insight into the relationship between leadership styles and lifelong learning on a new, innovative approach. In the applied sense, through the results of the research, it is possible to determine which leadership styles contribute the most to the lifelong learning of employees.

The results of this research provide a broader picture of lifelong learning of employees and are one of the first studies of this kind in this region. Also, through the process of research of this type, the old paradigm that the autocratic style is harmful and prevents the development of ideas, creativity and learning is destroyed. The results of the research say the opposite. Also, insight is gained into cultural determinants, where the question is raised whether it is perhaps a cultural phenomenon that employees are most tolerant of creativity and the acquisition of new knowledge in an atmosphere imposed by an autocratic leader.

The main limitations of the research are reflected in the complexity of data collection and the potential dangers of insincerity when giving answers by the respondents.

However, this can be an interesting topic for further research in this area, such as learning difficulties, rewards for learning, etc. It is useful to state that the leader is the absolutely most important person in the organization, on whom the activities of all other individuals in it depend, therefore it is useful for the leader to adapt and subordinate his style of behavior and management to the progress of the organization.

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## Povzetek:

### Razmerje med stilom vodenja in vseživljenjskim učenjem zaposlenih

**Research Question (RQ):** Vseživljenjsko učenje je osnova današnjega poslovanja. Vsi zaposleni in njihovi vodje se morajo v sodobnem času nenehno učiti in delati na razvoju svojih sposobnosti. Kljub temu vseživljenjsko učenje zahteva določen trud in podporo skozi ves proces. Glavni problem raziskave je bil vpliv različnih stilov vodenja na vseživljenjsko učenje. Glavno vprašanje je bilo, ali vodje in stili vodenja vplivajo na vseživljenjsko učenje svojih zaposlenih in sledilcev?

**Purpose:** Glavni namen raziskave je bil preučiti povezavo med slogi vodenja in vseživljenjskim učenjem zaposlenih. Namen je bil ugotoviti, kateri slogi vodenja najbolj podpirajo vseživljenjsko učenje, torej kateri slogi vodenja vodijo do največje motivacije, ko gre za vseživljenjsko učenje zaposlenih.

**Method:** V teoretičnem delu dela so bile upoštevane predhodne raziskave, povezane s to temo. Empirična raziskava je bila opravljena na vzorcu 30 podjetij, malih in srednje velikih, v Balkanski regiji, v kateri je bila opravljena analiza stilov vodenja v analiziranih podjetjih, analiza metod vseživljenjskega učenja ter preučena povezava med stilimi vodenja in vseživljenjskim učenjem.

**Results:** Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da je najbolj zastopan slog vodenja v malih in srednje velikih podjetjih demokratični (56,7 %). Ko gre za podporo zaposlenim v kontekstu dodatnega učenja, rezultati raziskave kažejo, da so avtokratski vodje najpogosteje pripravljeni podpreti svoje zaposlene s finančnimi naložbami, medtem ko so demokratični vodje bolj pripravljeni svojim zaposlenim zagotoviti proste dni za strokovno izboljšanje. Prav tako rezultati raziskave kažejo, da je pristop k učenju med zaposlenimi najbolj študijsko zavzet in boljši v primerih, ko je vodja avtokrat, izogibanje učenju pa je najbolj prisotno v primerih, ko je vodja laissez-faire.

**Organization:** Z raziskavo je bilo ugotovljeno, kateri vodstveni slogi so najbolj prispevali k motivaciji za vseživljenjsko učenje, vpogled v te rezultate pa bi lahko bil vhod za vodje (ali tiste, ki nameravajo postati vodje), kako prilagoditi svoj slog v kontekstu največje motivacije zaposlenih za vseživljenjsko učenje.

**Society:** Več znanja oziroma učenja zagotovo vodi k večji družbeni odgovornosti. Z vseživljenjskim učenjem ne koristijo le zaposleni, temveč tudi vodje, stranke, potrošniki in širša družbena skupnost.

**Originality:** Raziskava te vrste je ena od najbolj pomembnih v regiji, kjer se na vzorcu malih in srednje velikih podjetij išče povezava med vodstvenimi slogi in vseživljenjskim učenjem.

**Limitations / further research:** Omejitve raziskave se nanašajo na težave pri oblikovanju vzorca in pridobivanju podatkov. Priporočila za prihodnje raziskave se nanašajo na vključitev dodatnih spremenljivk v obstoječo konstelacijo, med katerimi so upravljanje sprememb, kakovost in formalno izobraževanje.

**Ključne besede:** vseživljenjsko učenje, vodje, vodenje, managerji, stili, priporočila, vpliv.

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