

## Human Resource Management Competencies of Microenterprise Owners – A Review of Past Research in Poland

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This study aimed to identify and discuss existing research in Poland on human resource management (HRM) competencies of microenterprises' (ME) owners. The article categorises the knowledge of competencies and related terms, and identifies the main conclusions of past research on MEs and directions for future research.

**Methodology:** This study was based on a systematic literature review of competency studies in MEs in Polish database.

**Results:** The article summarises the research so far, including identifying its limitations and indicating future recommendations. The review highlights the lack of direct research on HRM competencies in MEs and their owners, thereby identifying the research gap and creating a contribution to further studies.

**Implications and recommendations:** The article indicates the research gap for future research on MEs, and presents the collected recommendations for further research by the authors of the researched publications.

**Originality/value:** The research contributes to the field of management and quality sciences, also supporting ME entrepreneurship, thus pointing to the country's economic development as well as shed lighting on the existing research, identifying areas for future studies.

**Keywords:** micro-enterprise, micro-entrepreneur, competence, human resource management

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## 1. Introduction

Scientific studies confirm that the effective use of human resources contributes to the achievement of company goals (Pocztowski & Miś, 2000). Such an approach seeks to make full use of human capital, which is a source of competitive advantage, a pathway to achieving company objectives and supporting employee development and thus innovation (Oczkowska & Bukowska, 2014). Competence influences the use of emerging opportunities and the elimination of risks that arise from modern challenges for organizations that determine the management of people, i.e. cultural diversity, globalisation and the development of technology.

International publications on the management of people in microenterprises reveal that there are currently not enough scientific studies on HRM competencies in this type of enterprise (Kelliher & Reinl, 2009), resulting in owners not seeing HRM as an important area affecting their operations (Małecka, 2018). The omission of MEs in studies can be explained by a number of reasons, including, for example, the lack of specialised human resources units in the organization (Hayton, 2003; Ordiz-Fuertes & Fernandez-Sanchez, 2003), the wide variety of enterprise characteristics, the lack of consistent management structures and management based on the owner's decisions. MEs, due to limited resources, do not have specialised HRM positions, and the organization of employee functioning matters is characterised by little or no formalisation (Pocztowski, 2006). This paper, addressing the demand for replacing advanced HRM solutions in large companies with a range of competencies for the self-employed and micro-entrepreneurs (Pauli et al., 2019), includes a review of the existing research in Poland. The identification of research conducted in this area is the first step to planning research that will fill the indicated gap.

## 2. The Role of Microenterprises in the Economy

MEs belong to the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector, which as an area is the subject of much scientific research. The SME sector accounts for 99.8% of businesses in Poland and includes micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości [PARP], 2022). The European Commission stresses the importance of SMEs to the entire European Union: "SMEs account for 99% of all companies in the EU, making them the backbone of the EU economy. (...) They stimulate a sense of entrepreneurship and innovation, which helps stimulate and competitiveness, economic growth and employment in Europe" (European Commission, 2020). An ME has fewer than ten employees and an annual turnover or balance sheet of no more than €2 million. However, the definition of an ME, as indicated by the European Commission, is not the basis for this categorisation in all countries (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 136). The difference between countries in terms of the number of employees in microenterprises means that international research cannot be standardised across all EU countries.

Tuszyński, in his article on the role of MEs in the national economy, quoted Confucius saying: "everything that is big now was once small, and even a thousand-mile journey begins with the first step" (Tuszyński, 2011, p. 188). The importance of microenterprises on the overall development of the economy has been confirmed by the 2019 data presented in a report by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development. MEs are the largest group accounting for 97% of all enterprises in Poland, their number has been growing steadily since 2013 (Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości [PARP], 2022). Average employment in this type of enterprise in 2021 was 1,527.4 thousand people (Główny Urząd Statystyczny [GUS], 2022). In 2019, MEs generated about 30.6% of Poland's GDP (Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości [PARP], 2022). It is worth noting that the identified publications in the literature review mostly refer to studies presented in subsequent PARP reports.

### 3. The Essence of Competencies and Their Impact on Efficiency

Research on competencies was initiated by McClelland, followed by Boyatzis, who pointed out the need for certain conditions to exist for the development of competencies to be effective, and the link to the efficiency of the management system (Jabłoński, 2019). Most researchers take into account the components of competence identified by Spencer & Spencer (1993), i.e. knowledge, skills, motives, personality traits and self-assessment. Wiśniewska (2014) emphasized that there are no commonly used components of competence in the literature. Over the years, components such as ability (Parry, 1996; Lévy-Leboyer, 1997), motivation (Jia & Fan, 2008), experience (Awang et al., 2013; Gajdzik, 2013) and aptitude (Oleksyn, 2010) have been added. The lack of clarity in the components belonging to the competencies affects the emergence of many differences in research approaches.

The literature distinguishes between two approaches to competence, competence in terms of an individual's characteristics or defined as personal preparation and qualities (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012, p. 45) and competency as an area of work in which a person should be competent (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012, p. 45; Pocztowski, 2018). In addition, many authors defined, interpreted and interchangeably used the concepts of skills, abilities and competencies as components of intangible resources in terms of different concepts (Macias, 2009). The author proposed the definition indicated by Pocztowski of competence as a cluster of enduring characteristics of an individual, constituting a configuration of knowledge, skills, abilities, motives and values, ensuring high efficiency in a specific area and context of professional activity (Pocztowski, 2018). Human capital and knowledge-based organizations are increasingly important. Competencies influence the use of opportunities and the avoidance of risks associated with contemporary challenges, i.e. cultural diversity, globalisation, technological innovation, flexible work models. Research on HRM competencies will identify and promote a set of practices and attitudes in an environment characterised by dynamic change and unpredictability.

### 4. Methodological Assumptions of the Literature Review

The literature review is designed to map and evaluate the research area. The results allow the researchers to formulate objectives, justify research questions and hypotheses, and reliably develop methodological assumptions and justification for the research. A literature review used in this way can act as a theoretical framework or research background. The theoretical framework allows for focusing on specific variables and defining a particular point of view (Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021, p. 131). The identification of the existing studies in the researched area made it possible to determine the current knowledge of HRM competencies in MEs' owners, identify research gaps, as well as point out the limitations of existing research. Thus, the literature review prepared in this way can influence not only the research plans of the author of the review, but also indicate possible directions for other researchers. The review enabled the construction of theoretical and definitional models pertaining to the area, thus providing an opportunity to compare them with assumptions in academic textbooks.

The main objective of the systematic literature review was to assess and synthesise the published literature related to HRM competencies among MEs' owners in Poland. In addition, it can serve to identify the main approaches and new research directions in the relevant literature, which will contribute to determining future research directions based on the found knowledge gap. The research questions formulated for the article are:

1. What is the current state of research on HRM competencies in MEs, with a focus on the motivation of the researchers, the methods used, the limitations, the stated importance of micro-businesses and the main conclusions of the previous research in Poland?
2. What subject areas have been explored so far?
3. What are the directions for future research on HRM competencies in MEs' owners?

To ensure the continuity of the research (Tranfield et al., 2003), an initial search of the BazEKON database was first performed on the basis of keywords using Boolean operators. The database was selected due to the planned research on Polish micro-enterprises in the future, the conditions of this type of enterprises are unique due to their local character. The EKON database is a full-text database in economic sciences and related fields, created by the largest Polish economic universities (Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021, pp. 75-76). Access to the database is free of charge. A search of the database was performed in February 2024. The keywords selected were “kompetencje” and “mikroprzedsiębiorstwo” with the “AND” operator included, which means that searches included only papers that had both words in the title, abstract or keywords. The search results indicated only six publications, hence the decision was made to search using a single keyword – “mikroprzedsiębiorstwo” – thus obtaining 488 publications. An additional exclusion criterion was the availability of the full text of the publication. After imposing the criterion, 371 articles remained. Following the review and verification of the titles, abstracts and keywords, 17 publications were selected for further analysis. On reading the full text of these articles, 15 publications were subjected to data extraction.

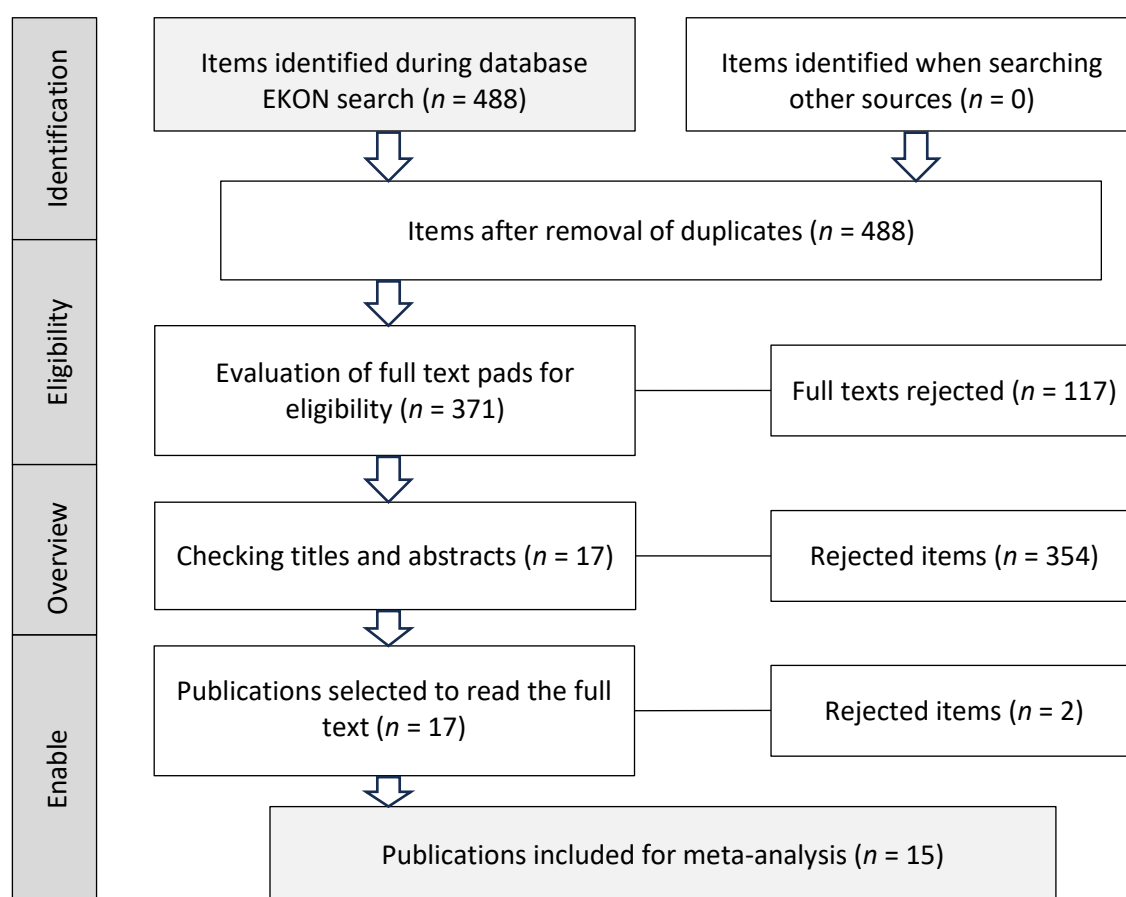


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Source: own elaboration based on (Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021, p. 214).

None of the publications directly addressed the HRM competencies of MEs' owners. All the study was indirectly related to them, such as including family businesses in their research, which involved more than just MEs (Gołoszevska-Kaczan, 2012), examining the competencies of workers in the shadow economy (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012), focusing on SME owners in general (Korpysa, 2013), or identifying opportunities and threats in the area of HRM in MEs (Kowalewski, 2016). The lack of a direct result indicates a gap in the research up to date.

## 5. Literature Review

### 5.1. Motives and Research Methods of Identified Publications

The main rationale indicated by researchers was to study ME innovation (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 138) and to determine the impact of MEs on the global economy (Tuszyński, 2011). Some researchers highlighted the lack of items in the literature that focus on the competencies of small business entrepreneurs (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012, p. 45). The objectives of the research included presenting the differences in specific types of enterprises (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012, p. 46), the limitations and opportunities of MEs in the process of HRM (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 148), the role and importance of employees in their innovation activities (Kowalewski, 2017, p. 117) and changes in the specifics of HRM due to the impact of economic consulting (Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 35). Other work sought to identify and analyse specific processes in MEs, i.e. planning (Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 21), recruitment and selection (Gaura, 2014, p. 41) and remuneration (Kowalska, 2018, p. 142). The authors pointed to various motives, including the lack of research on HRM processes in microenterprises, but there are still no publications that directly address this topic.

The authors of the identified studies focused primarily on quantitative methods, such as survey questionnaires (Kukulak-Dolata, 2014, p. 31; Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 22; Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 36), telephone surveys (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012, p. 45) and the documentary method (Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 22), concentrating on quantitative methods in competency research can be fraught with limitations. Describing microenterprises, according to the author of this paper, requires first of all a combination of quantitative research using various indicators and qualitative research, for example, using interviews with the owners of this type of enterprise.

### 5.2. Limitations of Research in Identified Publications

The identified limitations of past research include comparing results to areas different from the MEs environment in Poland, such as generalising research results from Peru (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137), and from the international SME sector (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137). Studies also looked at small companies without indicating MEs (Gaura, 2014), analysing specific industries or focusing on a small research sample (Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 21), and including even a single company (Kochanowicz, 2018, pp. 25-26). A recurring mistake is frequent referring of MEs to the SME sector. MEs are distinguished from other companies by their unique characteristics, which are determined from specific factors that they have no control over due to their limited own potential (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 136). What is lacking in the research so far is a focus directly on the HRM competencies of microenterprise owners, while the research that has been already conducted is distinguished by its inability to be generalised to all enterprises of this type.

### 5.3. The Importance of MEs for the Development of the Economy

Researchers clearly emphasised the importance of MEs activities on economic growth (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137; Kowalewski, 2016, p. 148), stressing the significant contribution to the value of GDP and to raising the standard of living (Tuszyński, 2011, p. 191), the role of a stimulator (Kowalewski, 2017, p. 118), and as an engine of economic development in Poland (Kowalska, 2018, p. 142). Kowalewski (2016, p. 147) defined MEs as a critical element in the structure of any national economy, in which the country's entrepreneurship can be measured by the growth dynamics of the number of MEs.

In addition to economic growth, publications most often pointed to the impact on job creation (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137; Tuszyński, 2011, pp. 194-197; Kowalewski, 2017, p. 121; Kowalska, 2018, p. 156), on entrepreneurship (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137; Tuszyński, 2011, p. 199), economic dynamism (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137; Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 35), and social

development (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, p. 137; Kowalewski, 2017, p. 122). Individual indications included less environmental damage and decentralisation of business and employment (Kowalewski, 2017, p. 122), achieving a better market position (Kukulak-Dolata, 2014, p. 44) and stimulating creativity (Tuszyński, 2011, p. 199). All their indications point to the strategic importance of MEs for the development of society and the economy.

The research identified internal growth factors such as the age of the company, experience, the owner's personality traits and the state of the IT infrastructure. The owner's personality traits have been divided into specific (including risk propensity, willingness to grow, risk anticipation, delegation of responsibilities) and general (practical knowledge, technical and managerial skills, education) (Juchniewicz & Decyk, 2010, pp. 142-143). The aforementioned characteristics are referred to in the literature as competencies.

The barriers to MEs' development identified in the publications include their unique characteristics (Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 24), limited resources (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 151; Kowalska, 2018, pp. 155-156), and the lack of knowledge regarding HRM (Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 25; Kowalewski, 2016, p. 148), and the scarcity or low level of ME owner competence (Kowalewski, 2017, p. 131; Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 35). Staff and financial constraints indicated a focus more on cost reduction, product improvement, product mix change, marketing, or upgrading machinery and equipment (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 151). Another suggested limitation was the generally framed personnel policy, which is often carried out unprofessionally, relying on social relationships and emotions. What distinguishes micro companies are small numbers of employees, modest turnover, small scale of operation, scarcity of specialists, problems in obtaining external funds – which adds to the impression of the ME owner's lack of knowledge, skills and motivation (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 148).

#### **5.4. Main Conclusions of the Previous Research in Poland and Subject Areas Explored**

The ME sector is dominated by companies focused on serving the local market due to their organizational, human and financial capabilities, and their owners have to adapt to the existing environment and try to fill a perceived niche in the market (Kukulak-Dolata, 2014, p. 31). This causes them to be aware of the need to constantly control the market and focus on products and their production instead of human resources.

Competencies in the field of HRM were not directly indicated in the identified publications. Some of the competencies included in the scope of HRM were referred to in studies as management competencies (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 150), managerial competencies (Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 35) or personal competencies (Wasilczuk & Zięba, 2012, p. 52). The authors suggested that personal competencies are acquired with age through experience, making older people more likely to perceive themselves as having developed entrepreneurial competencies. This finding calls for separate empirical research, focusing on the self-assessment of MEs owners' competencies.

Studies indicate that MEs owners do not attach importance to recruitment processes, do not plan staffing needs, do not have a database of previous recruitments, use the simplest and cheapest instruments, and focus on professional skills rather than social competencies (Gaura, 2014, p. 41). Some owners do not demonstrate problems with hiring employees, although a threat has been indicated due to the requirements of increasing competence, at the same time the same research indicates a low propensity to make investments in human capital (Kukulak-Dolata, 2014, pp. 43-44). Employee selection mainly consists of analysing job application paperwork and interviewing (Kowalewski, 2016). Such a situation may confirm the lack of awareness of MEs owners and the prevalence of ad hoc actions in personnel management, who only when the need arises make the decision to hire an employee, thus indicating the lack of a strategic approach to workforce planning. Despite the fact that the employees of one of the surveyed companies pointed out the incompetence of the owner and the lack of knowledge of the rules of employee acquisition, the author cannot

consider them reliable, since they were conducted on only one company (Kochanowicz, 2018). In order to study the real situation related to the employee sourcing process in MEs, it is necessary to carry out reliable research, including a representative group of respondents.

Earlier research indicated that HRM processes should be tailored to individual employees in order to maximise commitment and efficiency. This approach can be used in the development and motivation of employees, such as through the use of individual sets of motivators (ISM). These involve identifying the needs and motivations of employees, taking into account MEs financial constraints, followed by implementation of the developed ISM elements, monitoring and periodic review, and implementation of any changes (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 153). The process ends with reference to the goals set at the beginning of the process. Another solution is the use of individual development plans (IDP), the implementation of which is similar to ISM. Both processes seek to optimally develop the competencies of ME employees. The limitation of this tool is the ongoing evaluation within the framework of employee evaluation, distinguished by direct contact, which can promote unfair evaluations. The author of the above pointed out some risks of their implementation, such as the lack of a vision and mission and a strategic approach, including ME personnel strategy (Kowalewski, 2016, p. 153). Similar conclusions on the HRM function surfaced in small and micro hotel enterprises in the province of Opole. Decisions and management are characterised by strong centralisation and the predominance of decision-making authority (Gawlik & Zagórna-Goplańska, 2016, p. 24).

In conclusion, it is important to discuss whether insufficient financial and non-financial support in managing human capital development (Kowalska, 2018, pp. 155-156) is the real reason for mismanagement in MEs. Their owners' low awareness of the role of HRM, reluctance to bear the costs of implementing HRM tools, the simple structure of the company, through which the HR function is not formalised but assigned to the ME's owner, may limit the overall activities in the implementation of the basic tasks of HRM (Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 37). At a time when human capital is crucial to organizations, research in this area seems necessary to maintain high social and economic development.

Answering the last research question, the thematic areas explored in the previous research included: identifying the determinants of MEs, the employee recruitment process as a unique process of MEs compared to larger enterprises, identifying tools to strengthen the individual approach to employees in ME's.

## **6. Findings and Recommendations for Future Research**

Earlier research indicates a knowledge gap regarding the HRM competencies of MEs owners in Poland, the main evidence of which was the lack of publications that directly addressed this issue. This is a significant problem due to the importance of MEs for the development of the economy and society. The competencies of their owners are crucial for this type of enterprise due to its characteristic features, i.e. limited financial and human resources and focus on the regional market (Kowalska, 2018, pp. 155-156). Research does not determine the impact of HRM competencies on MEs' efficiency. Future research will have an impact on the currently low awareness of their owners regarding the role of HRM (Lisowska & Stawasz, 2020, p. 37) and changes in attitudes toward implementing HRM tools. Acquiring the right competencies affects survival in the market, as the use of existing practices is often insufficient.

HRM competence in micro entrepreneurs is one of the less explained phenomena in organizations. Compared to research on SMEs, the number of studies dealing exclusively with microenterprises is limited. Researchers emphasised the importance of HRM in small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as the importance of competencies among entrepreneurs. However, there are still noticeable difficulties in understanding the right attitudes and defining and operationalising individual competencies.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can contribute to a better understanding of the mechanism and complexity of the area under study, namely HRM competencies. Further research will facilitate observation of changing behaviour in companies, taking into account the context, and also identification of factors that support the acquisition of competencies at individual and organizational levels.

After conducting a systematic review of the literature, it can be concluded that the current state of knowledge allows to state the importance of continuing research on the HRM competencies of MEs' owners. In this view, multilevel empirical research on this type of competence can contribute to recognising its relationship to MEs' effectiveness and development. Currently, findings on the HRM competencies of their owners are incomplete, and the existing studies do not allow either for generalisation of research findings, e.g. due to the lack of a representative research sample. This therefore raises the need for further in-depth and expanded research on HRM competencies.

Future research, and thus also management publications and textbooks, must emphasise the importance of creativity, flexibility, people management skills, communicativeness and openness as an ME owner traits that influence innovation and human capital development. Building employee commitment to creative thinking (as the development of creative competencies) and inclusion in management may be key in the near future (cf. Kowalewski, 2017, p. 131).

Only the Polish database was used to analyse the previous research and Polish keywords were used, which is an important limitation of the study. The next step must be a review of international literature and the consideration of publications, which are often not available in electronic databases, that deal with MEs owners' business and/or HRM competencies.

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## Kompetencje właścicieli mikroprzedsiębiorstw z zakresu zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi – przegląd dotychczasowych badań w Polsce

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### Streszczenie

**Cel:** Celem artykułu jest ocena stanu wiedzy w Polsce na temat kompetencji z zakresu zarządzania zasobami ludzkimi (ZZL) właścicieli mikroprzedsiębiorstw (MP). Praca kategoryzuje wiedzę oraz podejmuje próbę zidentyfikowania luki badawczej w krajowej literaturze, wskazując jednocześnie obszary wymagające dalszych analiz.

**Metodyka:** Zastosowano systematyczny przegląd literatury oparty na jednej bazie danych. Zidentyfikowano 371 publikacji, z których wyselekcjonowano 15 tekstów do pełnej analizy. Podczas ekstrakcji danych koncentrowano się na motywach badawczych, zastosowanych metodach, ograniczeniach oraz wnioskach z dotychczasowych badań.

**Wyniki:** Artykuł identyfikuje ograniczenia dotychczasowych badań i wskazuje przyszłe rekomendację. Przegląd podkreśla brak bezpośrednich badań analizujących kompetencje z zakresu ZZL właścicieli MP, uniemożliwiając uogólnianie wyników. Istniejące publikacje często obejmują MP w sektorze małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw.

**Implikacje i rekomendacje:** Wyniki wskazują potrzebę prowadzenia empirycznych badań, które powinny koncentrować się na operacjonalizacji kompetencji ZZL, ich wpływie na efektywność MP. Pozwoli to na zwiększenie świadomości właścicieli MP, co wpłynie na rozwój kapitału ludzkiego w sektorze MP.

**Oryginalność/wartość:** Badania wnoszą wkład w dziedzinę nauk o zarządzaniu i jakości, wspierając także przedsiębiorczość MP, a tym samym dążąc do rozwoju gospodarczego kraju. Rzucają światło na dotychczasowe badania, wskazując obszary do badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mikroprzedsiębiorstwo, mikroprzedsiębiorca, kompetencje, zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi

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