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EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION SCHEMES

Experiences of Polish Companies

SLMP Lean Management
Association
of Poland

Wrocław 2014

Lean Management Association of Poland (*Stowarzyszenie Lean Management Polska*, SLMP) was established in Wrocław in 2014. Its founders are a variety of people with an equal variety of professional backgrounds who decided to become jointly involved in popularising lean management in Poland. If you enjoy cooperating with others, sharing your knowledge, and if you consider lean management to be the most common sense method of management that can be implemented by every Polish organisation, this association may also be for you.

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1. AUTHORS' FOREWORD

According to the lean management literature, "idea," "suggestion," and also the commonly used "kaizen suggestion" ("kaizen") all refer to employee proposals as to how their workplace might be improved through improvements introduced into the organisation's areas and processes. In order to encourage such feedback among their personnel, a number of enterprises introduce specially-tailored organisational solutions called employee suggestion schemes/programmes, idea management systems or *kaizen teian*, the last form being borrowed from Japanese.[1] Under such programmes, employees' ideas are typically put forward in writing or *via* electronic means; afterwards, the ideas are evaluated. If considered worthy of implementation they are introduced and very often the authors are rewarded. This process has been the area of our research.

Both authors have had some previous experience with employee suggestion schemes. We consider the innovativeness and creativity of the company's personnel, especially of the rank-and-file, i.e. those who are closest to the processes, products and customers, to be of key importance to continuous improvement. Employee suggestion schemes are one of the tools that facilitate such activity, providing a source of valuable process-related and organisational innovations. They help the enterprise lower its operational costs, while at the same time making the work of the employees more pleasant, easier, and safer. If managed wisely, the schemes educate, motivate, and increase the sense of belonging. They also reduce employee anxiety toward changes. Even in an extremely well-managed company, the well of ideas never seems to dry up; all because the processes inside the company change, together with the produced goods or rendered services. Other things which are undergoing constant changes are the requirements of

the customers, legal context, technologies and materials used in production, machines, suppliers, as well as places where the work is performed.

Our intention is for the information contained in this report to serve as a benchmark for the widest range of people who wish to implement or improve existing employee suggestion schemes in their organisations. Our research was conducted on an interesting sample of companies, 80% of which have implemented employee suggestion schemes. Of those 90% were implementing or have implemented lean management. This document covers all the questions raised in the questionnaire, but we devoted most space to the issues that were – in our opinion – most vital: designing, perfecting, and maintaining suggestion schemes. Answers of the questionnaire participants to two open-ended questions stand out in terms of further interest – these were related to further development of suggestion schemes and the best developed practices in building and maintaining such tools. Not willing to exceed the predefined size of the final text, we provided an overview of the employee suggestion schemes in the 249 companies under scrutiny. Guidelines as to which solutions seem to be most effective when put in the context of the collected data and the statistical analysis thereof will be the subject of a separate publication.

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The project was made possible through the help of a large number of people. We owe great thanks to the participants of the *III Otwarta Konferencja Lean* (Third Lean Open Conference) in Poznań, who completed our questionnaire, and whose organisers made our survey possible. We also wish to thank the reviewers and colleagues from the Lean Management Association of Poland for their editorial and subject-matter related comments. Our special thanks go to our American friend Professor Joel I. Deichmann from Bentley University for thoroughly proofreading the English version of this report and providing invaluable insights.

Any errors are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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1 Some authors argue that the two latter approaches put the strongest emphasis on the involvement of the largest possible number of employees in the process of the organisation's improvement. In a "traditional" employee suggestion programme, the savings for the company and rewards for the contributors are what matters. Cf. A. Brophy, *The Financial Times Guide to Lean*, Harlow 2013, pp. 112–113; Japan Human Relations Association (ed.), *Kaizen Teian 1: Developing Systems for Continuous Improvement Through Employee Suggestions*, Productivity Press, Portland 1997, pp. 15–41.

2. ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted on a group of participants in the *III Otwarta Konferencja Lean*, which took place on April 9–11, 2013 at the Poznań University of Technology. The conference hosted over a thousand participants from all over Poland.[2]

The research questionnaire contained 23 questions, including six open-ended ones. Statistical analysis was conducted on 249 questionnaires that have been filled in and returned to the researchers. Missing answers are acknowledged in the tables/figures and in individual question descriptions.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

► Employee suggestion schemes are eagerly implemented by Polish companies that are interested in lean management; most of the researched enterprises (82.8%) had already introduced this method or were in the process of introducing it.

► In 2012, employee suggestion programmes involved – with at least one idea put forward – 36.2% of the researched companies' personnel on average.

► In about a fifth (18.9%) of the companies, turning in improvement ideas was compulsory. Most frequently, one idea per year was required from each employee.

► In these enterprises where submitting ideas was obligatory, almost twice as many employees (58%) suggested their improvements than in companies where suggestion submission was not mandatory (30.1%).

► In 2012, an average employee of the researched companies submitted 0.65 ideas.

► Feedback was given to employees as to whether their suggestion has been adopted or rejected. On average, this took 17.1 days.

► The vast majority (85.1%) of researched companies rewarded their employees for suggestions.

► Over half of the companies (50.3%) gave their employees material rewards, but most combined these with financial rewards. The most popular material rewards

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2 According to the organisers' data, 42% of the conference participants worked in companies located in Greater Poland voivodeship, 19% – Lower Silesian, 7% – Western Pomeranian, 6% – Mazovian and Silesian and 5% – Pomeranian voivodeship. The remaining 16% worked in the companies located in the other Polish voivodeships. Source (in Polish): *Podsumowanie III Otwartej Konferencji Lean, Poznań 9–11 2013 r.* http://www.konferencjalean.pl/pliki/3konferencja/podsumowanie_III_konferencja.pdf [Retrieved: 3 March, 2014].

were vouchers and gift cards. 45% of the companies gave their personnel only financial rewards.

► Just 12% of the researched enterprises decided to pay their employees amounts proportional to the gains that were the result of the implementation of the individual ideas (usually measured as savings).

► In 2012, the researched companies introduced 60.2% of the submitted suggestions. Average appraised savings from the implementation of a single idea amounted to 2171 PLN.

► Over half (52.7%) of the firms shared the best ideas submitted by their personnel with their Polish and international branches.

4. FUNCTIONING OF EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION SCHEMES IN THE RESEARCHED COMPANIES

The question as to whether employee suggestion schemes were used in their organisations was answered by all 249 of the research participants. Based on their responses, 201 of the questioned employees worked in companies that had such programmes in place (80.7%), while 48 enterprises did not implement them (19.3%), see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Presence of employee suggestion schemes among the researched companies*

No
19.3%

Yes
80.7%
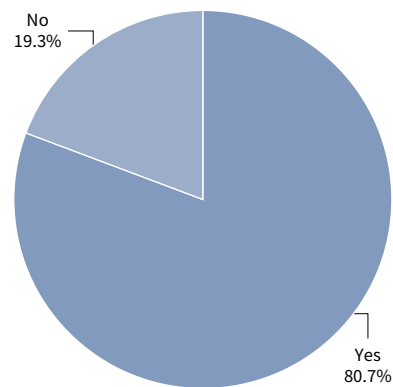
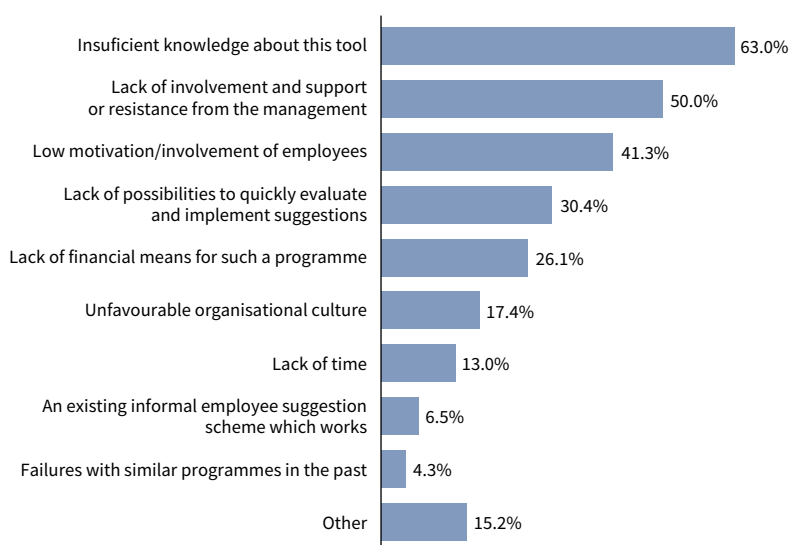* The source for all the figures and tables in the report is the authors' research.

Employee suggestion programmes were employed more frequently in production companies (83.9%) than in services (65.1%). When the research survey was conducted, the suggestion schemes had been operating in all the companies for four years, on average.

Among the 48 research participants whose companies did not introduce employee suggestion schemes,

Figure 2. The largest difficulties in implementing employee suggestion schemes

Insuficient knowledge about this tool	63.0%
Lack of involvement and support or resistance from the management	50.0%
Low motivation/involvement of employees	41.3%
Lack of possibilities to quickly evaluate and implement suggestions	30.4%
Lack of financial means for such a programme	26.1%
Unfavourable organisational culture	17.4%
Lack of time	13.0%
An existing informal employee suggestion scheme which works	6.5%
Failures with similar programmes in the past	4.3%
Other	15.2%

29 (60.4%) were considering the implementation of such programmes, 5 (10.4%) had no such plans and 14 (29.2%) responded with "hard to say."

Why is this tool not being used?

We asked respondents whose employers did not introduce employee suggestion schemes to define three largest challenges or difficulties in implementing such programmes. Forty-six employees answered this question.

The most important (indicated by 63% of the research participants) reason for their companies not having adopted employee suggestion schemes was insufficient knowledge of this tool, especially how to construct its rules and implement it in a way that it would be effective. Further reasons offered include lack of involvement and support for the idea, as well as resistance from management against implementation (50%). The majority of respondents indicated that the resistance was from top management, but occasional responses also referred to mid-level managers. As another reason, low employee motivation and unwillingness to submit ideas were indicated (41.3%).

The answers are presented in Figure 2.

It is interesting that two among those 46 research participants worked for companies which cancelled their employee suggestion schemes. One of them backed their decision with the fact that their employees started to submit any ideas exclusively through the idea management system, looking forward to receiving rewards and expect-

ing constant increase in the total amount of the rewards and the value of individual rewards. The second company gave up their programme because only a small share of the suggestions were actual improvement proposals, while the vast majority were simply complaints about the engineers and the management.

5. REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION SCHEMES

Research participants were asked to give three reasons for implementing an employee suggestion scheme at their companies. This question was answered by 172 people.
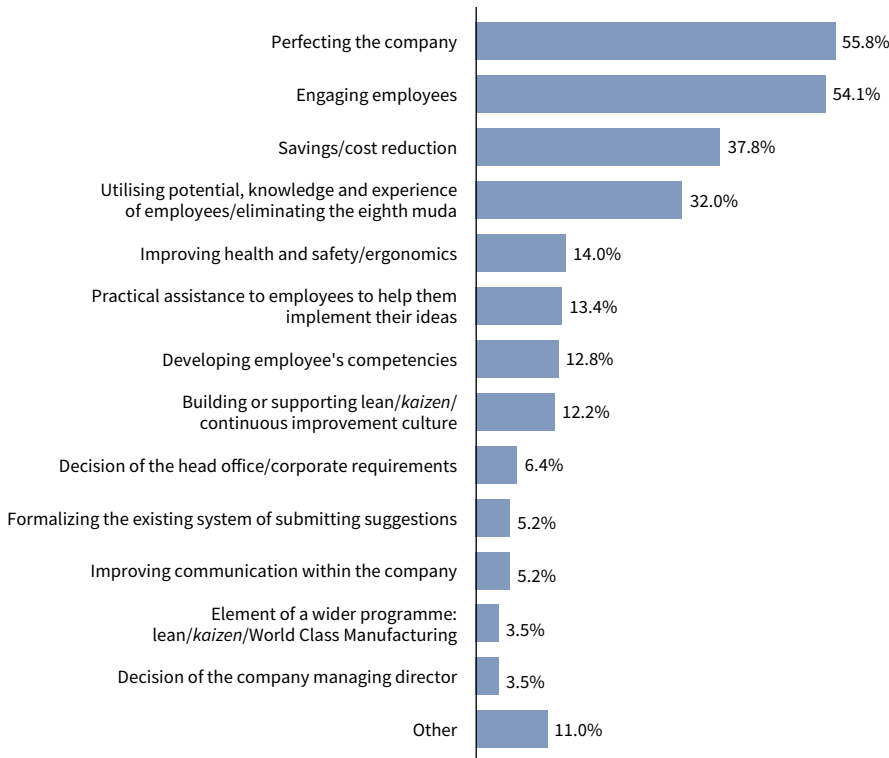
After analysing the answers, the most vital (indicated by 55.8% of the research participants) reason for implementing this tool was the drive towards perfecting the enterprise, mainly through the improvement of its processes, better work organisation, limiting all the eight types of waste (*muda*), shortening the lead times and limiting the number of technical difficulties (improving the TPM). Further reasons were willingness to engage the personnel in making the company better (54.1%) and the drive towards savings, limiting costs or avoiding excessive spending (37.8%).

The answers are presented in Figure 3.

Among the answers in the "Other" category, one could find reasons such as having been inspired by employee suggestion schemes in other companies (including competitors), improving the existing employee motivation systems with additional rewards, creating a more interesting work environment, as well as increasing customer satisfaction and sales volume. In two of the researched companies, this tool was implemented following the requests of the employees themselves. One participant declared that implementing an employee suggestion programme was one of the requirements for the company in order to receive its Technical Specification (TS) certificate.

In the opinion of the participants, the employees of their companies were rather satisfied with the introduced suggestion schemes. On a scale between 1 and 7, where 1 stood for "extremely dissatisfied" and 7 – "extremely satisfied," the average was 4.15. Employees of manufacturing companies tended to be more satisfied with their suggestion schemes (4.27) that those working in service businesses (3.46).

Figure 3. Reasons for implementing employee suggestion schemes

|	
Perfecting the company	55.8%
Engaging employees	54.1%
Savings/cost reduction	37.8%
Utilising potential, knowledge and experience of employees/eliminating the eighth muda	32.0%
Improving health and safety/ergonomics	14.0%
Practical assistance to employees to help them implement their ideas	13.4%
Developing employee's competencies	12.8%
Building or supporting lean/*kaizen*/continuous improvement culture	12.2%
Decision of the head office/corporate requirements	6.4%
Formalizing the existing system of submitting suggestions	5.2%
Improving communication within the company	5.2%
Element of a wider programme: lean/*kaizen*/World Class Manufacturing	3.5%
Decision of the company managing director	3.5%
Other	11.0%

Thirty-one respondents from companies where idea submission was compulsory gave detailed answers to an additional question asking how many ideas per year were required. The results are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen from the data, most employees are required to submit one idea per year. The largest number of ideas (twelve per year) was required from mechanics, a specific group of technical department employees. Two respondents declared that idea submission was not compulsory for all the company's personnel and another responded that employees could submit either three small ideas per year or one of larger value.

6. COMPULSORY IDEA SUBMISSION

When asked whether the submission of a specific number of ideas was obligatory in their companies, 18.9% of the participants (among the employees of companies with functioning employee suggestion programmes) answered "Yes," 75.1% answered "No," and 6% provided no answer (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Compulsory idea submission in the researched companies
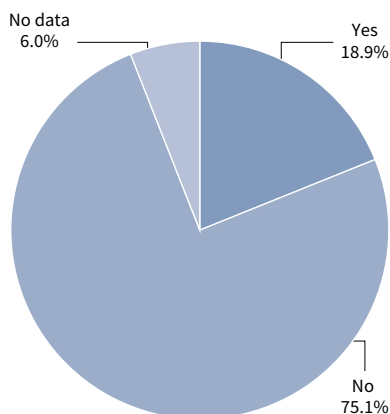
Table 1. Number of mandatory suggestions that an employee should submit every year

	Percentage
One idea	35.5%
Two ideas	16.1%
Three ideas*	9.7%
Four ideas	6.5%
Six ideas	3.2%
Twelve ideas**	3.2%
Every team (production line, department) is designated their own number of required ideas	12.9%
Every employee is designated their own number of required ideas	6.5%
Every position is designated their own number of required ideas	6.5%

* Administrative employees can exchange this for one *kaizen* of high value (1 answer).

** Only the mechanics.

7. PARTICIPATION IN EMPLOYEE SUGGESTION SCHEMES

In 1990, Yuzo Yasuda's book about Toyota's employee suggestion programme was published in the United States.[3] The book's suggestive title *40 years, 20 million ideas* made us curious as to how Polish businesses compare to Toyota.

The question about the total number of ideas submitted within companies in 2012 was answered by 148 research participants. It turned out that 123,494 company employees submitted 80,207 suggestions, so statistically each employee was the author of 0.65 suggestions. In companies where suggestion sharing was obligatory there were about twice as many ideas submitted vis-à-vis those where it was voluntary. An even larger discrepancy could be observed between manufacturing and service companies. In the former, an average of 0.74 ideas per employee was submitted in 2012, while in the latter – 0.12.

The questionnaire also contained a question about the percentage of company employees that submitted at least one suggestion in 2012. From the responses in 132 questionnaires, we calculated that an average of 36.2% of the personnel participated in the schemes, however, with large differences in the researched group. In a quarter of the companies, less than 10% people were actively submitting suggestions, while there were some enterprises where over 90% of the personnel members suggested at least one improvement (Figure 5).

Among those companies where idea submission was mandatory, about twice as many (58%) employees submitted their suggestions compared to the companies where it was voluntary (30.1%). Only two participants working for the first group of companies, however, indicated that ideas were put forward by 100% of their company employees. This may lead to the conclusion that requiring improvement suggestions was taken less than seriously by employees and that it can be more accurately considered "soft compulsion." Comments from the research participants suggested that activity in the suggestion schemes was one of the performance appraisal elements, influencing whether they would receive a bonus, the size of any bonus, and whether the employee would be promoted.[4] Whether the employees of the company participated in the suggestion

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3   Yuzo Yasuda, *40 years, 20 million ideas*, Productivity Press, Cambridge 1990.

4   Negative motivation was also possible: one of the research participants wrote that if an employee failed to submit the required number of suggestions, their salary bonus was decreased.

Figure 5. Distribution of researched companies from the perspective of the employees' activity in suggestion programmes in 2012 (in %)

Percentage of employees who submitted at least one suggestion
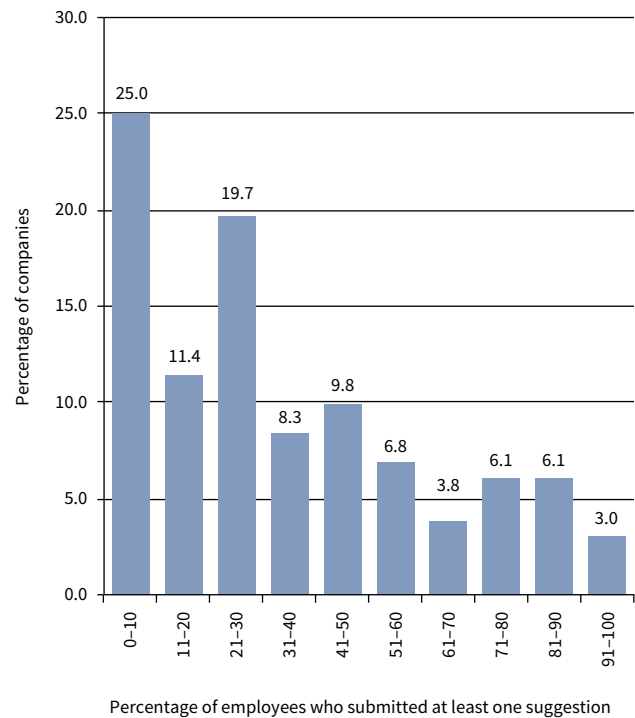
scheme might be one of several areas assessed periodically, so not all the employees were striving to keep this obligation. Another reason for a lower submission count in researched companies with mandatory idea sharing might be that *kaizens* were reported by departments, which could be achieved by a lower number of rather active employees.

Motivation for submitting improvement ideas

In the research questionnaire, the participants were asked to describe three factors that most effectively motivated employees to report suggestions.

The question was answered by 184 people. In the opinion of 80.4% of the respondents, the factor that was most effective in motivating employees to submit their suggestions was the possibility of being rewarded. The next largest percentage of participants (58.7%) mentioned the employees' influence over the improvement of their working conditions, followed by involvement of company management in maintaining the programmes (34.8%), especially through encouraging the submission of new ideas, and a well-constructed and properly managed employee suggestion programme (20.1%).

A more detailed analysis is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Factors motivating employees to submit suggestions**

	Percentage
Rewards	80.4%
Improvement of working conditions	58.7%
Involvement of the company management in the maintaining of the suggestion scheme/encouraging, motivating and praise from the superiors	34.8%
A well-designed and properly managed employee suggestion programme	20.1%
Eagerness to improve the company's processes	19.6%
Respect and recognition among the co-workers/aiming to stand out among the team members	14.1%
Satisfaction from the implemented idea/feeling proud of the effects	13.0%
Positive effects on the performance appraisal (bonus, raise, promotion)	9.2%
Self-fulfilment /possibility of learning something new	8.7%
Good atmosphere in the workplace	3.3%
Possibility of participating in the implementation of the submitted suggestions	2.7%
Obligation to submit suggestions	2.2%
The good of the company	1.6%
Competition against the other departments of the company	0.5%
Other reasons (e.g. the possibility of introducing variety into the work routine or increasing customer satisfaction)	3.3%

8. SUGGESTION EVALUATION

In 61.2% of the companies the submitted ideas were evaluated by a special team, while in 19.4% the manager of the area where the idea was to be implemented was responsible for this task. 16.8% of the researched companies used a two-stage evaluation procedure comprised of the designated team and the target area's manager, while 2.6% followed still other ways of idea assessment (see Figure 6).

The responses to this question lead to the conclusion that the researched companies employed a variety of organisational solutions in evaluating the submitted suggestions. If a unit manager evaluated an idea, this process

Figure 6. Unit designated as being responsible for the evaluation of the ideas
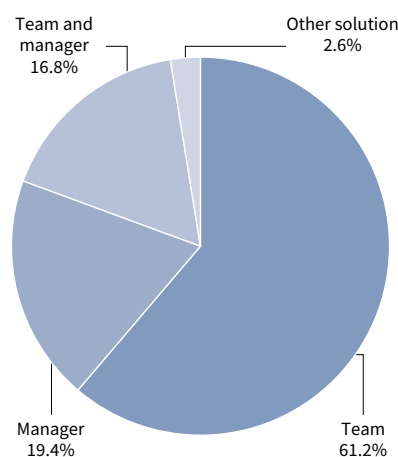
often included an additional person: the employee's direct superior was first to assess the suggestion, and if the results were positive, the manager of the unit where the idea was to be implemented took over.

During the process of evaluating an idea in most companies the suggestion was preliminarily evaluated by the appropriate manager, and afterwards the full assessment was performed by a special team. If the evaluation was done in reverse order – first the team and the manager afterwards – the verification team was frequently composed of the leaders and employees of the team where the suggestion was to be implemented. This team then verified whether the idea would improve their work directly at the *gemba*.

In some companies, the way of verifying the idea's value depended on the nature of the suggestion. The managers often verified minor ideas or those that were to be implemented in their areas (e.g. related to a single workplace or a group of similar workplaces, a work centre or a production line). If the *kaizen* related to multiple areas of the organisation, influenced the process in a major way, or required additional financial outlays, it was evaluated both by the unit manager and the special team.

One of the research participants reported that the suggestions in his company were evaluated by the company's president, in another case they were assessed by the management board. In most situations, however, the role of the president or a board member was just to accept the team's decision if the implementation of the suggestion required spending considerable amounts of money or if the originator of the idea was to be rewarded in a major way.

Among the answers in the "Other solution" category, the most popular answer was that the suggestion was evaluated by the interested party – the employees of the de-

partment (area) where the idea was to be implemented. An example of such an approach was posting the suggestions on a noticeboard or on the intranet which allowed each employee to learn about and comment upon the idea.

Team composition, method, and criteria of suggestion evaluation

The questionnaire did not contain direct questions as to these three issues, but it can be concluded from the comments to the above question that the composition and number of participants in the evaluation team depended upon the character of the suggestions and their degree of complexity. The teams were mostly composed of the lean team member (coordinator of the employee suggestion scheme) and the representatives of the interested departments, with the frequent addition of a health and safety specialist. One of the participants added that in cases when the suggestion was related to supplier activity, their representatives were also invited to comment on the proposed *kaizen*.

In the evaluation process, some companies categorised the suggestions. For example, A – new implementation/innovative approach; B – major change of an already functioning solution; and C – minor change. The idea's category influenced the amount of the reward. Other companies assigned points for the individual *kaizen*, most frequently for:

▶ the estimated size of savings (e.g. reductions in resource, raw material and media consumption);
▶ improvements in health and safety/ergonomics;
▶ increased labour productivity;
▶ improved quality of the goods produced or services rendered;
▶ improvement of 5S;
▶ shortening lead times;
▶ positive impact on the environment;
▶ potential of having the suggestion implemented in other branches of the company.

In addition, some companies assigned weights to the criteria. Final evaluation of the idea was dependant on the expected results in each area included in the assessment process and on the number of areas that could be improved upon the implementation of the idea.

Employee feedback

When asking how long it took employees to receive feedback regarding their suggestions, we collected 169 an-

swers.[5] Among the companies represented in the responses, the time taken to evaluate the suggestion and provide feedback to the interested employee was 17.1 days on average. Naturally, this period did not include the time taken to implement the idea. The largest number of enterprises (38.3%) gave their employees feedback within 10 days (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Distribution of researched companies from the perspective of the time taken to provide feedback to the employees regarding the approval or rejection of their ideas
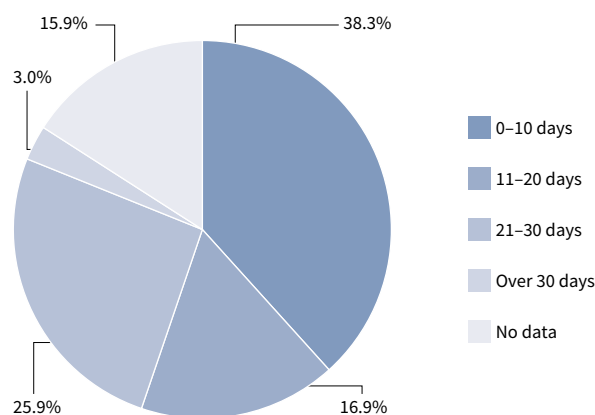
The process of evaluating suggestions was shorter in service companies (13.2 days on average) than in manufacturing (17.8 days). It was also noticeably shorter in companies that did not reward their employees for the *kaizens* (11.9 days) than in companies that did so (18 days). Only minor differences in the duration of the idea evaluation process could be observed between companies where idea submission was compulsory (16.3 days) and where it was voluntary (17.5 days).

9. REWARDING EMPLOYEES

As Paul I. Slee Smith wrote in his classical book on suggestion schemes, rewards serve two very important goals: they reward employees for the useful ideas and encourage further support for the scheme.[6] So what does the reward process for submitting *kaizens* in Polish firms look like?

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5 Some participants suggested in their comments that this was an approximate value. It depended on the degree of complication of the suggestion: small *kaizens* were evaluated faster, while others took longer, such as those requiring an in-depth technical analysis, estimation of potential savings, or assessment of the outlays the company would need to make.

6 Paul I. Slee Smith, *How to Set Up and Run Effective Employee Suggestion Schemes* (2nd Edition), Kogan Page, London 1989, p. 38.

When asked in the questionnaire whether company personnel received rewards for their suggestions, 85.1% of the research participants said "Yes," while 14.9% said "No" (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Rewarding the employees for submitting suggestions among the researched companies
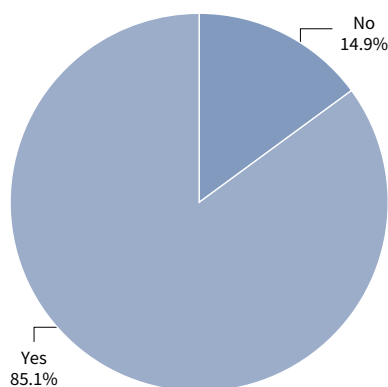
Manufacturing companies were more willing (89.5%) to reward their employees for the *kaizens* than service companies (57.2%).

We did not ask in the questionnaire whether all the submitted suggestions were rewarded, but from the comments to this question it may be concluded that in most companies the implemented ideas were rewarded. At the same time, there were firms that also rewarded the authors of the ideas that were not implemented with a small amount of 10–20 PLN or a symbolic point if such a scheme was adopted; more on this later.

Types of rewards

The responses suggest that 45% of the researched companies gave their employees only financial rewards, 20.5% – only material (non-monetary) rewards, while 29.8% combined financial and material rewards in their systems. Other participants (4.7%) reported that their companies rewarded the authors of *kaizens* without mentioning how (Figure 9).

Financial rewards

The most popular type of a *kaizen* reward was a defined sum of money. This was the solution adopted by 51.3% of the researched companies – either exclusively or together with material rewards. The amount of financial rewards

Figure 9. Types of rewards for the submitted suggestions
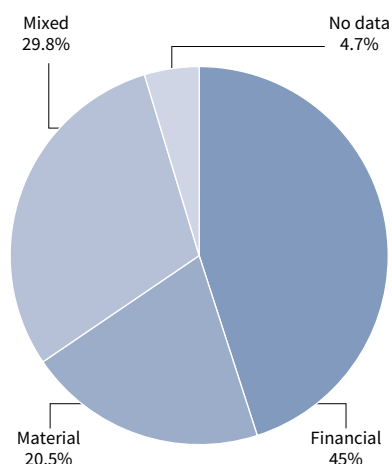
was dependant on the estimated profits for the organisation from the implementation of the idea (primarily in the form of tangible savings). These were usually sums between 20 and 500 PLN (either gross or net, depending on the company). Only a few companies indicated higher amounts, up to 10,000 PLN.

The second most popular type of rewards (28.2%) included periodic bonuses/special merit awards – issued monthly, quarterly, or annually. The amount of said bonuses was predefined and the granting of them was conducted on a competition basis for the best suggestion in a given time span, which made it different from the discretionary bonuses which are described later. In this category, one may also find rewards to the employees who were most active in submitting suggestions.

In the case of quarterly and annual bonuses, especially in large companies, a number of people were usually rewarded, typically in the form of first, second, and third places. Here again, the highest bonus amount indicated by the research participants was 10,000 PLN.

In 14.5% of the researched companies rewards took the form of quarterly or annual discretionary bonuses. Very often, this represented percentage of the rewarded employee's monthly salary.

Further places were occupied by a points system (12.8%). Its principle of operation was that each submission (or implementation) of an idea was assigned a number of points. Upon reaching a certain threshold, the rewarded employee could exchange his or her points for a monetary reward, where each point was usually worth 10, 15, or 20 PLN. As a few participants stated, this method of rewarding looked a little like loyalty programmes used by large retail chains or petrol station chains: the employee was moti-

vated to participate in the suggestion scheme while being able to accumulate the rewards towards a major amount.

The least popular rewards (12%) were those amounting to a certain percentage of the gains from the implementation of the idea. Usually, this reward type was reserved for situations where the suggestions brought substantial savings with most of the research participants reporting amounts between 5 and 10% of the annual savings (10% was the maximum).

The types of financial rewards among the researched companies are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of financial rewards for the participants of the employee suggestion schemes

	Percentage*
An amount of money for an idea	51.3%
Monthly, quarterly or annual reward for the best idea	28.2%
Bonus	14.5%
Points that could be exchanged for money	12.8%
Percentage of savings from the implementation of the idea	12.0%

* The percentages do not add up to 100%, because some research participants indicated more than one type of financial reward.

Material rewards

The most popular type of material rewards according to 43.2% of the respondents, were vouchers and gift cards (henceforth "vouchers"). The value of the vouchers for the submitted ideas ranged from 100 to 500 PLN for individual, monthly and quarterly rewards, and 1000 PLN and more for annual rewards.

Of subsequent popularity were company gadgets and gifts (25.7%), and computer, photo, audio-video and home equipment (18.9%). About a tenth of the companies (10.8%) used a points system for distributing rewards – employees received points for each suggestion, which they later could exchange for material rewards from a catalogue or for vouchers.

Types of material rewards among the researched companies are presented in Table 4.

Material awards of higher value (such as trips) were usually given on a quarterly or annual basis as incentive to the authors of the best suggestions or the most active contributors to the scheme. Trips were not only of sightseeing character (e.g. a weekend trip to an attractive spot in Po-

Table 4. Types of material rewards for the participants of the employee suggestion schemes

	Percentage*
Vouchers and gift cards**	43.2%
Company gadgets and gifts (e.g. T-shirts, caps, pens, key rings, umbrellas, wallets, mugs, lanyards, bags, USB drives, food baskets, company products)	25.7%
Computer, photo or audio-video equipment and home appliances (laptops, phones, iPads, iPhones, DVD players, photo cameras, TVs, car GPS systems, tool sets)	18.9%
Domestic and international trips (weekend and week-long, including New Year's, skiing and spa)	17.6%
Cinema and theatre tickets	12.2%
Items from a catalogue	10.8%
Sport event and activity tickets (e.g. swimming pool, gym, bowling, speedway races)	8.11%
Dinners at a restaurant, pub visits	6.8%
Sports and tourist equipment	5.4%
Car petrol	2.7%
Books	1.4%

* The percentages do not add up to 100%, because some research participants gave more than one answer.

** This category also contains topping up of pre-paid cards.

land or Europe) but could also be educational and developmental, such as visits to foreign factories in order to learn about the operational management solutions used there.

Considering some of the rewards, their direct beneficiaries could also be groups of employees. These were, for example, incentive visits to a restaurant, pub, or sporting events.

Sometimes there was also a possibility for people close to the employee to take advantage of the rewards. A few research participants reported that cinema or theatre tickets, as well as trips, were rewards for the employee and a companion. The author of one of the questionnaire responses listed a week trip to the mountains for the rewarded employee with his whole family.

Other rewards

The questionnaire asked also about rewards that were not material or financial. The participants listed as examples the following *kaizen* rewards:

Table 5. **Examples of the methods of rewarding employees for their participation in suggestion schemes among the researched companies**

Material rewards	Financial rewards
For minor suggestions: small gifts or vouchers, 50 to 150 PLN in value.	Quarterly rewards of 1000 PLN for the best suggestion and 500 PLN for the most active participant in the scheme. Annual rewards of 5000, 3000 and 1000 PLN (first, second and third place, respectively) for the three best ideas of the year and a reward of 2000 PLN for the most active participant in the suggestion scheme.
Material rewards for improvements where the gains were difficult to calculate.	In the case of improvements that translated to measurable/ tangible financial gains/savings, awards with a value dependant on the assessed savings: Up to 1000 PLN in savings – reward of 100 PLN; 1000–10,000 PLN in savings – reward of 500 PLN; Above 10,000 PLN in savings – reward of 1000 PLN.
None.	For small improvements, a reward of 150 PLN gross. Larger projects were evaluated individually. Depending on the savings from the *kaizen*, the employee could be rewarded with up to 10,000 PLN gross.
Points are awarded for each idea: – 1 point for the idea; – 5 points for the idea being accepted for implementation; – 15 points for the idea having been implemented. Each point is worth 2 PLN. After accumulating a predefined amount, the employee may exchange their points for items from a catalogue.	Quarterly rewards (3 × 200 PLN). Annual rewards (3 × 500 PLN).
Cinema tickets, small gifts and vouchers of 50 to 200 PLN in value.	In case of ideas bringing major savings, 10% of the assessed savings value.
For small ideas, gadgets with the programme's logo (mugs, T-shirts, pens). For three top ideas of the month, 100–200 PLN in vouchers. Additionally, annual rewards for the best *kaizen* – vouchers of 1000 to 1500 PLN in value.	None.

▶ extra day(s) off work;
▶ parking a car in the company's car park;
▶ letters of praise from the top management;
▶ diplomas;
▶ statuettes;
▶ challenge cup for the best team.

To sum up, our research shows a wide variety of incentive programmes for the submission of suggestions. A few examples from the research participants are presented in Table 5.

10. PERCENTAGE OF IDEAS IMPLEMENTED

As David Mann put forth in his book on lean culture, the benefit from suggestion systems does not come from the suggestions themselves, but rather from implemented im-

provements.[7] Therefore, in our research we asked the participants about the percentage of ideas submitted in 2012 that were actually implemented.

One hundred forty-nine people answered this question and the results say that among the researched companies, on average 60.2% of the submitted ideas were put into practice. There were, however, major differences among companies, see Figure 10.

In those companies where employees were required to submit suggestions, a larger percentage of ideas was implemented (65.1%) than in companies where suggestion scheme participation was voluntary (58.7%). The percentage of implemented ideas was also slightly higher in manufacturing companies (60.5%) than in service businesses (55.9%).

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7 David Mann, *Creating a Lean Culture. Tools to Sustain Lean Conversions (1st edition)*, Productivity Press, New York 2005, p. 143.

Figure 10. Distribution of the researched companies as percentage of the ideas implemented in 2012
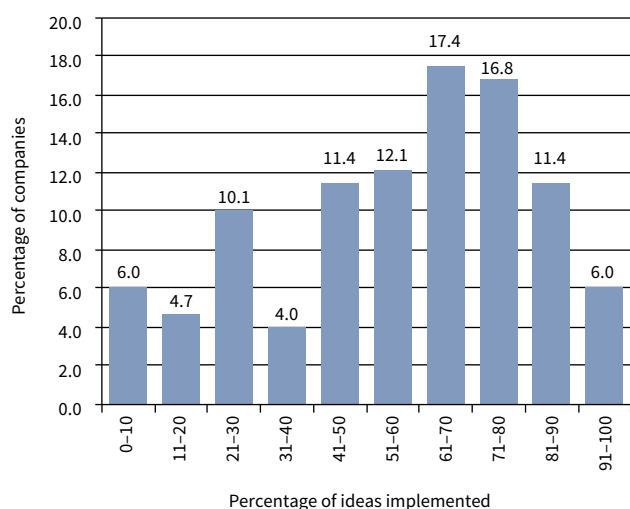
11. FINANCIAL BENEFITS FOR THE COMPANIES

The questionnaire also asked about the predicted value of savings that was brought to the company by suggestions submitted by the employees in 2012. This was answered by 42 participants, and most of these respondents were employees of larger organisations.[8]

The combined value of savings in 2012 as the consequence of running employee suggestion programmes was 45.093 million PLN. In two service companies the savings were assessed not financially, but in full-time equivalents (FTE). In 15 companies, the annual savings resulting from the operation of employee suggestion schemes amounted to over 1 million PLN each.

The average savings from the implementation of a single idea was 2171 PLN, but there were large differences among companies. In those organisations where the participation in the program was obligatory, the average rate of savings from one suggestion was over twice that of companies where *kaizen* reporting was voluntary. Taking into account that among the members of the first group there were about twice as many improvements submitted per employee than in the second group we might conclude that the largest and easy-to-spot ideas ("low hanging

fruits") have already been implemented. Therefore, in order to meet their quota, employees also submitted minor improvement ideas.

12. SHARING THE IDEAS WITH OTHER BRANCHES

One of the employee suggestion scheme rules dictates that good ideas ought to be implemented not only right where they came up, but also in all the places that may bring benefits – both inside and outside of the originator's home unit.

Our research showed that over half (52.7%) of the researched companies shared the best submitted suggestions with their other branches in Poland and abroad (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Sharing of the ideas submitted in employee suggestion schemes with other branches
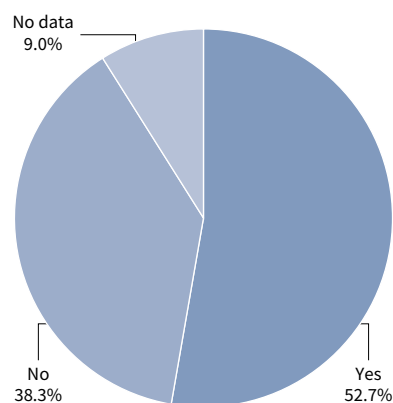
Some of the research participants who answered this question negatively or who did not provide an answer at all commented that their companies did not have branch offices elsewhere, so there was no possibility of sharing the suggestions of their staff outside their home offices. It may be assumed, then, that in case of multi-branch enterprises, such cooperation was even more frequent.

The ways that successful *kaizens* were distributed among company branches included teleconferences on best practices, periodic corporate meetings on continuous improvement, spreading information regarding interesting proposals *via* e-mail, and publishing them on the company intranet, for example in a database of implemented suggestions. The research shows that Polish companies could not only count on the inflow of ideas from their own employees, but they could also use the best practices of others.

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8   Those who did not respond to this question often remarked that the profits from the implemented ideas in their companies were either not rated or that the assessed values did not reflect all the gains. This was because the value of some improvements, like those related to improvements in health and safety, were difficult to estimate.

13. ONGOING DEVELOPMENT OF SUGGESTION SCHEMES

In 2013 most of the researched enterprises further developed and perfected their employee suggestion schemes. In the two years prior to conducting the research (2011 and 2012), 55.9% of the companies introduced modifications to their programmes, with changes occurring more frequently among those firms where participation in such schemes was mandatory (86.5%, as opposed to only 50% in companies where it was voluntary).

As the responses to this question show, changes were introduced mainly as the result of gaining experience with how suggestion schemes function. Their main goal was to motivate a larger number of employees to submit a bigger number of ideas. Corrections were made to practically all elements of these schemes. Some of the most frequent were:

► simplifying the forms for submitting *kaizens;*
► giving the employees the possibility of submitting suggestions on-line and/or submitting the ideas *via* electronic channels, including the placing of computer terminals on the company premises;
► creating a special IT solution, database, dedicated website, or platform to manage the suggestion scheme. This approach allowed for the standardisation of the evaluation process and monitoring of the whole scheme more efficiently; introducing such IT tools was also combined with partial or complete replacement of paper forms with electronic ones, as well as facilitated the cataloguing and archiving the ideas;
► in those companies which have already introduced IT solutions to facilitate their employee suggestion schemes, implementing additional tools and functions, e.g. the possibility of ongoing monitoring of the status of the submitted suggestions by their authors;
► in order to limit the risk of submissions of trivial ideas which consumed resources for evaluation yet contained no added value to the company, changing the rules according to which suggestions could be submitted;
► defining or clarifying in the rulebooks what an improvement idea was or what areas it covered, so that employees (mainly specialists) knew what improvements could be submitted under the employee suggestion scheme and which ones were part of their job descriptions/daily duties;
► limiting or expanding the group of people authorised to submit improvement suggestions, e.g. excluding the management, technology departments, lean departments or other people whose job descriptions contained the development of improvements;

► introducing modifications to rewarding of the employees for their submissions, e.g. increasing the number of items in the reward catalogue, replacing some rewards with others (such as replacing financial rewards with material ones or the reverse), reducing or introducing new reward categories (such as an additional annual reward for the employee with the highest number of submitted ideas), increasing the number of rewards for minor ideas, introducing minimal rewards for those *kaizens* that have not been implemented, unifying of the system for calculating rewards based on the savings earned, introducing a points system and altering the amounts of financial rewards;
► changes to the criteria of the evaluation of ideas, e.g. assigning extra points for ideas improving on the health and safety factors or quality, as well as *poka-yoke*-type ideas;
► in companies where previously only ideas that generated tangible savings could be submitted, introducing the possibility of submitting suggestions that did not result in measurable profits;
► changing the number of ideas employees were required to submit;
► giving up the mandatory character of the scheme;
► shortening the time of evaluating the ideas, for example by standardising the process, introducing shorter terms by increasing the frequency of evaluation group meetings, defining the responsibilities among the scheme coordinators, and increasing the number of employees managing the schemes;
► shortening the time of implementing the accepted suggestions, for example through wider involvement of autonomous teams in the implementation process, assigning deadlines to the responsible implementation teams, and having the teams keep the deadlines.

14. EFFECTIVE SUGGESTION SCHEME: GOOD ADVICE

In the final open-ended question, we asked the participants to share their insights from idea management schemes for companies which are just starting to implement such programmes. Below are some of the most frequently cited suggestions:

► **Will the employee suggestion scheme add value to the company's processes?** The scheme requires not only outlays to get it started, but afterwards it creates some administrative burden. There are a number of well-managed companies in which employees submit

their improvement ideas to their superiors on an ongoing basis and these ideas are smoothly implemented. In such organisations, formalised employee suggestion schemes may be unnecessary.

► **Commitment of the management**. Without it, implementing and maintaining such a program is pointless. Merely developing the scheme will not result in the employees submitting their ideas, let alone continue submitting them. Top- and mid-level managers need to continuously motivate and encourage employee participation. It is vital that their support is reflected with specific activities and behaviour. It is, for instance, worthwhile to have the employee's first submission prepared with the help of his or her manager. Many people are too shy to submit an idea and have it evaluated, or are in doubt as to whether their ideas are sufficiently good to gain the organisation's interest.

► **Cascading of involvement**. Dedication to development of the suggestion scheme must be cascaded down from the management level. Top management must efficiently energise the directors and managers to fulfil their roles in the scheme.

► **Tailor-made.** The idea management programme needs to be tailored to the specific nature, possibilities and limitations of the company in which it is implemented. Each organisation has its own history and organisational culture, employs different people, and is unique in many other ways. It also possesses different resources which can be included in the running of the scheme. The solutions ought to take the above into account.

► *Benchmarking.* It is always worthwhile to learn from the experience of others.

► **Introduction of the programme ought to be deliberated within the company.** All the scheme's rules, solutions and documents are to be discussed in the group of representatives of all the departments, and the rulebook is to be approved by the management board and the finance department. Additionally, funds for the rewards and the implementation of employee suggestions are to be secured in the budget. It is important that the scheme works efficiently from day one, so that it does not get "burned out" at the very beginning, as one of the research participants put it. If the company is unable to maintain the programme, it is not to be launched.

► **Keep it simple.** The rules of the employee suggestion scheme are to be simple and straightforward to everyone and the rulebook is to be accessible to everyone interested, with precise and clear wording.

► **Selection of appropriate people as the keepers of the scheme**. The suggestion programme needs to have its owners (coordinators, administrators) who will supervise the process of submitting, evaluating, and implementing the *kaizens*. They need to be organised people, who have been empowered by the top management to act and enforce the results. If a single programme coordinator is appointed, this should be a person with lots of positive energy, a communicative employee who would have good contact with the personnel of all levels.

► **Pilot project.** The scheme may be introduced as a pilot idea in one area – e.g. a single department – and after the experience from the implementation has been analysed and necessary corrections have been made – spread to the other areas of the organisation.

► **Training.** It is good to present the ideas, goals, and rules of the scheme in the form of a short training course. Such an event ought to be included in the initial training for all new employees, organised by the human resources department. Also, as inspiration for new ideas often comes from problems in the workplace, the implementation of a suggestion scheme may be preceded with a training course on the problem-solving techniques. Furthermore, as it gives additional chances for positive changes to the organisational culture, so it may be also supplemented with motivational training.

► **Submitting an idea should be easy.** A submission form ought to be simple and short, fitting on a single page. A useful example of a filled-in submission should be made available to the employees. It is good to have at least two channels through which *kaizens* can be submitted, i.e. a classical suggestion box where paper submissions will be filed (not everyone has easy access to computers and the Internet, especially not machine operators in manufacturing companies). Suggestion boxes are to be checked and emptied of their content regularly.

► **Group ideas.** The rules for the suggestion scheme have to take into account the possibility of joint submissions by two or more employees.

► **Do not limit the suggestion scheme to those ideas that only bring savings.** Non-quantifiable ideas, especially those that result in improved work safety, are equally valuable.

► **Time leading to feedback and the implementation are of vital importance.** Firstly, employees will stop submitting ideas if they are not informed about the status of their previous submissions. The information should reach the employee as quickly as possible, preferably in a single-digit number of days. The longer the evaluation process takes, the fewer new ideas will be

submitted. Secondly, employees will volunteer ideas only when they see that their suggestions are actually being considered and/or implemented. Also, idea implementation should not take months, because it frustrates the personnel and makes them believe that despite the ideals of the programme, the company does not care much about their suggestions. Acting fast is in the interest of the firm – the sooner the improvement is introduced, the sooner it will start generating profits.

► **Feedback about the rejection of an idea should be balanced and constructive.** Communicating with the authors of the suggestions is of key importance to maintaining the scheme, and the most sensitive issue is the time, method, and form of feedback regarding the rejection of an idea. Feedback needs to contain specific reasons for turning down the suggestion. There will always be ideas that are impossible to implement. Employees must be convinced that the rejection of their suggestions is not a failure and they should be motivated to submit new ones.

► **Suggestions ought to be analysed by more than one person**. Group evaluation is broader and may be considered more objective. It is easier for an author of an idea to reconcile with his idea having been rejected if it is turned down by a team instead of the decision of a single manager.

► **Lean the process.** The suggestion scheme should also be lean: it should follow the flow rule and put as little burden on the company as possible. When evaluating ideas, the *muda* (waste) of overprocessing is to be avoided and the *muda* of waiting – most often present in suggestion schemes – is to be fought.

► **Involving the employees in the implementation of their ideas.** If the author of a suggestion is interested in taking part in the implementation of his or her idea, they need to be able to do so. They should be provided with organisational support (the option of participating in the implementation of their idea during working hours or overtime) and financial support (e.g. through the purchase of appropriate materials). Employees participating in the implementation of their ideas learn new skills and are able to keep track of the current status of their suggestions. They also feel more like owners of the processes they helped to alter.

► **Standardisation.** The solutions implemented as results of the employees' suggestions need to be maintained, for example through relevant changes to the standards of work.

► **Transparency and access to the scheme's knowledge database.** Employees should be able to verify what suggestions have already been submitted and how they were evaluated. This prevents suggestions from being resubmitted. IT solutions can be helpful here – the tools required to manage the scheme and archive submissions can frequently be created without incurring costs – simply by using the skills of the company's IT personnel.

► **Build the brand and the standing of the scheme.** It is a good idea to invent a catchy name for the programme and even create its logo. However, an indispensable way of building respect for the scheme requires the constant and visible presence of top management in the program's activities. A good pretext for underlining the importance of the scheme is rewarding the authors of suggestions. Rewards for the best *kaizens* may be presented during regular meetings of the management with the personnel or they can become a standard part of Christmas employee gatherings.

► **Marketing**. All available channels of promoting the scheme need to be used, and primarily – the communication of the achievements of the scheme around the company must be pursued. These may include posters, information boards, newsletters, video presentations, films documenting the implementation of the *kaizens*, articles in company bulletins, intranet. Dedicated idea walls can also be used. Attractive visualisation of the outcomes of the scheme holds the interest of those employees who are already participating in the programme, and further motivates the contribution of more ideas. Employees talk among themselves about the ideas which have been submitted facilitating positive competition. Sometimes one submitted idea results in a number of suggestions that develop as extensions of the previous *kaizen*.

► **Mandatory idea submission.** The research participants disagreed as to whether participation in employee suggestion schemes ought to be mandatory. Some considered this idea to be a worthy addition to periodic performance appraisals, results of which have impact on bonuses, promotions, or salary raises. In their opinion, this rule ought to be applied not only to rank-and-file employees, but also to directors, managers, and team leaders. Here, the goal could be to set the minimum idea count submitted by their teams. This would result in greater involvement in motivating the subordinates to participate in the scheme.

Other participants in the research were of a different opinion: no one should be forced to submit improvement ideas, and pressure should not be used. It is better to encourage than to enforce – focus on promoting

the scheme, motivating employees by stressing that active participation may result in easier, safer, and wiser work. The employees ought to convince themselves that submitting improvement ideas is worth it, and this notion can be strengthened by recognition. As one of the participants wrote in the questionnaire, *the satisfaction, joy and pride from the implementation of an employee's idea are what really drives the scheme*.

▶ **Reward system.** The participants also differed in their opinions as to rewarding the employees for their suggestions. Some were of the opinion that intrinsic motivation of the employees was the key, so any rewards ought to be of symbolic character. A much larger group (by a factor of a few times) considered the rewards to be one of the required conditions for the maintaining and efficient functioning of the programme. Reward systems need to be carefully planned at the implementation stage, because it is difficult to change this element of the schemes to a less attractive solution from the viewpoint of the employees. One of the participants wrote from his experience that it was easier to convert the reward system from material to financial rewards, while it was more difficult to transit from financial rewards to material ones. Rewards motivate the personnel more efficiently when they are better suited to the demographic profile of the personnel, such as age and education level. When types and values of the rewards are defined, salary levels within the company also should be taken into account.

▶ **Choosing a reward**. The possibility of choosing a reward increases the attractiveness of the scheme. The employee's family members or life partners can, in this way, influence such decisions, translating to further involvement of the employees in the scheme.

▶ **"Educational" rewards.** Participation in the programme facilitates learning among the employees, for example through collecting the information required to submit their suggestions and through the analysis of management feedback. Additionally, their awareness of the company's running costs increases. This positive effect can be additionally boosted through a wise choice of rewards which will not only bring joy to their recipients but may also – indirectly – bring additional profits to the company. For example, these might include a visit to a specialist lean conference or seminar, a benchmarking visit to the best companies in the country or abroad, a study visit to another factory within the same group, or a certified Six Sigma training. Rewards for smaller *kaizens* might include interesting books.

▶ **Financial rewards for suggestions should not be paid together with the salary.** They should be handed over separately. When combined with other sums of money, they are less noticeable, which may decrease their motivating function.

▶ **Utmost meticulousness with all financial issues.** All the issues related to the calculation of a reward's value (if it is to be calculated on the basis of the percentage of savings) need to follow due diligence rules. People are very sensitive to all matters related to money owed to them. Delays, mistakes, and changing the rules when the ideas are being evaluated or implemented will largely demotivate the contributors.

▶ **Follow-up.** Rewards for the largest ideas should be paid out after positive assessment of the *kaizen's* implementation has been obtained. The evaluation should take place one to three months after the idea has been implemented.

▶ **Continuous improvement.** Employee suggestion schemes should function and be modified according to the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) rules. The employees are always a source of interesting feedback. It is also useful to perform annual reviews of the programme. If needed, value stream mapping (VSM) ought to be performed for the whole process. Two goals should be kept in mind: an increase in the participant count and an increase in the quality of ideas submitted. It is better to receive fewer ideas but such ones that are feasible to implement.

▶ **Hidden problems, challenges and nonstandard situations may appear in the programme.** Among the most frequent ones are conflicts between employees who have submitted identical or similar suggestions or who leverage some imprecise programme rules to increase the amount of rewards. The employees will also submit ideas whose goal is to solve problems that they were unable to remedy otherwise. The programme can therefore reveal errors, negligence, and unsatisfactory performance of individual employees or whole units.

▶ **Full use of the scheme's potential.** While evaluating an idea, it is prudent to check whether the suggested area of implementation is the only feasible one. It is also preferable to consider the potential of acting outside one's own organisation. If an idea is really superior and improves a process or multiple processes that occur in different locations of the same company, it is also worth considering the obligatory implementation of this very suggestion elsewhere.

▶ **Talent discovery.** Managers should be interested not only in the types of ideas submitted, but also the authors of said suggestions. The programme is an excellent way for managers to get to know their subordinates

better. As one of the research participants wrote: *the employee suggestion scheme helps discover new talents*.

▶ **Measurement.** Employee activity in the scheme and the percentage of submitted ideas that have been implemented may be valuable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

▶ **GoldenLine: a useful list of the conditions at which efficient employee suggestion schemes operate.** One of the research participants wrote that useful information on the implementation and operation of idea management programmes might be found on the discussion forums of the Polish community portal, GoldenLine. Another useful finding from the portal is a list of necessary conditions for the efficient operation of such schemes.[9]

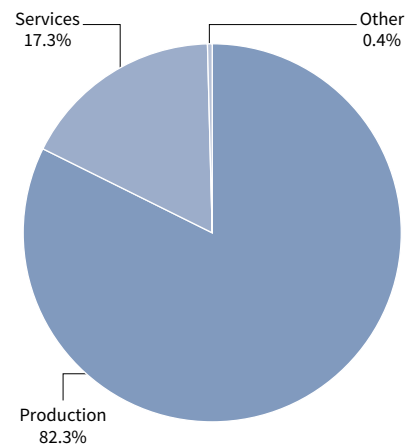## 15. INFORMATION ON THE RESEARCHED COMPANIES

Industry sectors

Among the 249 research participants, 205 (82.3%) were employed in manufacturing companies, 43 (17.3%) in services, while one person (0.4%) reported "other" type of their company's activity (Figure 12).

Employment

With regard to questions about the size of the workforce in respondents' companies at the end of 2012, we received 247 responses. Half of them worked in companies which employed up to 249 people, and between 500 and 999 people (62 and 63 responses, respectively). See Figure 13.

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9 Quite accidentally, the author of the post on the *Zarządzanie produkcją* (Production Management) discussion board (thread "Motivating the employees to participate in the suggestion scheme") from March 12, 2010, was one of the authors of this research. The eight-entry list of the features of a successful idea management system was published in Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder's book *Ideas are Free: How the Idea Revolution is Liberating People and Transforming Organizations*, (Berett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco 2006): *1. Ideas are encouraged and welcomed; 2. Submitting ideas is simple; 3. Evaluation of ideas is quick and effective; 4. Feedback is timely, constructive and informative; 5. Implementation is rapid and smooth; 6. Ideas are reviewed for additional potential; 7. People are recognized, and success is celebrated; and 8. Idea system performance is measured, reviewed, and improved* (pp. 121–143). In 2014 the authors published their second book in the same area of interest (*The Idea-Driven Organization: Unlocking the Power in Bottom-Up Ideas*).

Figure 12. Industry sectors of the research participant companies

Figure 13. Distribution of the researched companies from the perspective of the size of the workforce
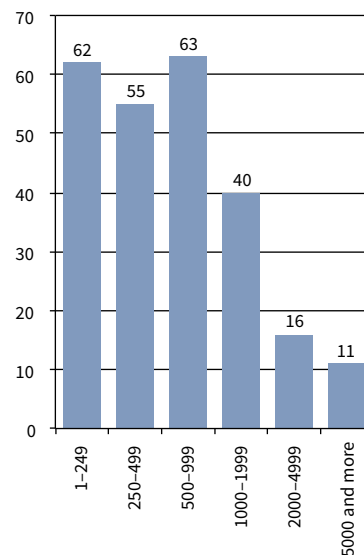

All 247 companies employed a total of 343,186 people at the end of 2012. The smallest company employed four people, while the largest had 90,000 employees.

Level of lean management implementation

The research was conducted during a conference on lean management and our expectation was confirmed that most of the researched companies have had experience with lean.

When asked whether their organisations have implemented or are implementing lean management, 227 (91.2%) participants answered "Yes," while 17 (6.8%) said their companies had no experience with this method, and five people (2%) provided no answer (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Implementation of lean management in the researched companies


No
6.8%

No data
2%

Yes
91.2%
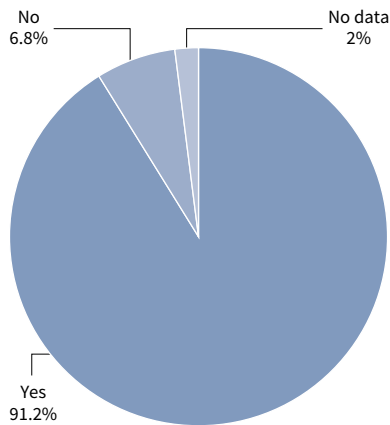
Among the companies which have implemented or were implementing lean management, employee suggestion schemes were present in 82.8% of the organisations (188 of 277).

When asking about the year lean management was implemented, we received 219 answers. As can be seen in Figure 15, the largest group of the companies (41) started their lean adventure in 2010.

In April 2013, the represented companies have been implementing lean management for an average of four years and two months. Our research indicates that Polish service organisations became interested in lean concept later than manufacturing ones: the average duration of lean management implementation in our survey's service companies was two years and 10 months.

An overview of the degree to which lean management has been implemented in the researched companies is presented in Figure 16.

Figure 15. Year when lean management was first implemented
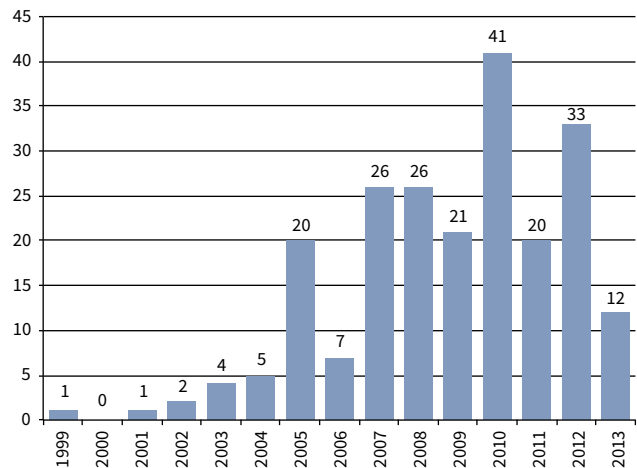
Figure 16. Level of lean management in the researched companies

High
10.4%

Average
43.6%

Low
46%
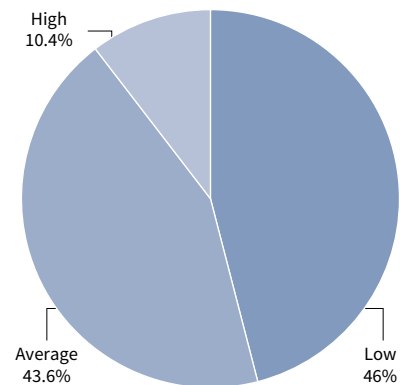
16. ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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A graduate of Poznań University of Economics (2012), currently working towards a doctorate at the PUE Department of Logistics and Transport. His professional career began at Leanpassion, where he became a consultant. He then proceeded to become a process engineer for Volkswagen in Poznań, where he was responsible for optimisation of production lines with the use of advanced process analysis methods such as MTM. Łukasz is currently a partner at ASD Consulting in Warsaw, where he delivers lean projects for production, logistics and financial companies. SLMP member.

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