

THE CURRENT STATE OF SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS' ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN SLOVAKIA

GABRIEL KOMAN – DOMINIKA TUMOVÁ –
ADRIÁNA BUČKOVÁ – BIANKA BEŇOVÁ – KATARÍNA ZELEŇAKOVÁ – MONIKA ADAMČIAKOVÁ

Abstract: The presented article focuses on the mapping of the current state of selected sports organizations' online communication in Slovakia. The research included four sports: football, tennis, basketball, and ice hockey. The aim of this article is the creation of a description of the current state in the presented area. This is followed by the proposal of recommendations regarding the improvement of the analysed state. Several methods were used in the research, namely orientation and content analysis, analysis of secondary data, deduction, induction, and synthesis. The main findings point towards the non-existent social media profiles of many sports organizations, the absence of linking among individual websites, and the lack of information on these sites. That is why recommendations for improving the online communication of sports organizations with the public were proposed. One such recommendation concerns the addition of the business cards of the main unions' representatives to promote transparency. Another one focuses on the clarification and simplification of the sports clubs' websites.

Keywords: sports management, sports organizations, online communication, decision-making

JEL Classification: M12, Z20, L83

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sports organizations has been enormous in recent years. Many sports organizations felt the economic impact of this pandemic, which was reflected in financial losses, in wages for employees, but also in the reduction of jobs, in income from sponsors, and in other areas. These losses were manifested because of the cancellation, postponement, or shortening of competitions at various levels or the limitation of fan attendance. These negative effects concern all branches of sport, in all countries of the world.

However, in addition to the presented negatives, *positive activities were also highlighted*, which were aimed at fans via *social networks, mobile technologies, streaming*, and the like. Even though it was possible to connect with fans via various information and communication technologies (ICT), a high level of connection between traditional sports and the fans in the stands, who are an integral part of it, was revealed. Since the management of sports organizations is a large system that includes many processes and activities, *organizations should evolve with the times*. Sports organizations should follow market trends and place more and more emphasis on interaction with the surrounding environment, thereby supporting the relationship with their customers – fans. The Internet, as an invention of modern times, represents a very effective way for sports organizations and athletes to publish diverse content that can help in their communication with the external environment. Ultimately, however, proper communication helps with the sports organizations' sustainable management (Skinner, Smith, 2021).

The sustainable management of sports organizations is the subject of the analysis presented in this article, which primarily concerns online communication. Sport is still a

promising and developing market. Sports organizations form the basis of the sports industry, and although the pandemic situation has reduced the forecasted growth, the global sports market is expected to grow from USD388.28 billion in 2020 to USD440.77 billion in 2021 and even reach USD599.9 billion in 2025 (Researchandmarkets, online, 2021).

Sports organizations and their sustainable management were investigated in this article with a focus on *football, tennis, basketball, and ice hockey*. One of the assumptions is the predicted impact of the pandemic situation, which affected all selected sports. It is possible to consider that **the innovative responses of sports organizations** in the mentioned areas were deployed precisely because of the negative effects of the pandemic (decline in income from fans and sponsors). To find new sources of income, sports organizations have focused on *new strategies* via the creation of partnerships, emphasizing new forms of content monetization and commercial use of brands. An example of such a strategy can be Southampton, a football club of the English Premier League, whose strategy was also followed by AC Milan, Swansea City, FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Paris Saint-Germain. Southampton entered an agreement with a crypto-currency company, which was not common until now and brought interest from fans (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021). In the NHL (National Hockey League), because of a similar situation, an agreement was concluded with Amazon Web Services to improve the experience of fans, and the same was the case in the NBA (National Basketball Association), when the analytical power of the giant was used to track individual players within their statistics, interaction, but also social media. Sports organizations have been prompted by the impact of COVID-19 to find *new opportunities to engage their primary fan segment*. These new solutions should be used by sports organizations even in

the post-covid period, as it gives them *a competitive advantage* (Sharpe et al. 2020).

Online communication of sports organizations was important even before the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. But now this area has gained even more intensity. Apart from the pandemic, one of the most important factors for the success and popularity of any organization has been and will always be represented by **human resources**. This statement also applies to sports management. Thanks to HR, short-term, one-time successes become long-term ones. With a specific view of the mentioned issue, the centre of attention is put towards *the development of sports or club culture*. The management of a sports organization tries to create a favourable environment and, finally, motivates players, team members, but also the fans (Nová et al., 2016, p. 95). Since a sports organization can be characterized as a set of internal and external elements represented by people working to achieve a common goal, it is necessary to deal with their motivation as well.

The management of sports organizations should deal not only with the support of the motivation of its members, but also with the solutions to associated problems. *Sports psychologists* solve many problems of individual athletes, for example, problems in the field of motivation, concentration, thinking, self-confidence, mental preparation, and the like. Many authors connect sports psychology primarily with *motivation*, which can be internal or external. It is a key determinant that describes how to use the potential of the given person (the athlete) to increase his/her performance and thus the success of the club. Consultations and solutions to problems related to a given individual's sports performance often have positive results not only in the sports field, but also in his/her personal life (Brewer, 2009, p. 2-3).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that every successful sports organization, as a group of people, must deal with **human resource management**. The determinant of success is *the correctly set motivation* of each member of the organization, which is why it is important to take sports psychologists into account. To achieve success and

predefined goals of a sports organization, *interaction with the surrounding environment* is essential. Currently, **online communication** is flourishing, which can be defined as a competitive advantage in relation to the fans of those sports organizations that use it. This fact was revealed by the pandemic situation with the COVID-19, as it was forbidden in many countries for fans to physically participate in public sports events, so the sports clubs had to react innovatively.

The given model (Figure 1) shows the basic elements that were analysed as part of the research. It is mainly a sports organization and its possible innovative reactions to external influences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis of the theoretical background focused on sports organizations and concepts related to them. One of the main links analysed was the motivation of employees, and therefore also the motivation of athletes. Furthermore, for a better understanding of the researched area, the terms sports management and human resource management in sports management were described.

Sports organization

An organization, as a separate economic unit, can be described as a group of people who work together to achieve a common goal (Dictionary, online, 2021). A sports organization is characterized by five key elements. The first is the very fact that the organization is a part of and involved in **the sports industry**. Other elements are **the social aspect** and thus that the organization consists of a group of people between whom there is interaction and **the purpose of achieving a goal**. The fourth key element is **a consciously structured system of activity**. Areas such as marketing, product development, financial management, and human resources in sports management are characterized by the division into smaller or group tasks, which serves to ensure coordination and control over their fulfilment, to effectively achieve the organization's goals. The last element is **an identifiable boundary**, where it is clear who is and who is not a part of the organization.



Figure 1 Basic elements of the analysed issue and their connections
 Source: own elaboration

A problem with defining boundaries emerges, for example, in non-profit sports organizations (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 2-3).

According to the sports industry, sports organizations are divided into three sectors (Slack T. et al., 2006, p. 5-6):

- *Public sector* – which includes sports branches of local, state, and national governments, but also government-funded agencies that support the development of elite athletes (e.g., the National Institute of Sport).
- *Non-profit or voluntary sector* – consisting of sports clubs (a local football club) or regional, national (such as a state or national athletics association) and international governing bodies (such as the International Olympic Committee).
- *Professional and Commercial Sector* – These include organizations such as professional sports teams and their governing league (e.g., the Boston Celtics and the National Basketball Association (NBA)), manufacturers and sellers of sports apparel, sports facilities, and stadiums (for example, Rod Laver Arena in Australia, Wembley Stadium in Great Britain).

Employees' motivation

A set of activities via which it is possible to influence the behaviour of people in the organization can be called motivation. Many organizations do not realize that only properly motivated employees are able to perform in such a way that they are efficient and productive in the long term. Employees working in this way are happy to help in achieving set goals, targets, and results (Poláčková, online, 2016).

A different view of motivation sees it as a person's internal driving force. From this point of view, it is possible to state that motivation consists, for example, of a person's wishes, desires, or efforts. It is also the internal state of the individual that moves him/her to achieve the set goal, i.e., to provide the desired performance (Donnelly et al., 2002, 366-367). Various empirical pieces of evidence point to the fact that motivation is one of the main determinants of success. For a person to be motivated, basic biological, psychological, and social aspects must be fulfilled (Uysal et al., online, 2017).

Athletes' motivation

When defining motivation, it is possible to point out that it is an individual's power that affects his/her behaviour and his/her performance. It does not matter whether it is a sports performance, a work performance, a study performance, or any other performance. Motivation also affects how a person thinks, what he/she feels and how he/she communicates with his/her surroundings. In the sports industry, motivation is considered a key factor in achieving success. High motivation is understood as a prerequisite for using the potential of the given athlete to the greatest extent possible (Sports Performance Bulletin, online, 2021). Sports psychologists solve many problems of individual athletes, whether they are problems in the field of motivation, concentration, thinking, self-confidence, mental preparation, etc. (Brewer, 2009, p. 2-3).

Self-determination theory is considered one of the popular approaches to motivation in sports. This theory deals with how a person behaves in a specific situation and how he/she reacts to stimuli. Depending on the different degrees

of self-determination, the following degrees are recognized (Spartakus Fight Gym, online, 2019):

- *Demotivation* – is an insufficient connection between the action and the expected result when a person feels like giving up because he/she feels incompetent.
- *External motivation* – behaviour is under positive or negative pressure from the environment.
- *Internal motivation* – comes from within the given personality, most often it is the joy of a specific performance.
- *Regulation* – the behaviour is initiated by one's own decision, although the individual may not perceive it positively, but knows that it will ultimately help him/her improve (explains, for example, why athletes devote a lot of time to training).

Sports management

Management is generally oriented towards the performance of five basic functions, namely: planning, organizing, staffing, leading, and controlling. (Koontz, Weihrich, 1993). Sports management, as a specific discipline of management, focuses on the management of *sports unions, clubs, associations, and cooperatives*, which are to a certain extent oriented towards business activity. Sports management uses knowledge from several scientific disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, economics, or law. Therefore, it is possible to call sports management interdisciplinary (Čáslovová, 2009).

According to Durdová (2012), the difference between the term management and sports management is divided into two spheres. The first of them is **management and commerce**. Basic management activities are carried out here, but at the same time it also deals with finance, marketing, accounting, law, economics. In the second sphere, it is **the sport** itself. In sports, the basic part is to arouse interest on the part of the viewer, as a consumer of entertainment. However, it is also important to focus on actors (athletes) who concentrate on the performance of sports activities itself.

One of the powerful elements of sports management are *managers* who focus on ensuring various functions in the field of sports. Based on the level of management, it is possible to divide them into individual groups (Čáslovová, 2009):

1. *Manager at the level of leading sports activity* – this includes heads of clubs or individuals, specialists for the organization of sports events (World/European Championships or Olympic Games).
2. *Manager at the management level of the sports association* – this group includes members of the executive and control committees, secretaries.
3. *Manager in the business sector* – these are leaders in the production of sports components, then managers of marketing agencies or operators of certain paid sports services.

Human resources in sports management

HR management forms the link between the above-mentioned concepts. The basis for HR in sports management is HR strategy. Such has a set of basic features or rules according to which the parties involved should be guided for

the sports club to function adequately. Personnel strategy in a sports organization is influenced by aspects such as motivation and stimulation, care of employees or players, qualification structure or overall strategic goals for the area of human resources. An effectively set personnel strategy in a sports organization affects higher productivity, wages, and their development. When setting up such a strategy, managers of sports organizations should also think about corporate culture, as well as the safety and protection of all interested parties (Hanzelková et al., 2013).

3. METHODOLOGY

To fulfil the aim of this article, several methods were used in conjunction with a pre-selected procedure. The aim of the article was mainly to examine *the issue of sustainable management of sports organizations*, with a priority focus on *the social networks* of these organizations. Another sub-goal was the analysis of case studies from the practice, which mainly concern and affect staff members, managers, and the athletes themselves.

The work process can be divided into several phases. As a part of the preparatory phase, a content analysis was carried out with a focus on obtaining the theoretical background necessary for a better understanding of the topic in question. Subsequently, the research continued with the analysis of selected four sports organizations. First, it was necessary to select specific sports organizations in Slovakia that relate to popular sports. Selected sports organizations include *Slovak Football Association, Slovak Basketball Association, Slovak Tennis Association, and Slovak Ice Hockey Association*. The last stages of the procedure are the comparison, design, and evaluation phase. Within them, it was necessary to divide the presented associations into sub-associations to enable more efficient collection and acquisition of data. Finally, the comparison and evaluation of

complex findings and conclusions were also used, based on which recommendations for individual Slovak sports organizations were created.

While working with case studies, an in-depth analysis was applied, the aim of which was to identify the main problems, requirements, or key characteristics. As a result of this analysis, complex findings were clearly processed in the form of tables. The benefits of the presented results for sports organizations in Slovakia were identified as well.

The main methods and techniques used in the creation of the article include comparison of two or more phenomena (for example, comparing unions and clubs with each other); analysis of the current situation, analysis of case studies, analysis of secondary data; synthesis of knowledge and findings; induction of acquired information; or deduction representing the basis for the creation of recommendations.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of secondary data was divided into two separate but interconnected parts. The first part focused on the analysis of selected communication channels. Websites and social networks were selected to represent online communication. The second part focused on the analysis of case studies that represent examples from selected sports included in this research. Each of the parts contains specific findings, which are followed by a conclusion.

4.1. Analysis of websites and social networks of selected sports clubs

As a part of the analysis of the communication channels of individual sports clubs, the research focused on the data from Slovakia, where all recognized associations were analysed. The main object of the analysis was the associations and clubs of *football, ice-hockey, basketball, and tennis*.

Table 1 Analysis of communication channels of selected sports clubs

Football Association		BFZ		ZsFZ	
Club name		Sports club Slovan Bratislava	FC Petržalka	FC Dunajská Streda	FC Spartak Trnava
League		1. league	2. league	1. league	1. league
Information about the club president	Gender	M	M	M	M
	Age	31 years old	–	61 years old	52 years old
	Title	–	Ing.	PaedDr.	–
	Career	entrepreneur	long-time chairman of the Petržalka’s fan club and Engerau fans civic association	former football player in the position of defender; member of the executive committee of the Slovak Football Association for professional football for more than 5 years	former football player; long-time football official; he previously managed the club in Malženice
Social networks – club profiles	Web page	club colours design; clear; with links to social networks	interesting design; clear; with connections on social networks	in club colours; nice design; with links to social networks	nice; swallowed by information (chaos); with ink to social networks
	Facebook (FB)	87,461 followers; 2-3 posts per day	7,236 followers; regular posts	63,410 followers; 2-3 posts a day	34,883 followers; 3-4 posts a day
	Instagram	28,200 followers; 2,391 posts	2,725 followers; posts focused on the weekly program and others; 328 posts	44,400 followers; training, match, and infographic posts; 3,183 posts	18,800 followers; training and match posts; 3,621 posts

Source: own elaboration

Each one of these four sports was analysed from the perspective of *the availability of information* about the association and individual clubs, as well as from the perspective of *persons responsible for management*. The following table (Table 1) serves as an example of a clear processing of the obtained information about clubs that were available on websites or social networks (Facebook and Instagram). The table contains collected information about club presidents. From the perspective of compliance with all the GDPR rules (Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2016), the table does not include their names, only *age, gender, education, or career*. For selected sports clubs, the website and social networks were analysed from the perspective of *clarity, design, regularity of adding posts, or the number of followers*.

As a part of the orientation analysis, a similar table was created for each of the four selected sports based on the same procedure. The table also contains dashes symbolizing information that could not be found via the analysis of secondary data.

The main finding resulting from the analysis of secondary data was the lack of information on the websites or social networks of the clubs in question. The most difficult to find was *the information about the chairmen or presidents of the clubs*, which could not be obtained even via other sources, such as the official websites of the clubs. Based on the analysis of communication channels, it can be concluded that all selected sports and their clubs should focus on *clarifying and supplementing the basic information* that is missing on the analysed pages and social networks.

However, the analysis also revealed positive examples of information sharing via online communication channels of sports organizations in Slovakia. Some small clubs had their websites clear, designed in the club colours. The managers of these clubs try to interact with the fans also on social networks with the help of regular posts, polls, or discussions.

4.2. Analysis of the selected case studies from the field of sports organizations

Following the analysis of websites and social networks, the analysis of case studies also focused on the sports of *football, ice-hockey, basketball, and tennis*. At least two case studies from Slovakia or the world were analysed for each of the mentioned sports. All studies were compared with the situation in Slovakia, and finally, conclusions and recommendations were drawn.

Analysis of a case study focused on tennis

Two case studies from the field of tennis were selected for the analysis. The first case study focused on *the shared leadership of sports organizations*. The authors of the study dealt with the issue of coordination of all clubs and unions operating in this area in the selected territory. As an example, 477 affiliated member clubs, 66 non-affiliated member clubs, 25 regional divisions, and 28 sub-divisions were included. The second study, published in 2022, looked at the *innovation programs in the RFET* (the national governing body of tennis in Spain). The research focused on obtaining answers to two questions. The first question addressed the extent to which innovations are promoted and how stakeholders perceive them. The second question focused on what role innovation plays in sport and what impact it has on RFET features (Tennis New Zealand, 2013; Innovation programs of the Royal Spanish Tennis Federation, 2022).

The results of both case studies were summarized, and a graphic representation of individual elements and their connections was created. Figure 2 points out that globalization and competition together with the new challenges of the present stimulate the emergence of innovations in sports organizations. Innovations in selected cases represent *the introduction of development programs and a shared form of leadership*. The creation of development programs includes a support for the beginning tennis players in the form of a handbook that contains valuable advice for beginners.

Analysis of a case study focused on football

The research, presented via the analysed case study focusing on football, was primarily oriented towards the definition of a four-field matrix representing the conceptual framework of the strategy and management process of a football club or football organization. Subsequently, after defining the matrix, an example from the practice of the Aston Villa football club was analysed, which focused on the way this club was managed in the 2007/2008 season. The sports manager who bought the club in question, Aston Villa, managed to move it to the 6th place out of a total of 11 places in the Premier League (Santomier, 2019).

Due to the steps taken by this manager, it can be stated that the competitiveness of the analysed club has increased. The motivation of fans as well as people from minority ethnic groups has also increased, which affects the motivation of the players.



Figure 2 Elements of innovations from the environment of tennis and their connections resulting from the analysed studies
 Source: own elaboration

The manager, Randy Lerner, used innovative methods in running the club. He implemented specific activities on and off the field, not only during matches but also outside of them. In addition, from a managerial perspective, he focused on all four aspects of the management matrix – the perspective of stakeholders, the perspective of internal processes, the perspective of infrastructure, and the perspective of financial capability. The interconnectedness of all parts of the matrix together with innovative, non-traditional activities led to a huge success (Coskun et al., 2020; Coombs, Osborne, 2012).

Analysis of a case study focused on basketball

The initial analysis showed that there are still no relevant case studies in the field of basketball for the Slovak market, and at the same time, there are not enough of them abroad either. Nevertheless, two case studies from the field of basketball abroad were selected for a detailed analysis. The first case study is based on an interview with basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, who described his leadership style and the challenges he faces. From the interview with the head coach, it is clear that it is essential for the coaches to pay attention to their estimation and intuition. It is not advisable for them to stick to established traditions at all costs, such as in the case of choosing a team leader. When choosing a leader, it was customary that it was usually an older player. The coach must be able to estimate who is suitable for the role of the leader based on the characteristics of the players and their personality typology. Krzyzewski himself stated that being a leader is a lifelong journey (An Interview with coach Mike Krzyzewski, 2022).

Basketball is a typical sport popular especially in America. That is why the second case study focuses on the National Basketball Association (NBA). Basketball is currently the most popular sport among Generation Z and millennials, which has also been helped by the digitization of this sport. The results of the case study indicate a steady *increase in fan interaction on the NBA's website and social networks*. The managers of the association in question are also aware of the constant technological progress to which it is necessary to respond. Innovative approaches used by managers led the NBA to the

title of the most innovative sports organization (NBA – the success of permanent innovation, 2022; NBA – Launchpad innovation program, 2022).

Following the conclusions that result from the analysis of online communication of selected sports clubs in Slovakia (chapter 4.1), it can be concluded that Slovak sports organizations are currently unable to fully respond to the trend of digitalization of sports. Some smaller clubs in Slovakia are trying to take advantage of this opportunity, but in comparison with world clubs and associations, they are still left behind. The resulting recommendation for sports organizations in Slovakia is a *higher level of engagement in the digital environment*, so that the potential of technological progress in sports is fully utilized. In that case, it will lead to higher competitiveness of sports organizations in Slovakia and to their sustainable development (NBA – development of the number of fans 2022).

Analysis of a case study focused on ice-hockey

Hockey is the second most popular sport in Slovakia, so it was possible to find specific case studies within the domestic market. The first analysed case study focuses on the Slovak national ice-hockey team. The main proposed solution resulting from the research was to increase the clarity and efficiency of the website to achieve better usability of *the information system*. Based on the incorporation of proposals, team players, coaches, and many other participants could track information about training and matches in a better quality, more accurately, and especially those that are truly topical (Slovak ice hockey information system, 2022).

In the second case study, a similar problem was described in detail, but in the Finnish national ice-hockey team. The sports organization in question tried to create a clear panel on the website in cooperation with the betting company. This would display information regarding the health status of the players, their weaknesses or strengths, the number of goals, their movements, and much more. The result of the implementation of the presented solution was a high positive impact on the interaction with fans and other interested parties. The successful project led to the advancement of ice-hockey in Slovakia (Liiga and Veikkaus, 2022).

Table 2 Conclusions and findings from the case study analysis

Sport	Case study focus	Main findings
Tennis	New Zealand – Shared leadership	- the impact of globalization, competition, new challenges of the present on stimulating innovation
	Spain RFET – innovation programs	- creation of development programs (manual for beginning tennis players) - financial scholarships, support of professionals - shared form of leadership (common goals, vision, mission)
Football	England (Aston Villa) – club management	- the change of management increased the motivation of fans, employees, and players - working on relationships with loyalty, organizing events - using and focusing on the BSC matrix of football clubs
Basketball	USA (Mike Krzyzewski) – leadership styles	- building a leader, not just based on age - building a leader is a lifelong process
	USA (NBA) – innovations	- share information on the website and social networks - to constantly innovate the club using the latest technologies
Ice hockey	Slovakia (SZLH) – information system	- use effective information systems - first-hand information (quality, accurate and up-to-date information)
	Finland – innovative solutions	- players get information and fans can react and interact in real time - increasing the performance of the team and increasing the interest of other companies

Source: own elaboration

Conclusions and findings from the analysis of the selected case studies from of sports organizations

Partial findings resulting from the performed case study analyses were summarized and compared. The main findings from all case studies were also clearly processed in the form of Table 2.

Based on the presented analysis, it can be concluded that there are relatively few case studies within the selected sports, especially from Slovakia. However, positive examples can be generalized, adjusted, and specific elements can be implemented within Slovak sports. Following the analysis of online communication of selected sports organizations in Slovakia, it can be stated that Slovak associations and clubs currently do not pay enough attention to sharing information and using social networks, which are crucial in this digital age. For the effective operation of sports organizations, the application of innovation, development programs, or building relations with the public in all areas is appropriate.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A set of recommendations was formulated based on the performed analyses and applied methods, which related to four selected sports (football, tennis, basketball, and ice-hockey). These concern individual sports organizations, their members, and other interested parties to support their sustainable operation.

One of the key recommendations for Slovak sports organizations is the addition of basic and specific information about the club and about personnel representation (leaders,

managers). This information was missing from the clubs' online communication channels. Other recommendations include the revision of the websites of individual unions as part of graphic processing and updating of information. Social networks are a popular marketing tool these days, which is why it is necessary to establish accounts on social networks with all sports associations in Slovakia.

Finally, the benefits resulting from the analysis of case studies were identified. Sports organizations themselves can focus on performing an analysis of examples from practice, which will provide them with a better knowledge on the given issue. They will gain insight on the trends and operation of other sports organizations around the world and thus expand their experience, knowledge, and inspiration. The benefits of the implementation of the presented recommendations include an increase in the attractiveness of sports, a better overview on social networks, motivation of athletes, or the support of future development. When looking at the associations themselves, another benefit is the creation of a better overview of individual associations in a specific territory, an increase in their profitability, the creation of better relations, an increase in their competitiveness, or the possibility of applying innovative ideas.

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Gabriel KOMAN, doc. Ing., PhD.

Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, Department of Management Theories, University of Žilina
Univerzitná 8215/1, 010 26 Žilina, Slovakia
e-mail: gabriel.koman@fri.uniza.sk

Dominika TUMOVÁ, Ing., PhD.

Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, Department of Management Theories, University of Žilina
Univerzitná 8215/1, 010 26 Žilina, Slovakia
e-mail: dominika.tumova@uniza.sk

Adriána BUČKOVÁ, Bc. – independent researcher

Bianka BEŇOVÁ, Bc. – independent researcher

Katarína ZELEŇAKOVÁ, Bc. – independent researcher

Monika ADAMČIAKOVÁ, Bc. – independent researcher

Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, Department of Management Theories, University of Žilina
Univerzitná 8215/1, 010 26 Žilina, Slovakia

e-mail: buckova8@stud.uniza.sk, e-mail: zelenakova3@stud.uniza.sk, benova18@stud.uniza.sk, adamciakova1@stud.uniza.sk