

## Knowledge Management and Lifelong Learning - Some Aspects of Their Development in Bulgaria

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Radka Ivanova  
University of Economics – Varna, Varna, Bulgaria  
r.ivanova@ue-varna.bg

### Abstract

*The modern economy is characterized by globalization of processes and a high degree of digitization nowadays. The dynamism, competitiveness, the increased migration of the population and, in particular, of labor resources, lead to the need of constant search for new ways of doing things. In this regard, today the key role of an extremely valuable resource is acquired by knowledge. Moreover, the intangible resources to which they refer are crucial for the success of organizations. Achieving sustainability in economic, social and cultural terms implies the generation, acquisition and effective use of knowledge. This is closely related to supplemental learning of already acquired knowledge and skills. **The purpose** of this article is to characterize knowledge and its management and to analyze the degree of implementation of the lifelong learning strategy in Bulgaria.*

*Keywords: knowledge management, lifelong learning, Bulgaria*

*JEL Code: I2, I24, I25*

*DOI: 10.56065/IJUSV-ESS/2023.12.2.32*

### Introduction

Knowledge, as one of the irreplaceable resources today, is extremely important for the development and competitiveness of companies. It is considered that the acquisition of new knowledge, as well as the effective use of available knowledge, is an important factor in the development of modern organizations, and the management of knowledge is a serious challenge. The globalization of the world, the accelerated development of technologies, the shortened life cycle of products, the drastic depletion of non-renewable resources require finding new ways and means to satisfy needs. This requires upgrading people's knowledge and skills, which is helped by the EU's lifelong learning strategy. The priority is to increase the qualification of human resources in order to create conditions for their fuller professional realization, as well as increasing the competitive advantages of organizations.

### 1. Knowledge and its management

Knowledge is different from all other resources available to any organization. The main difference lies in its specificity, namely – it has an immaterial nature, it is difficult to describe, and over time and in the course of its use, knowledge rather increases its value and significance, unlike other resources that are used up, age, including morally, etc. In this regard, we can point out that knowledge is of crucial importance both for the economic development as a whole and for the individual organization. Therefore, there has been an understanding that knowledge can be seen as a major source of high quality and competitive advantages for organizations. (Gurova, Dulev, & Yotovska, 2013). Knowledge is also seen as the main source of power, prestige and wealth, and its generation, acquisition and use are of fundamental importance for sustainable economic, social, cultural development of organizations and economies as a whole (Gurova et al., 2012: 10).

In clarifying the origin of knowledge, two aspects of a philosophical nature can be used – empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism is expressed in the sense sensations and sensory perceptions of man, with the help of which he studies reality. Philosophically, empiricism emphasizes two basic principles that lead to the acquisition of knowledge through experience, namely: "there is no absolute truth" and "all truth is subject to verification, modification,

acceptance, correction, or rejection." As a result, the validity of knowledge needs to be empirically confirmed.

Rationalism, on the other hand, is based on the understanding that knowledge is the result of reason, that people use their intellect to generate knowledge, and is thus opposed to sensory information. It is believed that the latter can be misleading or wrong, therefore reason must be relied upon. In general, for the viability and success in the professional life of everyone - people and organizations - knowledge is crucial, and practically, from the moment of its creation, every company increases its volume and develops it (Gourova, & Vladimirova, 2016: 12).

Knowledge is dynamic in nature and is created in the course of interactions between people. From the point of view of the organization, knowledge can be considered in two aspects - knowledge possessed by each of the personnel and knowledge formed in the specific company as a result of the implementation of various practices. Of key importance, accordingly, is this knowledge that corresponds to the needs of the organization given its principle field of operation and contribute to its successful development.

In general, from the point of view of its origin, knowledge can be considered as two variations - explicit and implicit. According to researchers in the field, *implicit knowledge* is accumulated based on the experiences that a person forms in the course of his development. On the other hand, *explicit knowledge* is the result of logical thinking and is closely related to rationality. It is the explicit knowledge that is subject to encoding and storage with the help of appropriate information carriers. At the same time, we can point out that explicit and implicit knowledge complement each other, interact and can be transformed from one type to the other and vice versa. Therefore, both types of knowledge are important for organizations. As R. Marinov (2010) points out, knowledge is based on real ideas, relevant skills and abilities for its dissemination within the company. The formalization of the explicit knowledge takes place during the development of the various documents, procedures, regulations, rules, norms, codes, etc. As a result, the subsequent transmission of the accumulated knowledge is facilitated through relevant trainings, courses, seminars, etc. to increase the qualification of the staff.

Implicit knowledge, called silent knowledge by some researchers, finds expression in people's acquired and improved over time experience and skills, representing an intangible asset that does not lend itself to formalization. It includes values, intuition, attitudes, emotions, which are different for each person. Nevertheless, silent knowledge is very important to any organization because it is possessed by the people working in it.

In the specialized literature, there are other varieties of knowledge, the qualifications of which are made according to signs related to their purpose and scope.

Regardless of existing classifications, we should point out that researchers in the field are united around the understanding that turning knowledge into a valuable asset for an organization requires formalizing, disseminating, sharing, and applying the information, experience, and skills at their disposal (Vatchkova, & Kolova, 2009).

Given the importance of knowledge, it is necessary to find the right ways and methods to manage it for the benefit of the particular company. According to some authors, organizations can be seen as "*repositories of knowledge*" (Galabova, 2022: 43). That is why the issue of knowledge management has attracted attention and has been the subject of research by a number of authors for decades. The key role of knowledge is still a challenge for organizations today, especially since it lies at the heart of generating competitive advantages.

Each of the researchers in the field tries to interpret the process of knowledge management, focusing their attention on that aspect of it that they consider the most important. However, the importance of knowledge for the effective and successful development of organizations can be deduced as a common feature of all definitions. In general, knowledge management from the point of view of companies can be seen as a set of activities to create, secure, store, apply information, knowledge, experience and create conditions for upgrading knowledge (Galabova, 2022: 141).

According to one of the definitions, knowledge management can be defined as a set of strategic and operational efforts focused on increasing the degree of usefulness of the company's intellectual capital used to improve the achieved results (Panayotova, 2010). In support of this, we can point to the thesis of E. Simeonova (2014), according to which knowledge management is an organizational strategy that started its rapid development at the end of the 20th century. Also, the author points out that knowledge management can be defined as identifying and analyzing knowledge that is available and needed, as well as corresponding to this analysis, planning and overall management of all activities related to the formation of intellectual capital, allowing the realization of corporate goals.

Knowledge management practically covers all organizational processes, and the main goal is to form creative and innovative capacity of people (Nankova, 2014: 97). The continuous generation of new knowledge, its timely distribution and materialization through relevant products, services, and technologies is important for achieving success. At the same time, knowledge management affects all social processes, being in close interaction with effective communications, sharing information between people, and making adequate decisions. Knowledge management must enable the acceleration of the processes of creation, sharing, application of different knowledge and dissemination of good practices in order to realize sustainable growth. This is also in accordance with the globalization of the world, the opening of the borders of the countries, which supports the migration of people, the creation of new market conditions, etc. All these processes are supported by the extreme development of information and communication technologies and the Internet environment.

On the other hand, M. Nankova (2014) points out that the knowledge management process depends on several main factors, namely:

- the social and informational level of the society;
- the degree of use of modern technologies (communication, mobile, computer, network, etc.);
- the educational level of the teams that use these technologies for different purposes;
- the degree of development of knowledge management systems;
- the communication competence of individual institutions as a whole and the communication standards to which they adhere.

We should also pay attention to the fact that knowledge management in a company can be interpreted at three levels:

- *strategic* - what strategies should be developed and implemented in terms of products, services, technologies, formation of competitive advantages;
- *tactical* – monitoring, selection of practices and undertaking activities to implement the relevant business strategy;
- *operational* - emphasis on the application of knowledge in the direct activity of the people in the organization.

As a process, knowledge management covers several main activities, namely:

- *knowledge identification*, which is the analysis of the knowledge and abilities of the people available to the organization at a given point in time to be used in decision-making;
- *acquisition of knowledge*, in which external sources of knowledge are used, including external experts and additional staff, partners, customers, etc.;
- *knowledge development* aimed at acquiring new knowledge;
- *distribution of knowledge* depending on which unit of the organization needs what and at what point in time this knowledge must be available;

- *use of knowledge* related to improving the company's productivity and the benefits it generates;
- *storing knowledge* in an established organizational knowledge base, guaranteeing its credibility, relevance and quality.

In practice, the ability of managers to effectively manage the knowledge of their staff becomes a critical success factor. From this point of view, knowledge management can be seen as a tool for improving the organizational effectiveness of companies (Koleva, 2012: 84). Moreover, the new knowledge also determines the opportunities of the organizations to carry out innovative activities, directly corresponding to their competitiveness. Knowledge management allows it to reach the place and people who need it in a timely manner so that the right decisions can be made. The effective use of knowledge and skills, their timely transformation into new products and services or the improvement of existing ones, their rapid dissemination leads to the formation of new competitive advantages.

## **2. Knowledge management in organizations and lifelong learning**

The process of knowledge management in an organization involves gathering information using various methods and tools. In order to ensure its subsequent use, the need arises for its structuring, appropriate storage, analysis, sharing through appropriate channels and techniques. As a result, the collected information is transformed into organizational knowledge that serves as a basis for making various decisions.

The creation of organizational knowledge implies the performance of several basic activities (E. Gurova). The first among them is to make an inventory of the knowledge that the particular company has, so that it can then be analyzed, classified according to characteristics relevant to it and arranged in such a way as to ensure easy access to them. Next, such knowledge must be generated or acquired that the organization will need to achieve the stated goals. As the third element, E. Gurova points out extraction of the implicit knowledge. Given their characteristics, this is an extremely complex process, and at the same time, this knowledge is important for subsequent development. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze and store them. After all of this is done, knowledge must be disseminated throughout the organization using appropriate channels and technologies. The available knowledge must be analyzed from the point of view of its essence, type, accessibility, usefulness from the company's point of view. Depending on the quality and volume of this knowledge, the need to provide additional one is determined.

On the other hand, we must point out that the turbulence of the environment in which we live and work today gives rise to the need to constantly upgrade the knowledge that people have. In this regard, the European Commission drew up a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning back in 2000. In it, the following six main positions were set:

- Formation of new skills to increase the qualification of everyone.
- Increase investment in human capital.
- Innovations in teaching and learning, by introducing innovative methods for implementing these processes.
- Assessing people's knowledge through advanced assessment methods.
- Providing easy access to high quality information and advice related to education and training for all age groups.
- Creating opportunities for continuous learning near the home of the learners.

It is necessary to point out that the European Commission considers lifelong learning as a concept according to which it is any action related to learning, aimed at improving the knowledge, skills, and competences of people, regardless of their age. The main goal is to build on the basic supply of competences typical for each person. Through its policy, the EU stimulates active civic

awareness, promotes adaptability to changes of an economic, political, social nature, participation in various forms of professional and personal development of people. Based on all this, the competitiveness of the workforce should be improved, which is a prerequisite for improving the state of organizations and economies in general.

The main ways of realizing the concept of lifelong learning are associated with the use of formal, non-formal and independent learning. It is necessary that each of the forms is attractive enough to stimulate people to use it. A long-standing policy of the EU and of each member country is the development and implementation of projects and programs that contribute to the sustainable stimulation of learning for people of all ages. The upgrading of knowledge and skills is beneficial for the people to expand their opportunities for personal fulfillment, for organizations and economies as a whole. The fast development of technologies supporting the processes of creation, accessibility, and use of information implies continuous learning (Mihova, 2014:119). In each company, it is necessary to be considered what type of learning methods it is appropriate to be used, taking into account the characteristics of its personnel, as well as its capabilities, to support the process of meeting the needs of knowledge and in practice to comply with the established way for knowledge management. It is important to note that gaining new knowledge can be done by applying learning by doing as well as learning from others. Learning sources can be internal and external. The main point is that after carrying out this process, what has been learned must be adapted and applied in accordance with the particularities of the particular organization.

### 3. Bulgaria and the „Lifelong learning strategy”

Lifelong learning implies participation in various forms of formal and non-formal education and training, qualifications and re-qualifications. The analysis of the data on participation in similar forms of education of persons between 25-64 years of age in Bulgaria for 2016 shows that only a quarter of them were involved in various forms of learning. The largest relative share of persons in the youngest age group - 25-34 years old, engaged in training to improve their qualifications. Accordingly, the share of people aged 55-64 is the smallest (see fig. 1). The indicated trend is natural, given that the first group is at the beginning of its professional path and it is necessary to prove itself continuously by acquiring new knowledge and skills with the aim of better personal development over time.

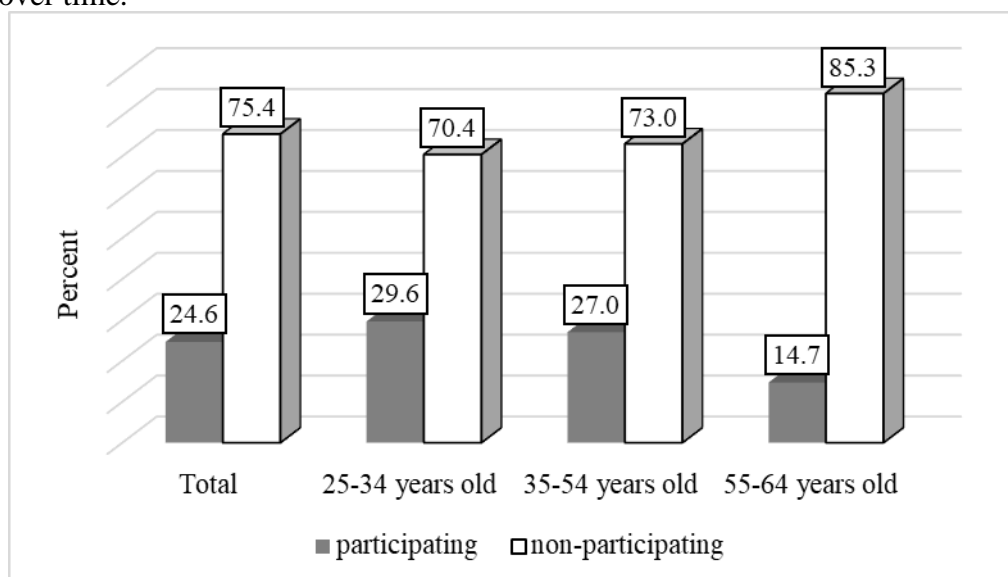


Figure 1. Participation in formal education and training or non-formal education by age for 2016

From the point of view of the gender characteristics, it is striking that the share of male and female learners is the same (see Fig. 2).

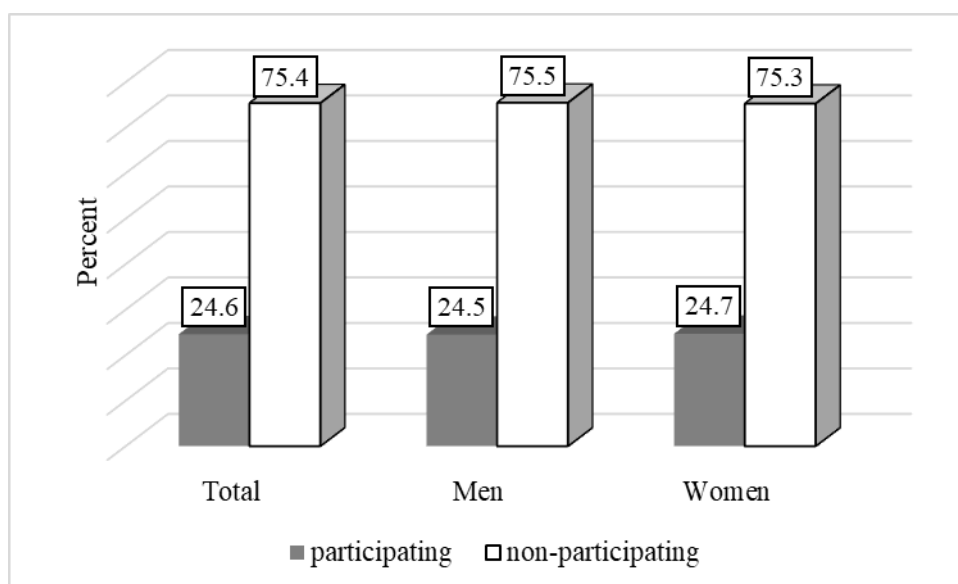


Figure 2. Distribution of participants in training (formal education, formal and informal training) by gender for 2016

The data of the National Statistical Institute (NSI) in Bulgaria also show that a greater part of those participating in the trainings, regardless of their nature, are persons with a higher education (a little over 38% of all), and with the smallest share distinguish those who have a low level of education (see Fig. 3). We can connect this trend to the fact that more highly educated people have a greater need to improve themselves in order to have more opportunities for realization in accordance with the constantly changing requirements and working conditions.

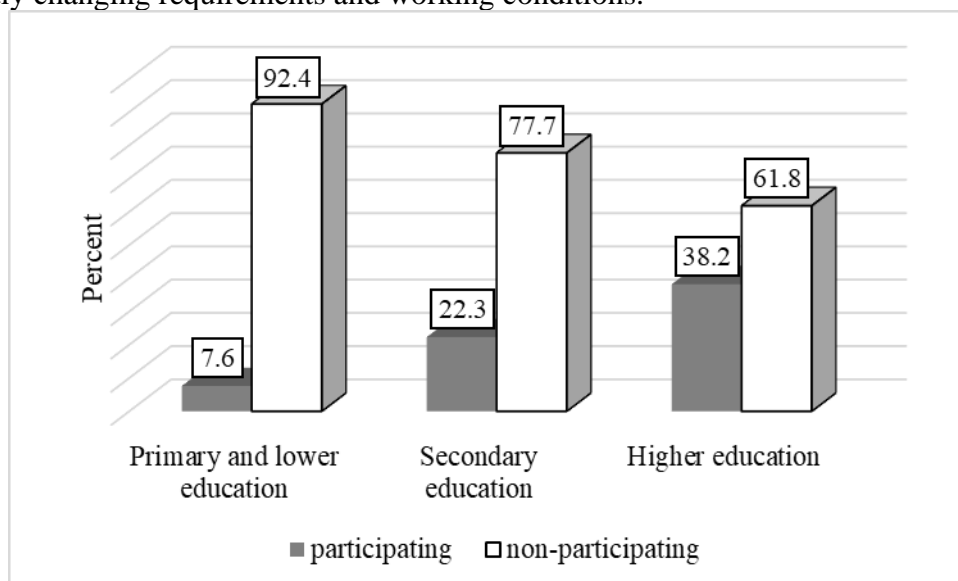


Figure 3. Relative share of participants in training (formal education, formal and non-formal education) according to their education (2016)

Also of interest is the data for people in Bulgaria aged 25-64 with regard to their employment status. Awareness of the need for continuous improvement of qualifications, acquisition of new knowledge and skills is observed among workers. We must consider as a negative trend the fact that the share of participants in various trainings among the unemployed and economically inactive persons is insignificantly small - only 4.6% and 4.5% (see Fig. 4).

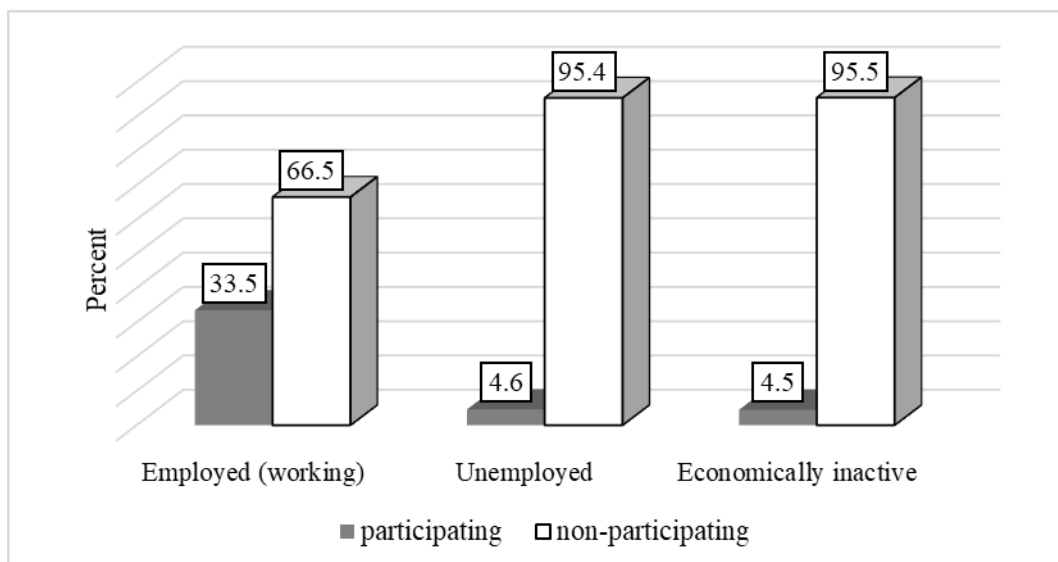


Figure 4. Relative share of persons who participated in training according to their employment status as of 2016

As a constant value, we can consider the observed tendency for training to be attended primarily by people living in urban areas compared to those who live in villages. In this case, for 2016, the number of people from cities who took part in various forms of training was twice as large (see Fig. 5). In urban areas, there are greater opportunities for development, which is a prerequisite for more students studying there.

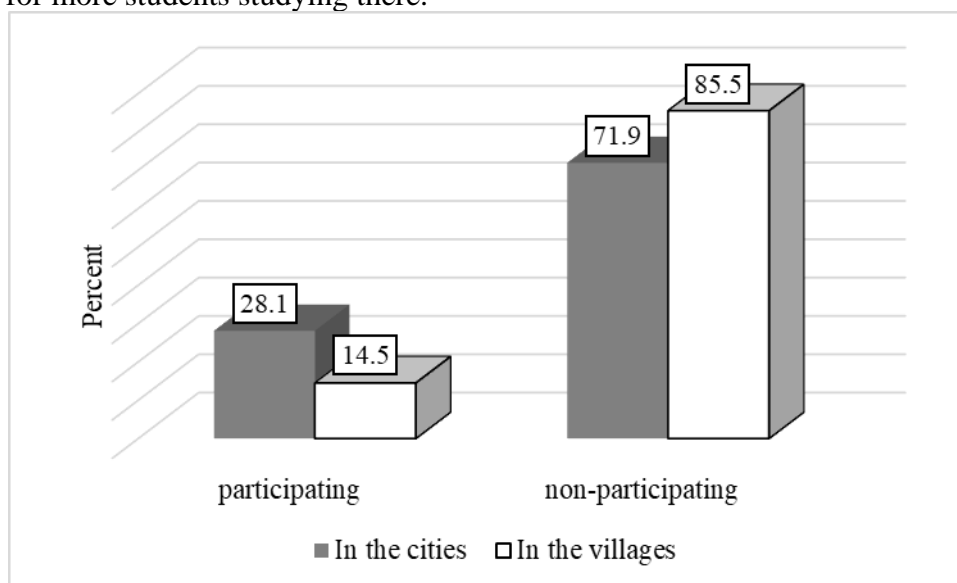


Figure 5. Relative share of persons who participated in the training according to their place of residence as of 2016.

From Eurostat's data on lifelong learning, it is clear that in 2020 Bulgaria remains in the penultimate place in the EU, followed only by Romania. On the other hand, however, a reduced interest in education and training is reported for all countries during this period compared to the previous year 2019, which can be attributed to the restrictions imposed worldwide in connection with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Bulgaria, the number of persons who acquired a professional qualification in 2020 was 50.4% less than in 2019 (see Fig. 6) in 2021 a slight increase of 10% is reported, but in 2022 the level is below that of 2020.

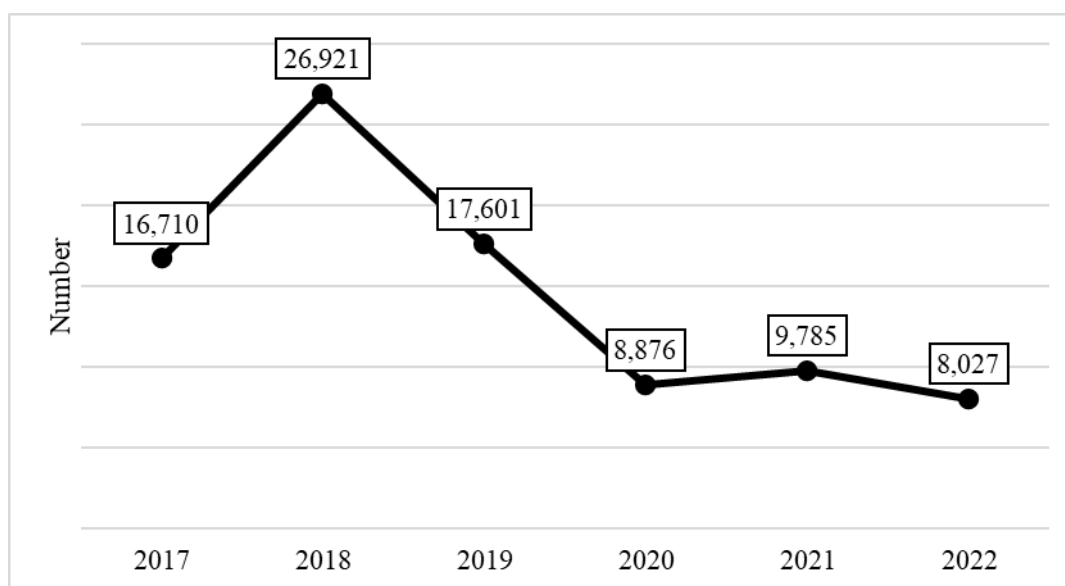


Figure 6. Dynamics of the number of persons who acquired a degree of professional qualification in various forms of education (2017-2022)

Furthermore, from Fig. 6 it can also be observed that for the period 2017-2022, the data show an initial increased interest in training programs in various age groups among people in Bulgaria in 2018 compared to 2017, which began to decline in 2019. This unfavorable trend continues, and the analysis of the data shows that the number of persons who received vocational qualifications in continuing education centers, vocational high schools and vocational colleges has almost halved (around 48%) at the end of the period under review.

### Conclusion

People's knowledge and skills are a resource that every organization needs. Through them, appropriate actions can be taken to respond to the continuous transformations in the environment. Therefore, it is important for every company to find the right ways to manage and increase the knowledge it has. In this regard, the EU's long-standing "lifelong learning" strategy, implying continuous training for everyone - employed and unemployed - is particularly useful. The data for Bulgaria, covering the period 2016-2022, show a rather unfavorable trend, since 2020 the number of people participating in various trainings and forms of education has been decreasing. It is necessary, in our opinion, to increase the attention towards the provided opportunities for improving the qualification of human resources, emphasizing the benefits that will be able to derive from everyone - both the trainees and the organizations that employ them. The end result should be in favor of the national economy and increase its competitiveness. Taking in consideration that not every company can organize additional training on its own, the services of specialized institutions and relevant experts should be used.

### References

- Galabova, L. (2022). *Knowledge Management. Intellectual Capital*. Sofia: EUT+ Academic Press.
- Gourova, E., & Dragomirova, M. (2016). Building the Knowledge Management Info-Structure of the Organisation. *E-spisanie „Pedagogicheski forum“*. 2, 12-26. DOI: 10.15547/PF.2015.046
- Gurova, E., Dulev, P., & Yotovska, K. (2013). *Otchet po deynost 2: Prouchvane na sistemi za upravlenie na znaniето v obrazovaniето*. Proekt BG051PO0014.3.04-0058 „Inovatsionni formi za distantsionno obuchenie v Balgarskite universiteti“. Sofiya: Evropeyski sotsialen fond.
- Gurova, E., Nikolov, R., & Antonova, A. (2012). *Knowledge Management*. Sofia: Bulvest 2000.



5. Koleva, D. (2012). The problems in Communication of Knowledge Management (Part II). *Management and Education*. VII (I), 84-91.
6. Marinov, R. (2010). *Interaktivni komunikatsii – strategii i znanie*. Sofia: NBU. [Online] Available from: [https://ebox.nbu.bg/prob12/view\\_lesson.php?id=246](https://ebox.nbu.bg/prob12/view_lesson.php?id=246) [Accessed 14/08/2023].
7. Mihova, M. (2014). *Obrazovatelna politika na Evropeyskiya sayuz. Problemi i prioriteti*. Plovdiv: ASTARTA.
8. Nankova, M. (2014). Current trends in Knowledge Management. Good Practices. Collection with Papers of The First Scientific *Conference Contemporary Strategies and Innovations in the Knowledge Management* 3rd – 4th December, 2014. Sofia: Publishing house “Za Bukvite – O Pismenech”, 96-102. [Online] Available from: <https://unyka.unibit.bg/images/pdf/2014-1/21.pdf> [Accessed 14/08/2023].
9. Obrazovanie i uchene prez tseliya zhivot. [Online] Available from: <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/3374/> [Accessed 22/08/2023].
10. Panayotova, T. (2010). Izbor na strategiya za upravlenie na znaniyata chrez inzhenering na znaniyata. *Nauchni trudove na Rusenskiya universitet*. 49(5.1), 70-74.
11. Simeonova, E. (2014). Knowledge Management in Higher Education. *Collection with Papers of The First Scientific Conference Contemporary Strategies and Innovations in the Knowledge Management* 3rd – 4th December, 2014. Sofia: Publishing house “Za Bukvite – O Pismenech”, 190-194. [Online] Available from: <https://unyka.unibit.bg/images/pdf/2014-1/21.pdf> [Accessed 14/08/2023].
12. Vatchkova, E., Y. Kolova (2009). *Application the Knowledge Management Methodology in Management Consulting*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.ibset.eu/docs/%D0%95\\_Vachkova\\_J\\_Kolova\\_Paper\\_2009%20\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.ibset.eu/docs/%D0%95_Vachkova_J_Kolova_Paper_2009%20_2_.pdf) [Accessed 24/08/2023].