

## EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE AS A STRATEGIC PILLAR OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE IN OIL COMPANIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53486/dri2025.16>  
UDC: [005.962.13:005.332.1]:665.6/7(478)

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**Abstract:** *Employee performance is a strategic research topic, intensively addressed in the international literature over the last decades. A bibliometric analysis of 2,672 relevant publications from the last 10 years reveals close links between this theme and several Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 09 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), SDG 03 (Health and well-being) and SDG 04 (Quality education). This multidimensional focus reflects the fact that employee performance is perceived not only as an operational component, but also as a driver of sustainability and competitive advantage. In the Republic of Moldova, the petroleum products market is dominated by a small number of companies operating in a highly regulated and volatile economic environment. In such a context, where price differentiation is limited, the ability to strategically capitalize on human resources becomes a key factor for resilience and competitiveness. Against this backdrop, this article explores how oil companies in the Republic of Moldova approach human resource performance as a strategic pillar of their market positioning by analyzing public documents available on institutional websites.*

**Keywords:** *employees' performance; competitive advantage; strategic human resources management; oil industry; Republic of Moldova; organizational sustainability; documentary analysis.*

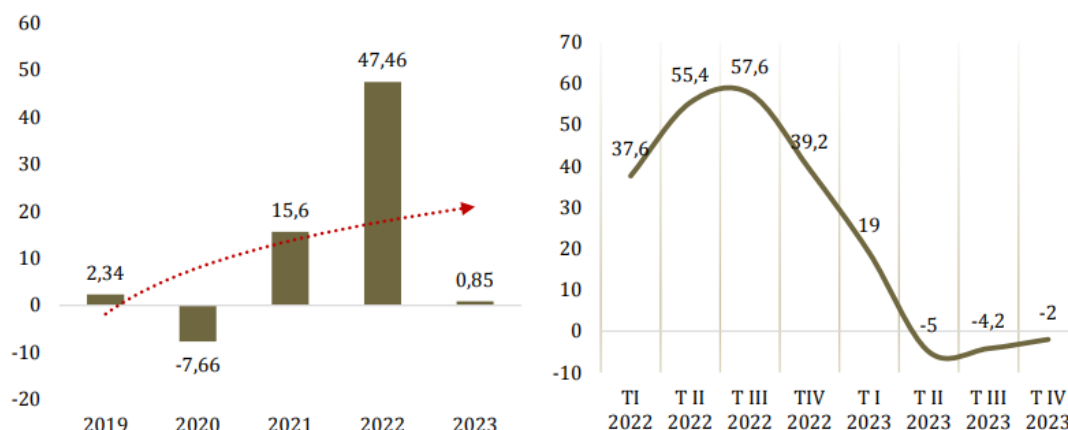
**JEL:** M12, L71, O15

### 1. Introduction

In today's context of accelerated economic transformation and intensifying competition in global markets, employee performance has become a key strategic element to strengthen the position of organizations in critical sectors such as the oil and gas industry. In an industry characterized by capital intensity, technological complexity and stringent regulations, human capital plays a central role in ensuring operational efficiency, safety and innovation. Thus, understanding how employee performance can be cultivated and leveraged not just as an operational objective, but as a strategic pillar of competitive advantage, becomes a necessity for organizations in the sector.

In the Republic of Moldova, the retail fuel distribution sector is dominated by a small number of companies, which outlines an oligopolistic market environment. According to data for 2023 (source: <https://www.data2b.md/ro/companies>), Lukoil Moldova has a market share of 45.8%, followed by Petrom-Moldova with 19.8% and Vento Retail S.R.L. with 10.1%. Together, these entities account for more than 75% of total fuel sales volume, which limits price differentiation and emphasizes operational efficiency and the quality of human capital. In this context, employee performance becomes a strategic resource for maintaining market share, optimizing service and increasing competitive advantage.

Moreover, the recent fuel price dynamics reflect the high level of volatility in the oil industry. According to the data published by the National Bureau of Statistics, fuel prices in 2022 saw an annual increase of 47.5%, followed by a slight decrease in 2023. These variations were influenced by global geopolitical and economic factors and created a climate of operational uncertainty for companies in the industry. In such a context, maintaining employee performance and organizational adaptability become strategic tools for resilience and competitiveness, able to offset external pressures through internal efficiency and responsiveness.



**Figure 1. Annual and quarterly evolution of fuel prices in the Republic of Moldova (2019-2023), % (2019-2023)**

*Source: taken by the author from Tendințe în economia Moldovei, no. 50/2024*

The relevance of the topic stems from the need to correlate individual and team performance with the managerial, cultural and leadership processes that define the organizational climate. The motivation for the choice of the topic lies in the absence of applied research that analyzes this phenomenon in oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, given that employee performance is often approached in isolation, without a strategic contextualization.

In this context, the recent statistical data confirm the importance of the oil sector in the national economy: in 2023, the volume of imported petroleum products reached a new historical high of 907.9 thousand tons, with a dominant share of standard diesel. The positive dynamics of domestic consumption and the high level of competition on the distribution market - reflected by the number of licensed operators - consolidate the idea that the success of these entities depends on the ability to efficiently leverage human capital (ANRE Activity Report, 2023).

The main aim of the research is to identify and analyze the conceptual and managerial dimensions through which employee performance contributes to gaining and maintaining competitive advantage in oil entities. To achieve this goal, international and national literature sources, empirical studies and public documents were analyzed, with a focus on how human resource policies, leadership styles, organizational culture, innovativeness and intellectual capital are reflected.

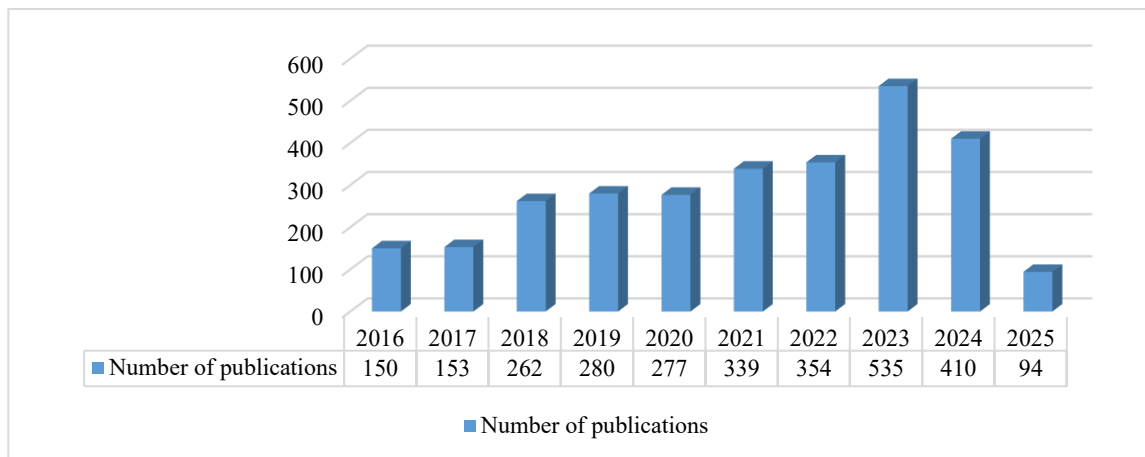
The research methodology is qualitative, based on content analysis of public documents available on the websites of relevant oil companies in the Republic of Moldova. In parallel, a bibliometric analysis of the international scientific literature published in the last 10 years (2016-2025), extracted from established databases (Web of Science), was carried out in order to outline the dominant thematic directions and position the topic in the global context.

The literature review phase revealed a significant diversity of approaches: from research highlighting the influence of democratic leadership, motivation and organizational discipline, to studies that look at performance from the perspective of internal branding, intellectual capital, organizational culture, collective learning, and the emotional and spiritual dimensions of employees. Overall, recent literature supports the idea that employee performance is a result of the interaction between individual, organizational and strategic factors, which justifies the integrative approach proposed in this paper.

## 2. Literature review

To substantiate the analytical approach applied to oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, an exploration of how employee performance has been researched internationally over the last decade is required. Thus, between 2016 and 2024, employee performance research has seen a steady increase

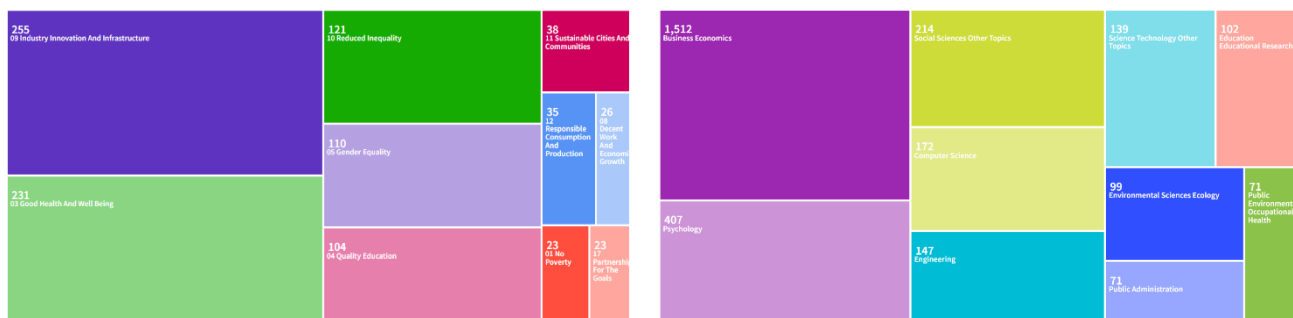
from 150 publications in 2016 to a peak of 410 in 2024, Figure 1. This development reflects not only the expansion of theoretical interest in the topic, but also its integration into multiple practical contexts, from digital transformation and teleworking to organizational sustainability and equity. The year 2020 marked a relative stagnation, explicable by the redirection of research towards emerging themes in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the post-pandemic period (2021-2024) brought a visible revival and consolidation. In 2025, the lower number of papers (94) probably reflects the fact that data are still in the process of being finalized for the full calendar year.



**Graph 1. Dynamics of international scientific publications on employee performance in the period 2016-2025**

*Source: author based on Web of Schience*

The analysis of the 2672 international publications indexed over the last 10 years, related to the theme of employee performance, shows a strong association of research with several Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, SDG 09 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 03 (Health and Well-being) are the most frequently encountered, suggesting that employee performance is addressed in a multidimensional framework that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional human resource management. At the same time, the significant presence of SDGs 05 (Gender Equality), 10 (Reducing Inequalities) and 04 (Quality Education) reflects the researchers' interest in integrating equity and training issues in the analysis of individual and organizational performance.

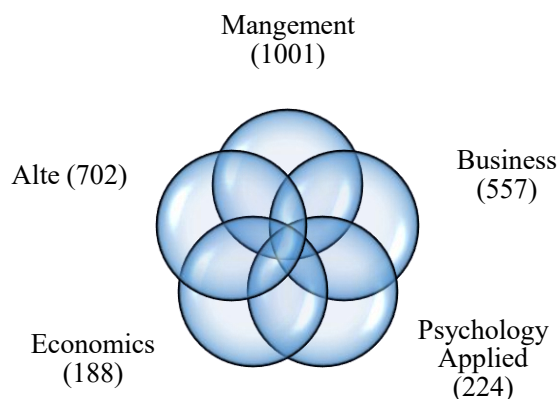


**Figure 2. Breakdown of international publications on employee performance by Sustainable Development Goals and Web of Science categories**

*Source: author based on Web of Schience*

The publications analyzed according to the Web of Science categories confirm the transdisciplinary character of the topic “employee performance”. The Business & Economics domain concentrates over 1500 papers, reflecting the central theoretical positioning of the topic within strategic management, competitiveness and labor economics. Also, the strong presence of organizational psychology (407

papers), social sciences and education shows that performance research has evolved towards a holistic approach, where motivational, formative and health factors are integrated in the assessment of employees' contribution to organizational success. This substantiation supports the relevance and complexity of the analysis applied in oil companies in the Republic of Moldova.



**Figure 3. Distribution of international publications on employee performance according to Web of Science subdomains**

*Source: author based on Web of Science*

The breakdown by scientific field shows that the topic of employee performance is deeply represented in economics and management sciences, with a significant number of papers published in the “Management” (1,001 articles) and “Business” (557) areas. Relevant contributions also come from applied psychology (224), industrial relations and labor (111), but also from education and tourism, indicating a diversity of perspectives and contexts of application. This distribution reflects the deeply interdisciplinary nature of the research, supporting the integrative approach adopted in the present study.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the development directions of the scientific literature on employee performance, it is essential to move from a simple quantitative analysis of the evolution of the number of publications to an examination of the thematic content of the research carried out. Thus, recent literature highlights a wide range of organizational, behavioural and strategic factors that influence the level of staff performance, depending on the operational context, management style, internal culture or intangible resources.

First, applied research indicates that leadership style, motivation and discipline are factors with a direct impact on employee performance. For example, studies investigating these dimensions have concluded that discipline, as an expression of a well-structured organizational framework, has the strongest influence, especially in sectors such as the oil sector, characterized by operational complexity and strict regulations. These findings support the idea that employee performance is not an accidental outcome, but the effect of a coherent and strategically oriented managerial system (Sinaga et al., 2022).

Further, other papers approach employee performance from the perspective of innovative leadership, highlighting its ability to mobilize teams towards superior results. Analytical studies based on literature reviews confirm that leadership oriented towards innovation and adaptability contributes to the creation of a favorable environment for employee engagement, and this mechanism is transferable also in critical industries such as aviation or oil industry (Ly et al., 2021).

In the same vein, a study applied in Tenaga Nasional Berhad utility company shows that different forms of innovation (product, process, technological and organizational) positively influence employee performance, except for the variable “attitude”. This finding highlights the importance of well-implemented innovative systems in organizational strategies (Osman et al., 2016).

In addition to the strictly managerial or technological aspects, the literature also brings to the forefront identity-related factors, such as internal brand culture. Research focused on this topic demonstrates that internal branding, through mechanisms such as employee identification with organizational values (EBI), brand citizenship behaviors (BCB) and customer orientation (COB), can be important levers for enhancing employee performance, including in industrial sectors (Ngo et al., 2020).

An interesting perspective is also provided by studies that analyze group identity and performance reporting as interrelated factors. Thus, the degree of transparency of managerial appraisal systems can transform collective identity into a performance enabler or, conversely, into a driver of conformity and plateauing (Shang et al., 2020).

Also, research investigating the relationship between leadership style, organizational culture and employee performance shows that these dimensions are closely correlated. Specifically, democratic leadership supported by a supportive organizational culture leads to higher levels of engagement and outcomes, both individually and collectively - a conclusion with applicative value also in corporate environments in the energy sector (Diana et al, 2021).

Another relevant area of research is that of intellectual capital, analyzed in relation to employee performance through the lens of organizational learning. Thus, human, relational and structural capital contribute to the generation of performance to the extent that the organization actively capitalizes on accumulated knowledge (Al-Husseini, 2023).

Finally, recent literature also integrates affective and value dimensions of HR, such as emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence and communication competence. Studies show that these components significantly influence employee performance, especially in industries in which teamwork, adaptation to change and human interaction play a central role - aspects found also in the oil sector (Rahmawaty et al., 2021).

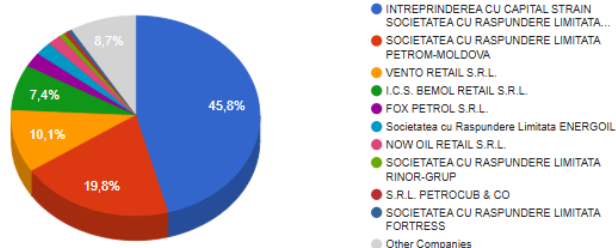
Therefore, the thematic diversity of the research highlights the complexity of the analyzed phenomenon and justifies the approach of employee performance from an integrative, strategic and contextualized perspective, with direct applicability in the analysis of oil companies in the Republic of Moldova.

### 3. Positioning of the oil sector in the national economy

The oil sector in the Republic of Moldova occupies a strategic place in the national economic architecture, having a direct impact on transportation, agriculture, trade and consumer prices. According to the ANRE report (2023), 100% of the oil products market is supplied by imports, which makes the stability of supply and domestic competitiveness significantly dependent on the efficiency of local players. In 2023, the total volume of imported petroleum products amounted to 907.9 thousand tons, marking an increase compared to the previous year. Their distribution is carried out through an extensive network of more than 500 filling stations managed by 80 licensed operators, which indicates a high degree of fragmentation and competitive pressure (ANRE Activity Report, 2023).

At the same time, the oligopolistic market structure, dominated by a few companies (Lukoil Moldova-

45.8%, Petrom-Moldova -19.8%, Vento Retail - 10.1%), emphasizes the importance of human capital as a strategic differentiator. In an environment where price differentiation is regulated and trade margins are controlled, operational efficiency, service quality and employee performance become critical factors for consolidating market share and increasing



competitive advantage. Also, international price volatility, reflected in local dynamics (e.g. +47.5%



in 2022, decreases in 2023), requires increased internal organizational adaptability and resilience. Therefore, the oil sector in the Republic of Moldova provides a pertinent analytical framework for investigating how human resource performance is used as a strategic pillar, not only in relation to operational objectives, but also in response to macroeconomic challenges, stringent regulation and increasingly sophisticated market demands.

#### **4. Core content**

In order to observe how employee performance is reflected in the organizational reality of oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, the analysis focuses on the most important market players, starting with Lukoil-Moldova - an entity with a dominant market share (45.8%) and extensive institutional communication.

Lukoil-Moldova, market leader in fuel distribution in the Republic of Moldova, provides an example of an integrated strategic approach to employee performance. In the absence of an annual public report dedicated to human resources, the company nevertheless clearly communicates key elements of continuous development, job security, social protection and recognition of the value of human capital. Regular training, educational incentives, partnerships with academia and the presence of an active trade union structure confirm the existence of an organizational culture geared towards sustainability and stability, which are fundamental to employee performance and to strengthening competitive advantage in a regulated and volatile sector (<https://lucoil.md/ro>). The Lukoil-Moldova case suggests that, in the absence of formal HR reporting mechanisms, employee performance can nevertheless be inferred from visible and consistent organizational practices. This indirect but consistent approach indicates a strategic assumption of the role of human capital that can serve as a model for other companies in the sector.

Another example of a strategic reflection of employee performance is provided by Petrom-Moldova, part of the international OMV group, with more than two decades of experience in the local market. In its public communication (<https://www.petrom.md/ro-md>), the company emphasizes that its success is due not only to the quality of its products, but also to the high standards implemented at the "People" level. This formulation is not metaphorical, but supported by clear and constant initiatives in the field of human resources management. Petrom-Moldova promotes an organizational culture based on continuous development, transparency and work-life balance, reflected in bonus systems and performance plans; training programs and e-learning platforms (Digital Academy), leadership development and training for students, participative internal communication, recognition and excellence programs. Moreover, the public recognition of the company among the top best employers in the Republic of Moldova (2013-2024), according to Axa Management Consulting, confirms the validity of these practices and their impact on social perception and internal stability. In this perspective, Petrom-Moldova becomes a concrete example of leveraging employee performance as a competitive resource, not only through financial motivation, but also by building an organizational climate conducive to involvement, innovation and retention.

A third example of the reflection of employee performance in the local oil sector is provided by Vento Retail (<https://vento-moldova.md/>), one of the largest gas station networks in Moldova. With over 900 employees, the company promotes a culture of individual performance, where the level of income is directly linked to the results achieved. Through a system of promotion based on merit and efficiency, Vento encourages professional autonomy and responsibility for the quality of work. At the same time, the company invests in process automation, which allows employees to work efficiently, reducing operational pressure and increasing productivity. Organizational communication makes direct reference to continuous professional development, innovation, original thinking and support for initiative, reinforcing the image of an entity that values its human resource not only as a workforce, but as a strategic partner in development.

From the comparative analysis of the three major oil companies in the Republic of Moldova: Lukoil-

Moldova, Petrom-Moldova and Vento Retail, it is noticeable that there are no official public reports on employee performance, and the relevant information is fragmented, dispersed in overview or corporate marketing sections. Communication on human resources varies significantly in the level of detail and depth, without outlining a formalized and strategic approach. Against this background, the following general research hypothesis is formulated:

*H1 In oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, employee performance is reflected fragmentarily and predominantly at the operational level, without a systemic integration into strategic communication oriented towards competitive advantage.*

## 5. Results and discussion

In order to understand how employee performance is integrated into the organizational reality of oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, three major operators were analyzed: Lukoil-Moldova, Petrom-Moldova and Vento Retail. Data on sales revenue, net profit and number of employees for the period 2021-2023 were examined based on publicly available information (<https://www.data2b.md/ro/companies>).

**Table 1. Comparative development of economic indicators and personnel structure in oil companies in the Republic of Moldova (2021-2023)**

Nr.crt.	Entity	Year	Sales revenue (million MDL)	Net profit (million MDL)	Number of employees
1.	Vento Retail	2021	1602.6	36.0	799
		2022	2164.2	21.3	858
		2023	1924.4	25.7	850
2.	Lukoil-Moldova	2021	5519.0	70.7	217
		2022	8977.7	86.6	211
		2023	8691.5	73.9	218
3.	Petrom-Moldova	2021	2524.5	41.9	53
		2022	4059.2	87.5	53
		2023	3755.5	76.4	48

*Source: Data taken from the companies' public communication on the official website: [www.data2b.md](http://www.data2b.md). Units expressed in millions of MDL, excluding number of employees.*

The analysis of the evolution of performance indicators for the period 2021-2023 highlights distinct but revealing trajectories for understanding how human resources contribute to competitive advantage in oil companies. All three entities show significant increases in revenues in 2022, reflecting the effects of economic recovery and changes in international fuel prices. However, a moderate adjustment in revenues is observed in 2023, not directly correlated with a decline in overall performance, but rather with a structural recalibration of the market.

Lukoil-Moldova remains the undisputed leader in terms of sales volumes, operating with a relatively small team, suggesting high operational efficiency, likely supported by investments in training, strict safety standards and a centralized coordination model. Similarly, Petrom-Moldova, despite operating with only 48 employees, has seen a spectacular doubling of profits in 2022 and a maintenance of high profits in 2023. This result indicates exceptional productivity per employee and a systemic approach to human resources, supported by the leadership, training and motivation initiatives described in the company's corporate communication.

In contrast, Vento Retail, despite having the most extensive network and the largest number of employees, has more modest revenues and net profits in relation to the resources involved. This may reflect an operating model oriented towards volume and accessibility, but with challenges in terms of economic efficiency per employee and return on investment in human capital. The company's strategy, focused on expansion and affordability, imposes the need to optimize staff motivation, appraisal and development systems in order to turn team size into a real competitive advantage.

Overall, the data analyzed support the conclusion that team size does not automatically guarantee superior financial performance. On the contrary, the effectiveness and impact of human capital depends on how it is strategically integrated into decision-making and managerial processes. Thus, employee performance only becomes a real competitive pillar when it is supported by coherent development, motivation and valorization policies.

Given the dynamics observed in the 2021-2023 period, a comparative analysis on the performance recorded exclusively for 2023 is relevant to capture the current positioning of each company. Table 2 presents this summary.

**Table 2. Comparison of financial performance and personnel structure in oil companies in the Republic of Moldova in 2023**

Entity	No. employees 2023	Revenue 2023 (MDL)	Revenue 2023 (MDL)	Revenue/employee	Profit/employee
Lukoil-Moldova	218	8,69 mld	73,86 mil	~39,8 mil	~339 k
Vento Retail	850	1,92 mld	25,72 mil	~2,26 mil	~30,3 k
Petrom-Moldova	48	3,76 mld	76,45 mil	~78,3 mil	~1,59 mil

*Source: Data taken from the companies' public communication on the official website: [www.data2b.md](http://www.data2b.md)*

The comparative analysis of the three oil companies reveals significant differences in the way of organization, financial performance and human resource reporting. Petrom-Moldova, in spite of the smallest number of employees, has a remarkable economic efficiency per employee, suggesting either a high level of automation and specialization or a centralized corporate structure influenced by the integration into the international OMV group.

At the same time, Lukoil-Moldova maintains a notable balance between sales volume, profitability and human resource size, which may indicate an efficient and well-balanced business model based on operational efficiency, organizational stability and rigorous cost control.

On the other hand, Vento Retail operates with a substantially larger team and an extensive network, but with a more modest profit to revenue to staff ratio. This suggests a model geared towards expansion and volume, but with the need to optimize employee performance and leverage human resources strategically.

These financial conclusions can be nuanced by a qualitative analysis of institutional communication. Thus, Lukoil-Moldova focuses on job security, continuous training and social stability, Petrom-Moldova emphasizes professional development, participative leadership and work-life balance, and Vento promotes meritocracy, automation and individual efficiency.

From the perspective of the research, it emerges that employee performance is not just an operational function, but is closely related to the managerial philosophy and organizational culture of each entity. Thus, the competitive advantage derived from the human resource is manifested both in the economic results and in the internal communication and valorization of human capital.

In this context, the general hypothesis of the research is confirmed: in oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, employee performance is reflected fragmented, in the absence of formal reporting mechanisms, which limits its strategic visibility. This contrasts with international trends, where non-financial reporting increasingly integrates human capital indicators as a key pillar of sustainability and competitiveness.

## 6. Conclusion

The research aimed to identify how employee performance is perceived and communicated within oil companies in the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing the strategic dimension of human resources in relation to competitive advantage. The quantitative analysis of economic indicators (revenues, net profit, number of employees) for the period 2021-2023, coupled with a qualitative assessment of



organizational communication, allowed to outline significant trends in indirect reporting of employee performance.

In the absence of official HR reports or standardized internal performance indicators, the research focused on publicly available sources on the websites of the main operators. This approach revealed notable discrepancies between economic efficiency and the way employee performance is publicly recognized and valued. For example, Petrom-Moldova, with the smallest number of employees among the three entities analyzed, has achieved remarkable financial productivity, suggesting a well-structured internal system based on merit, leadership and continuous training.

In contrast, Vento Retail, with a significantly larger team and extensive presence, demonstrated lower efficiency per employee without clear strategic communication of performance policies. Lukoil-Moldova, on the other hand, is distinguished by a balanced positioning, where operational stability and continuous training seem to be prioritized.

The findings obtained support the hypothesis formulated in the research: employee performance, although evoked in institutional communication, is not systematically addressed as a strategic resource for competitiveness, and the lack of transparency in human capital reporting limits its integration into public positioning strategies. Thus, employee performance can become a real competitive pillar only to the extent that it is underpinned by coherent policies, investment in professional development and institutional practices of recognition and motivation.

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