

IMPACT OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT ON COOPERATION RELATIONSHIPS – CASE STUDY OF THE SLOVAK ENVIRONMENT

PATRIK FERENC, MARTIN HOLUBČÍK, JOSEF VODÁK

Abstract

The cooperation between companies is very important in these days. It brings many benefits as increased competitiveness, cost savings, stronger bonds, etc. From this point, we argue that creating cooperative relationships brings companies concrete benefits and synergies. The aim of the paper is to focus on the most common joint and strategic elements of manage cooperative relations. The effectiveness of strategic decision relies on these elements. The importance of cooperation strategy plays a significant role in the systematic approach to cooperative management and deepening cooperative relations.

The paper presents the results of research on cooperation in the Slovak business environment. Strategic management of cooperative ventures consisted in revealing the primary areas of a company where strategic management of cooperative relationships already exists or can be improved. The fundamental areas that stand out as important for businesses, but not implemented are: common goals, and regular two-way communication, access partner, jointly set terms and conditions, culture and business confidence. Through these areas, cooperating businesses can achieve results and maintain competitiveness. Strategic management of cooperative organizational forms needs to achieve the full potential of cooperation which means not only achieving the goals but also creating synergies that maintain strong cooperative relationships and bring new benefits.

Keywords: competitiveness, cooperation, decision making, interactions, management, relations, stakeholders, strategy, survey, synergy.

Classification JEL: M10 – General; M12 – Personnel Management; O43 – Institutions and Growth.

1. Introduction

The manager has a difficult position in the current globalization environment. The importance of strategic management in cooperation relationships is becoming increasingly, especially due to globalization. The synergy effects can be achieved by means of high effective cooperation. The necessary and essential condition for holdout business is to gain competitive advantage through a synergy effect (*Jones, 1995*). This is followed by the idea of M. Porter, which is confirmed by several authors such as *Souček (2005)* and *Magretta (2012)*, etc. The idea is that permanent competitive advantages can only be achieved through a strategy.

What is the strategy and what are operational activities of the company, the performance of which is necessary to achieve the strategic goals? This question was answered by several authors from the Paladium (*Campbell et al., 2016*), and everyone agreed that the strategy is forward-looking, while operational activities are geared to present value (*Kaplan & Norton, 2006*). Therefore, if companies want to achieve a competitive advantage, it is important to identify issues related to cooperation in strategic management (*Doležal, Máchal & Lacko, 2012*). To gain competitive advantage, it is also important for companies to fulfill the potential for establishing and managing mutually beneficial cooperation and synergy effects.

The main problem with which companies have to deal is inefficient strategic management within cooperative relationships (*Lasker et al., 2001*). This problem in companies is affected by the current situation within the enterprise and the cooperative relationships, the interaction within of cooperation and the influence of human potential in the cooperative relations.

The aim of this paper is to identify the areas of inefficient strategic management in cooperation organizational forms. Problematic was getting the real perspective. If we focus on strategic management of cooperation organizational forms, than many of the problems, activities, relationships, and synergy effects might be uncovered. Methodological part of the

paper is focused on analysis, synthesis and comparison, and evaluates the current situation and strategic management within the framework of cooperation in particular companies. Conclusion of the paper contains inspirations or defined areas that should be improved firstly in the effort to put cooperation on a higher level and, based on this, achieve success and profit from cooperation synergies.

2. Main theoretical approaches to current cooperation connection

Changes in the global world are linked by a global economy that is dramatically accelerating. *Cooperative organizational forms* in the international market are a driving force behind the rise or fall of a company. Drawing attention on the growing impact of cooperation points to several factors in the global environment, including: competitiveness, importance of cost and productivity, constant science and technology development, and others. However, these factors represent only a selection of a number of factors that are characteristic for the global environment and require further investigation. The current global environment is increasingly being influenced by new events in economics, politics and society; by development in various fields of science and research of human society; and by changing values (changing behavior).

It is important to see environmental changes as an active factor in influencing the strategic management of cooperative organizational forms. The intensity of globalization in the current business environment is increasing. Globalization no longer acts as an external factor that may or may not influence us, but it acts as a catalyst for the evolution of company. Through cooperation, it is possible to face successfully several challenges of the current global environment. From widely available information on strategies and strategic management is need to select just those that could be applied to the management of cooperating companies. Porter defined the strategy as „the formula determining the competitiveness of the company, what should be its objectives and what policy will be needed to achieve these goals” (1980). Strategic management is ensured by the top management of company. Strategic management helps companies identify future potential problems, lengthens time to prepare for serious problems, gives clear goals and directions, and helps to improve the quality of company management (Keřkovský & Vykypěl, 2006).

An integral part of strategic management is to work with stakeholders of the company. The stakeholders for a company are entities that are directly or indirectly affiliated with their activities, or entities that affect a company in the course of its business (Doležal, Máchal & Lacko, 2012; Průcha, Veteška, 2014; Hrazdilová Bočková, 2016). As Freeman (1984) said, these are entities without whom the organization would not exist. These entities can be divided into primary (employees, customers, suppliers, owners, etc.) and secondary (competition, public, government, etc.), (Cleland, 1998; Barbee, 2013; Hrazdilová Bočková, 2016). Top management must know who are the main stakeholders of the business, and also need to know and understand their needs and interests in order to effectively manage them (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997; Clarke, 1998; Doležal, Máchal & Lacko, 2012). In order to be able to understand the various stakeholders, it is necessary to find out who they are. Understanding and especially correct identification of stakeholders is one of the main issues in this area (Phillips, 1997). If organizations understand and correctly identify the stakeholders, they will be able to often benefit from these relations (Rodriguez-Melo & Mansouri 2011; von Meding et al., 2013).

Stakeholder management is very challenging because some stakeholders want the business to fail on the market. Therefore, if the business is successful in cooperation with stakeholders, it is very important to identify possible threats and opportunities arising from mutual cooperative relations (Doležal, Máchal & Lacko, 2012). The main benefit of properly set relationships with stakeholders is to gain a competitive advantage (Jones, 1995). The basis for the success of cooperative relationships between stakeholders is mutual fair play relationships. It is necessary for each interested party to accept each other voluntarily and not to gain an

advantage at the expense of another interested party (*Phillips, 1997*). To build more effective relationships with stakeholders, it is necessary to create a *cooperative strategy*. The cooperative strategy is the effort of organizations to realize their goals through cooperation. It focuses on the benefits arising from the present cooperation, and brings significant benefits such as easy access to new markets, mutual synergy and learning (*Child et al., 2005*). However, this strategy must be flexible, as the requirements of the various stakeholders are constantly changing. Therefore it is important that organizations not only adjust their strategies on the basis of their experience and needs of stakeholders, but then due to various external and internal influences regulate this strategy in the course of cooperation (*Friedman, 2002; Elias et al., 2002; Friedman & Miles, 2002; Elias et al., 2004*). Management of the organization must be very wary: managers need to rethink the different changes in the strategy before they do so, as potential negative changes in the strategy may cause the stakeholders to fail to meet their expectations, which can lead to the termination of mutually built relationships and the failure to achieve the joint goals (*Cleland, 1986; Jergeas et al., 2000; Lim et al., 2005; Nilson & Fagerström, 2006*).

Based on mentioned above ideas, the cooperation is one of the main ways companies can get synergy effects and represents “effective and efficient management of relationships in a cooperation between separate and relatively independent organizations or individuals, with the goal of improving their competitiveness” (*Soviar et al., 2013*). In this environment, *synergy* must act; the connection, engaging in cooperation, in which the environment changes, develops and responds. In this perspective, synergies represent a new post within the very concept of cooperative management. Synergy also draws attention to relationships with functional properties and fitness implications (gaining benefits) of cooperative phenomena of all kinds – data associated with a causal explanation of the development of complexity (evolution of complexity), (*Corning, 1995*). Concrete result or consequence of synergy, i.e. a synergic effect is the value, the expected and unexpected result, the state that occurs within a particular environment. This result can strengthen trust and maintain cooperative relations.

This means, targets based on obtaining benefits can't be achieved by one person, organization, or sector. They are based on collaboration and synergies that shape the system – system which is subject to economic and technological changes and becomes more competitive and specific (*Lasker et al., 2001*).

3. Methods: Analytical case study – approaches to cooperation management of Slovak companies

The strategic elements of managing cooperative relationships in Slovak companies are identified in this chapter. They are based on the results of our survey conducted in selected Slovak companies in the Žilina region. These results are generalized, which represents the characteristics of the business environment in the defined area. Companies attach cooperation and competitiveness of different degrees of importance, as well as access to these two strategic thrust is more than just an individual. However, it is possible to focus on the most common and strategic elements of managing these relationships.

3.1. Characteristics of research done

This practical research was provided through a combination of sociological inquiry and subsequently semi-structured interviews which brought a comprehensive in-depth analysis of the research problems. Elsewhere, we used the following methods: (a) synthesis: combining the conclusions of processed data; (b) induction: generalizing conclusions based on partial knowledge gained from questionnaire analyses; (c) deduction: specific proposals for the determination of the general starting points; (d) quantitative and qualitative evaluation method:

comprehensive evaluation of analyses and design of real and applicable recommendations based on acquired data.

Based on our previous papers, e.g. Proposal of model for effective management of cooperation activities in Slovak companies (Vodák et al., 2015); Cooperative environment as the basis for creating synergy (Holubčík et al., 2016); and Engaging stakeholders in Slovak non-manufacturing organizations (Ferenc, 2016), research problem of this paper focuses on the management, strategic management, and cooperation management dealt from the perspective of current conditions of market. Flowing from our knowledge and experience, before we began to explore the identified research problem, we have identified general assumptions:

- A. Experience with strategic management within the framework of cooperation is not sufficient.
- B. Businesses will show several problems in the context of cooperative relationships (links).
- C. Each business has collaborated more than once with another company.
- D. Undertakings within cooperative relationships do not create a two-way (effective) communication.
- E. Intra-company cooperation is most evident in a company culture.

The target group is a group of companies operating in different areas, mainly production and sales of tangible products, in Žilina, Slovak Republic. Objectives of the survey were medium and large companies with over 50 employees (69%) and over 150 employees (31%). Time operation of companies in the market amounted to 9 years (11%) over 10 years (27%) and over 20 years (62%). The largest part of the company formed a limited liability company (53%), joint stock companies (39%), and others (8%). In total, 236 companies were involved in the survey in 2014 (presented in Chapter 3.2) and repeated survey in 2016 (Chapter 3.3).

As part of the research is expected to identify problem areas in a company focused on cooperation. We await the findings what values are preferred and which elements of strategic management are the most important businesses. On the other hand, we expect problems and possible failures in ignorance of managers surveyed within the research. Failure may also result in incomplete or inaccurate information provided or processed.

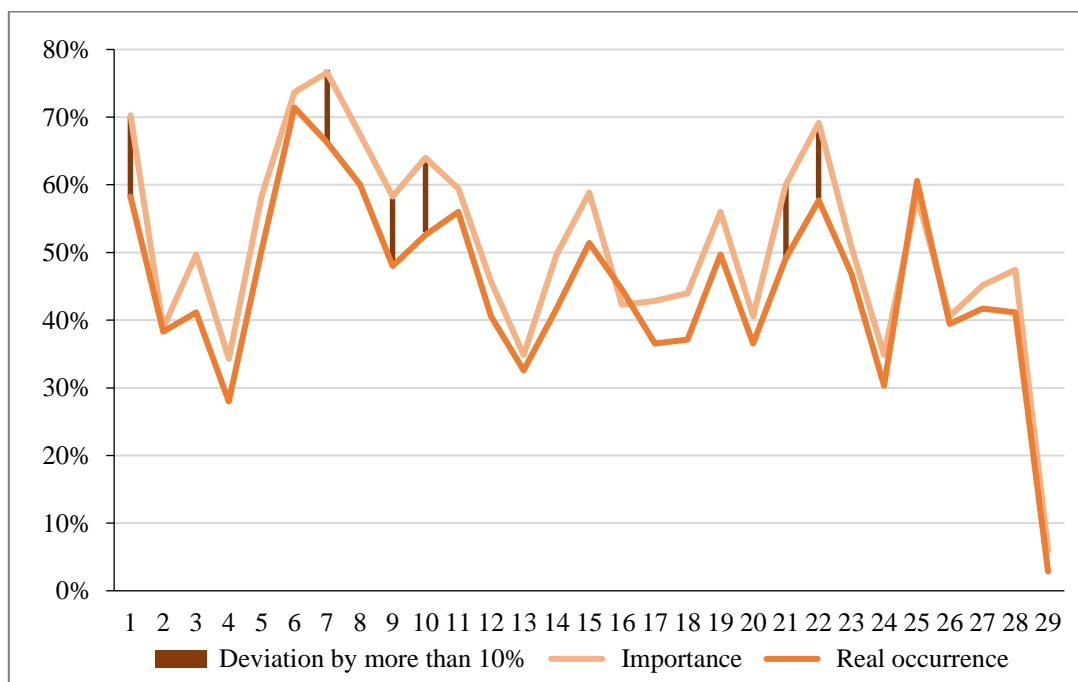


Figure 1. Perception of importance and real occurrence of the selected factors in 2014 (own study)

3.2. Analysis of selected sections and factors of case

The main area of our research was the ineffective strategic management of businesses within cooperation. This is directly related to our main objective, which consist of detection main sections of companies in which an ineffective management within cooperation already exists or it may occur.

In the evaluation of research on the importance and the occurrence of selected cooperation factors, the following facts have been found (the results can be seen in the Figure 1, Table 1 and Table 2):

- Perception of factors importance exceeds the real occurrence of factors in 27 out of 29 analyzed factors.
- Perception of factors importance exceeds the real occurrence by more than 10% in next factors: common objectives; regular and two-way communication; partner approach; together set terms and conditions; culture of company; confidence.

Table 1. Legend for Figure 1: selected factors

1	Common objectives	15	Human potential
2	Management based on top management	16	Active engagement in processes
3	Achieving a competitive advantage	17	Product Portfolio Expansion
4	Updating strategic moves	18	Growing market share
5	References	19	Flexibility
6	Long-term cooperation	20	Identity preservation
7	Regular and two-way communication	21	Culture of company
8	Two-way exchange of information	22	Confidence
9	Partner approach	23	Mutual reciprocity
10	Together set terms and conditions	24	Location
11	Ability to deal with problems	25	Adherence to standards
12	Combination of resources	26	Awards and Certification of the company
13	Linking processes and activities of company	27	Measurement and Control
14	Knowledge and Capabilities of the company	28	Responding to current challenges

Figure 1 shows significant differences in six factors. In these factors, we decided to investigate dependence by chi-square test. For this analysis, we used the SPSS Statistics program and the result is visible in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that factor 1 (common objectives) and factor 10 (together set terms and conditions) have the same degree of freedom 20, factor 21 (culture of company) and factor 22 (confidence) have the same degree of freedom 16, factor 7 (regular and two-way communication) has a degree of freedom 12, and factor 9 (partner approach) has a degree of freedom of 25. For significance level 0.05% is tabulated value for each factor determined follows: factor 1 = 31.410; factor 7 = 21.026; factor 9 = 37.652; factor 10 = 21.026; factor 21 = 26.296 and factor 22 = 26.296. Because the calculated chi-square value in all factors is higher than the table value, it can be confirmed that exist a correlation between importance and real occurrence in these factors. Based on this research (Figure 1), we can also say that the *potential for development* in the companies and also the *gap for further investigation* exist in these areas, because importance of main factors exceeds their real occurrence.

Table 2. Investigation of dependence on factors 1, 7, 9, 10, 21 and 22 (own study)

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Factor 1 (Common objectives)			
Pearson Chi-Square	85.516a	20	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	56.100	20	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	26.357	1	0.000
Factor 7 (Regular and two-way communication)			
Pearson Chi-Square	36.451a	12	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.317	12	0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.666	1	0.000
Factor 9 (Partner approach)			
Pearson Chi-Square	60.642a	25	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	58.732	25	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	23.324	1	0.000
Factor 10 (Together set terms and conditions)			
Pearson Chi-Square	70.936a	20	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	59.388	20	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	25.224	1	0.000
Factor 21 (Culture of company)			
Pearson Chi-Square	61.950a	16	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	54.871	16	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	25.656	1	0.000
Factor 22 (Confidence)			
Pearson Chi-Square	56.676a	16	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	52.553	16	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	26.229	1	0.000

3.3. Subsequent (repeated) survey and comparison

We have decided to repeat our survey from 2014 also in 2016. When comparing results from 2014 and results from 2016, the changes in corporate behavior can be noticed.

As can be seen in Figure 2, up to 15% of companies said they did not cooperate with another company in their business activities in 2014. Of all cooperating companies, their relationship with cooperation partners at level 81–100% rated approximately 34% of them. Up to about 44% of companies rated their relationship with cooperation partners at level 61–80%, of which it can be concluded that up to approximately 78% of companies rated their relationships with partners at a point above 61%.

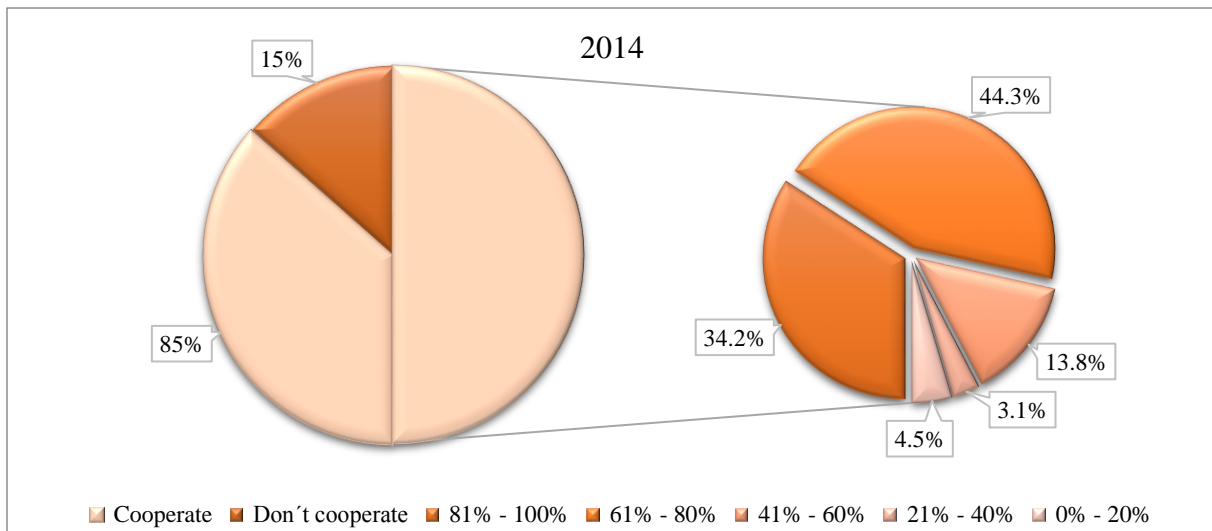


Figure 2. The main findings from 2014 survey (own study)

Figure 3 shows the difference in perception of issues in the two-year research. Compared to 2014, only 3% of companies in 2016 said they did not cooperate with other companies in their business activity which is a 12% change for the better. Of all cooperating companies, until 40% of companies rated their relationships with cooperating partners at level 81–100% which is 6% more than in 2014. Similarly to 2014, in 2016 around 43% of companies rated their cooperation relations at level 61–80% of which can be said that up to approximately 83% of companies rated their relationships with partners at level above 61%. This represents an increase of 5% compared to 2014. However, the significant difference is in the evaluation of cooperation on level less than 40%. In 2016, no company didn't rate its cooperation at level less than 41% which is about 7% less than in 2014.

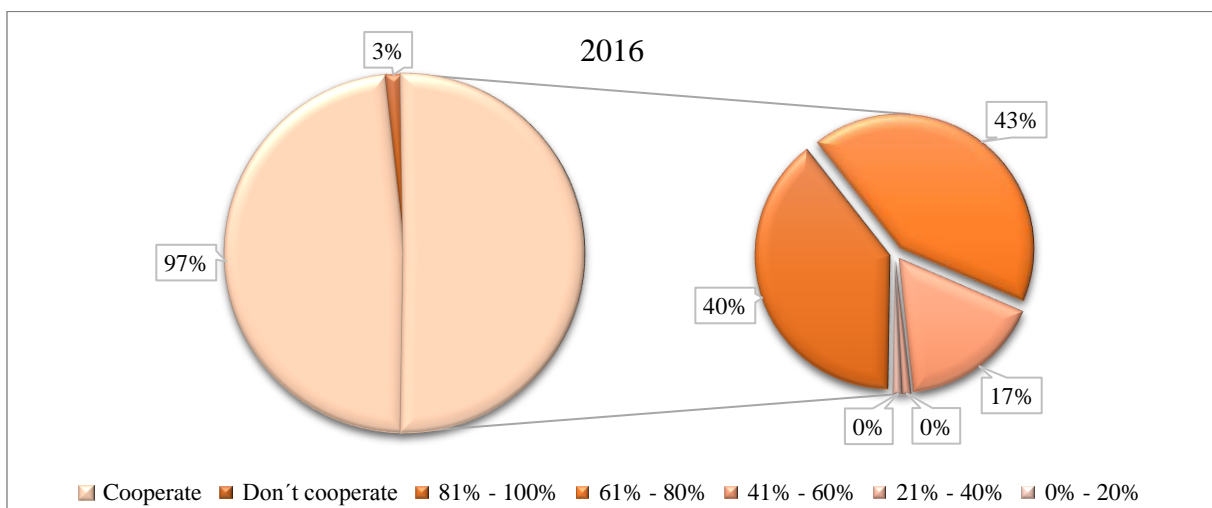


Figure 3. The main findings from 2016 survey (own study)

From the comparison of monitoring changes in the perception of cooperation in the years 2014 and 2016, we can say that the companies in Slovakia not only cooperate more but also are more satisfied with the cooperation. An increase in the number of cooperating companies caused the business environment in which companies seek to gain competitive advantage through cooperation with various key partners.

The strategic elements of managing cooperative relationships in selected companies are very individual. The reason is a different intention of cooperation. However, it is possible to focus on the most common and strategic elements of managing these relationships. The strongest reason to continue exploring the issue of business cooperation through strategic management is that competitiveness in the current business environment reflects the effectiveness of cooperation and also supports the emergence of new connections.

Collaboration can activate synergic effects because it is not only about to meet goals but also to reduce costs, helping in individual management activities, increase performance, combine resources, and other effects. Synergy and synergy effect in the cooperative environment should be identified in the areas of: cooperation, cooperative effects, joint negotiating power, support for existence in the environment, and as an independent effect and a random factor. Simplified synergy is a cooperative relationship between two companies, which, under certain conditions and objectives, can 1. Cooperate; 2. Fulfill the goals; 3. Create a synergy effect. These three phases of cooperation can be terminated at any time – cooperation may not be implemented, goals may to not be met, or a synergic effect may not be created. Background: synergy has a high potential for creating the conditions for cooperation within selecting appropriate and efficiently used strategic management methods.

At the beginning of methodological part of this paper (Chapter 3.1), we defined basic assertions based on past theoretical and practical analyses in the studied environment, i.e. in the business environment of the Slovak Republic. We can agree with claim A, B that most businesses show management problems. This is proved by the shortcomings in managing cooperative relationships. These problems need to be analyzed and proposed solutions with a link to functioning cooperative management elements that will bring results (synergy effects). There are a number of cooperative links in the current market, but some are formalized and other unformalized. We assume from the research results (argument C) that each company has cooperated at least once. The statement C, D is not only the most important element of cooperative management from the point of view of individual companies but also the most problematic.

3.4. Discussion: comparison with approximate situation in Slovakia

The expert team of the social partner *AZZZ* examined business environment in Slovakia. This team has written a document called as: The analysis, the monitoring of the quality of the business environment in the Slovak Republic and the competitiveness of the economy. The following conclusions represent results from this study (*Conorto et al., 2014*):

- Slovakia's competitiveness has been fundamentally negative since 2006, especially in comparison with the regionally and economically close neighboring countries as well as the European Union.
- The corruption perceptions index shows that among the 174 countries surveyed, Slovakia ranks 62nd and has the lowest rating from V4 countries. This result shows that Slovakia is the fourth worst country in terms of corruption perceptions from all EU countries – the worst result was recorded only by Romania (66th position of the 174 countries surveyed), Italy (72th position) and Bulgaria (75th position).
- The Business Alliance of Slovakia, according to the methodology of the Index of Underprivileged Environment (IPP), evaluated the incentive environment in Slovakia. The result is that from 2007 to 2013, the index dropped from 126.5 points to 72.7 points, representing the historically lowest value of this index since its beginning in Slovakia. At the same time, it can be expected to continue its decline.
- According to a survey conducted by the Association of Young Entrepreneurs of Slovakia in 2011, the most serious barriers to entrepreneurship in the Slovak market

were: lack of starting capital, lack of experience, lack of knowledge and professional contacts, lack of subsidies, corruption, fears of the impact of the economic crisis, high tax and tax burdens, very often changes in laws.

When comparing and connecting these results with our surveys, we can conclude that the business environment in Slovakia is dynamic but very demanding for business. Companies have to use different ways of achieving an advantage in the market. And, one of the possible option is the use of cooperation, i.e. strategic management of cooperation organizational groups.

4. Conclusion

Strategy in its general level of management represents the active approach of the manager in achieving business goals. Strategy reminds of art, is reinforced by not only a number of successfully achieved goal, but also a certain number of failures on the way to achieving the goals. However, strategy and strategic management is not just a procedure but also decisions, responses, and activities that increase the chances of success and also reduce the risk of failure to achieve goals.

Comprehensive analysis processed through questionnaires and interviews has produced several *important findings* from our surveys. In selected companies, the following elements of managing cooperation are preferred (assigned the highest priority):

- Planning long-term, sustainable and mutually supported goals, i.e. in common planning, it is necessary for companies to know what they want to achieve, what they need to achieved it, and how they will control and measure achievement of results.
- Developing a common cooperative strategy, i.e. it is important to interconnect processes and manage a suitable combination of resources for effective cooperation.
- Human potential in the connecting of knowledge and skills within cooperation.
- Development of communication, i.e. mutual communication and two-way exchange of information meet information needs. It doesn't only affect communication but mainly relationships and the potential of cooperation.
- Employee training is a challenge for management, i.e. it increases not only expertise and performance but also an access to work and collaboration between employees and businesses.

This research will help to better focus on the most significant elements that have not only proven results but also a high potential for creating synergies and synergy effects within explore environment. Selected strategic management elements are suitable for managing or supporting the management of cooperative organizational forms. They represent basic, most frequently applied elements that demonstrate real results. Strategic management within dynamic environmental conditions requires a combination of control elements. In terms of the current research, these elements represent potential model elements of strategic management.

In strategies, it is important to consider the *problems* too. As an example of problem is active influencing strategic management of a business. Orthodox setup of strategic management can have adverse effects on business performance. Business management in response to problems needs to assess what adjustments in strategic plans are needed in terms of business goals and available resources. This activity prepares decision makers (managers) to respond faster and anticipate problems. Identified areas of *inefficient strategic management* in companies within selected cooperative organizational forms are:

- Insufficiency of established business objectives.
- Creation of distrust of the cooperation partner, in case of non-observance of the conditions and rules of cooperation.

- Incomplete or inaccurate provided and processed information.
- Absence of mutual open communication (effective feedback).
- Unresponsive behavior within a relationship (relationship damage).
- Inappropriate approach of company within the cooperation (inconsistency of culture, feeling of superiority, sense of belonging, morale, awareness of value).
- Managers' and employees' access to a cooperative relationship (process management, implementation of strategy, fulfillment of tasks and objectives).
- Risk of cooperation (reputation and characteristics of the cooperating partner).
- Evaluation of the cooperative relationship within the decision on the continuation and success of the relationship.

If strategic management currently means anticipating, influencing, and thus managing problems, then obtaining a strategic competitive advantage is conditional on building, organizing and combining exceptional skills of managers and employees within the strategic business management.

In general, the essence of cooperative environment in the business environment is based on mutual interactions between individual business entities in the defined areas of cooperation. Such a generally defined environment has the prerequisites for a successful start, course, and outcome of a characteristic cooperative environment. Concept of the strategic management has in practice far greater consequences and intensity than we are aware of. It is important to set strategic moves as a set of managerial activities and decisions in order to:

- Establishing strong cooperative relationships based on trust.
- Emerging the synergic effects in the cooperative environment.
- Strategic managing the cooperative organizational forms to create synergic effects that maintain strong cooperative relationships that bring new benefits.

Strategic management of cooperative organizational forms needs to achieve the full potential of cooperation. The full potential of cooperation means not only the fulfillment of expectations and goals but also the opening of *new possibilities – synergies within cooperative relationships*, or the emergence of *synergy effects* (expected and unexpected added value). Today's groups of companies, such as the various cooperative groups (networks, clusters, alliances, mergers, etc.), point to the need to be able to maintain cooperative relationships not only in long-term cooperation but also in order to create synergies that result in the creation of conditional or unconditional synergistic effects. In other words: no organization can successfully implement a strategy without the right people, processes, and technological (and information) abilities. This means that all of mentioned elements are necessary for common, cooperative and successful connections and synergies.

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Addresses of authors:

Ing. Patrik FERENC
University of Žilina
Univerzitná 8215/1
010 26 Žilina
Slovak Republic
e-mail: patrik.ferenc@fri.uniza.sk

Ing. Martin HOLUBČÍK
University of Žilina
Univerzitná 8215/1
010 26 Žilina
Slovak Republic
e-mail: martin.holubcik@fri.uniza.sk

Prof. Josef VODÁK, PhD.
University of Žilina
Univerzitná 8215/1
010 26 Žilina
Slovak Republic
e-mail: josef.vodak@fri.uniza.sk