

INTERFIRM RELATIONSHIPS: EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. *The aim of the study was to demonstrate that the inter-organizational relationships form the framework of modern business. The common analysis of interfirm relationships is based exclusively on the relational view. The article is focused on the evolutionary and relational approach to management. In this respect, relationships are exemplified in the form of the adaptation mechanism used in the environment while making a selection. The author argues that organizational relationships are an expression of the variation processes that organizations use as the mechanisms of adaptation. Such a perspective is an original approach to the explanation of evolution and of the mechanisms of contemporary competitive advantage.*

The article is based on the reasoning based on a critical analysis of the existing research in this area, supported by results of the author's own qualitative research.

The main findings of the study outline the possibilities to survive in the current business settings and are related to the relationships; in a wider sense, interfirm relationships are an important mechanism driving evolution.

Key words: *evolution, interfirm relationships, variation, adaptation*

Preface

Currently, one of the central issues in management research is the inter-organizational relationships, cooperative relationships in particular, i.e. cooperation with other organizations, and thus complementing our own competences with others' competences as a basis for competitive advantage. From numerous publications, we can assimilate the reasons regarding the need for equipping organizations in relational skills. Such arguments have specific implications for strategic management and claim a different approach to strategic management, strategy formulation, strategic change, and many other key issues coming up in this area.

The evolutionary research perspective is used to elucidate the mechanisms influencing an organization in a complex environment. The evolution focuses on three processes: variation, selection, and retention. The article focuses exclusively on variation and subsequently on the adaptation to explain the importance of inter-organizational relationships in the evolution.

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In the general sense, variation is a response to the problems created by the selective environment. In the environment, impetuses appear showing the mismatch of the existing forms to the current situation. For this reason, organizations are taking initiatives focused on finding solutions to problems. The result of the variation is experimenting with new forms and solutions. Among the various forms, the environment selects. Better forms, which are better fit, are promoted. Less fitting forms are not disseminated. The fact is that they are favoured but do not determine the selection processes. In the latter case, organizations are moving towards stagnation or simply cease to exist.

The essence of the variation lies in adjusting to the environment and is virtually identical to the adaptation to the situation. Adaptation can be centered on the inside of the organization in order to propose the organizational solutions that will be accepted by the environment. From the strategic point of view, adaptation is important in terms of shaping the fit between an organization and its environment, guaranteeing the survival of the organization (fitness).

For the processes of the variation, inter-organizational relationships are important. Organizations are entities with genes focused on cooperativeness. Paradoxically, selfish instincts incline to cooperate. The same relationship does not induce the management structure in the network of inter-organizational relations, but the relations' configuration induces the mutual adaptation of entities involved in relationships and, reflexively, the skills and relational capabilities of each organization.

Strategic management: evolutionary approach

The evolutionary approach to strategic management is primarily associated with the works of H. Mintzberg (1994) and J.Quinn (1980). In their view, strategy rather emerges and develops over time but is not a form of a structured plan. Strategy is a response to the changing business environment and is shaped by evolution. In practice, this means that the strategy is a combination of targeted plans and changes attributed to emergency. This character of the strategy process is the result of learning processes for both managers and organizations in relation to changes in the environment. Strategic decisions are evolving partly at random and partly in a logical way, providing great opportunities for learning. H. Mintzberg introduced the category of emergent strategy, which does not reflect changes in the way strategists think, but it is the result of interaction between the organization and its environment. The aim of the emergent strategy is adaptation, in which the rationality of action goes hand in hand with the incident, evolution, and incrementalism.

The evolutionary perspective in strategic management leads to a situation when it is difficult to identify the purpose of strategic patterns. In addition, the evolutionary approach exposes the adaptive nature of strategy and competitive advantage.

On the other hand, strategic management is dominated by the assumption of the existence of regularities and patterns, which is currently confronted with a relational or network epistemology focused on a more sequential (evolutionary) process of the strategic management and on the development of working practices.

Adaptive actions mean the modifications that allow the development of different characteristics as compared with the current organization, product, sector or ecosystem to reach the point of equilibrium as a result of differentiation. The organizations that have not adopted the appropriate modifications do not pass on to the next phase of the life cycle and are selected.

The evolutionary logic is based on three basic mechanisms of evolution, such as variation, selection, and retention. The mechanism of variation is expressed in a continuous renewal and innovation. The second mechanism, evolutionary selection, is the process of selecting the units that survive and those that die. For a complete picture of the evolutionary process the retention process is also important. This evolutionary logic was the basis for deriving the assumption that the current variation processes are primarily determined and driven by interfirm relationships.

Evolution of competition

According to the main concepts present in strategic management, it should be noted that strategic problems are mainly analyzed from the perspective of the theory of constraints (TOC), strategic choice theory, and from the perspective of the theory of competition. Today, it is undoubtedly necessary to include in the main discourse the strategic management issues of cooperation and the formulation of activities to improve the relationships between the organization and its environment (or the context, i.e. a set of related elements).

The most popular explanation of competition was given by M. Porter who believes that the competitive strategy results from industry considerations. Originally, since the centre of strategic management is competition, the latter refers to the category of product and market. The entity that is able to offer a more attractive product to the market gains a competitive advantage. Contextual changes mean that there is an increasing competition among enterprises for resources and competences. In this case, those who have valuable resources and competencies win a competitive advantage. Such insight into competition is typical in the RBV approach and is observed particularly in the dynamic industries such as services.

Now, we can observe increasingly innovative forms of relationships between competing organizations undertaking, for example, the framework of cooperative relationships (Table 1). This makes us believe that the source of competitive advantage is a set of relationships between the firm and the other participants in the market. The organization that

TABLE 1. Strategy evolution

	Competition for products and markets	Competition for resources and competencies	Competition for relational value
Strategic objective	Defensible product-market position	Sustainable competitive advantage	Continuous self-renewal and value creation among stakeholders
Major tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • industry analysis • competitive analysis • market segmentation and positioning • unique product 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • core competencies • resource-based strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vision and value • flexibility and innovation • front-line entrepreneurship and experimentation
Perspective	Strategic planning	Networked organization	Cooperation in networked organizations
Competition scope	Competition among companies	Competition among companies	Competition among networks of companies
Key strategic resources	Financial capital	Organizational capability	Human relations and inter-organizational relations

Source: own elaboration based on Rudawska, 2010; Bartlett, Ghoshal, 2002.

TABLE 2. Strategy: organizational design

Strategic management	Organizational design	Content of strategy
Competition	Era 1: self-contained	Product-market
Collaboration	Era 2: process orientation	Resources
Coopetition	Era 3: organizational boundaries open up	Relationships

Source: own elaboration.

sets up such a relationship can get a better deal in the market. As a result, the competition for the relational value is treated as a third leg in the theory of strategy (after competition for products and markets, and resources and competences) (Contractor, Beldona, 2002).

Competition for the relational value is a logical consequence of the resource-based approach which, among other things, shows relationships (relationship architecture) as one of the strategic intangible resources capable of building a sustainable competitive advantage. Studies focusing on inter-firm relationships, especially in the context of inter-firm networks, clearly indicate the importance of these relational resources in today's business world.

Compiling and developing the concept presented in Table 2 and the concept described by Anand and Daft (2007), we can synthesize and relate the dynamics of competition, the dynamics of organizational design, and the content of strategy (see Table 2).

In conclusion, in the early phases, strategic management was focused on the issues of competition. As a result, organizations were closed and self-contained, and strategy

was related to the product and the market choice. Then companies began to base their operations on cooperation in order to increase the value in the value chain. In the organizational design area, this results in process orientation, and resources will become a source of competitive advantage. Currently, competitors take joint actions so that the boundaries of organizations blur and expand, and the sources of the market success are just relationships with other entities, the competitors in particular.

Interfirm relationships and their evolution

A relational view as well as RBV provide solutions and theoretical explanations related to why organizations develop a network of relationships. In the relational view, the category of competitive advantage is closely linked to the network of relationships in which the organization is involved; consequently, it is determined by idiosyncratic interfirm relationships (Dyer, Singh, 1998). Continuing the argumentation in a relational logic, critical resources for the survival of the organization have a potential to extend the boundaries of the organization and are embedded in inter-organizational routines and processes. Relational rent or otherwise competitive advantage due to the exchange relationship occurs when the partners invest in relational resources, when they develop inter-organizational routines of knowledge sharing, when they use effective mechanisms to coordinate and exploit the complementary resources and capabilities (Dyer, Singh, 1998).

Inter-organizational relationships are used to jointly achieve individual goals, so, *ex definitione* they are mutually beneficial. This mutual benefit is not always symmetric.

Analyzing the issues of inter-organizational relations, it is relatively easy to notice that cooperation among organizations is exposed in a much broader sense than it has been in the previous practices. Relationships can be not only of the cooperative nature, but also, what is currently a very interesting research problem, of the cooperative nature, i.e. simultaneously competitive and cooperative. These relationships are usually predetermined by the partners, i.e. there are clearly defined areas of cooperation and competition. According to J. Cygler (2009), the cooperative relationship is characterized by separation. Another feature of the cooperative relationship is the complexity arising from the existence of a set of relationships rather from individual contacts. A research by J. Cygler also indicates interdependence as another important feature of the relationship. This feature exemplifies the increasing need for cooperation because relationship partners simply need each other. An important attribute of the relationship is the dynamism of competitive relationship and the relationship of cooperation. Striving for a balance between these two types of relationships gives a dynamics. Of significance is also variability in the environment. Sustainability is another element that describes the relationship of cooperation and is associated with the complexity of the relationship

between the partners. Most importantly, the cooperation supports the hypothesis of mutual benefit.

Inter-organizational relationship studies concentrate on different aspects. One strand of research is to look at the relationship using its life cycle. Examples are findings by D. Ford (1980) who identifies four stages in the development of relationships: the stage before the formation of the relationship, the exploration stage, the growth stage, and the stage of stabilization. Dwyer et al. (1987), based on the model developed by D. Ford, add the awareness stage where opportunities to enter into relations are identified, the exploration stage, the growth stage, and the stage of commitment in relationships.

Subsequent studies on the relationship development cycle show that the parties involved in the relationship represent a general tendency to favour a long-term orientation and show efforts to avoid all kinds of restrictions and to build a value based on the relationship at each stage (Zerbini, Castaldo, 2007). This is because relations provide advantages, especially when the parties involved in the relation bear a mutual effort to reduce the uncertainty. Relationships are developed, i.e. maintained and enlarged in scope even when the platform for a joint problem solving is developed and a clear interdependence is observed. For this reason, a major role in inter-organizational relationships, from the perspective of the efficiency in a broad sense, belongs to the nature of social interaction as well as a harmonious and long-term cooperation. On the other hand, the development of relationships can be fraught with dysfunctional effects indicating negative implications, however, in the form of increasing uncertainty and limitations. In practice, the development of the relationship can be not a very harmonious experience characterized by tensions. These tensions are caused mainly by asymmetry with respect to the position of parties, the possibility of solving a conflict, or related to the level of commitment (Lee, Johnsen, 2012; Zerbini, Castaldo, 2007).

The complementarity and additivity of inter-organizational relationships is an important condition for strengthening the competitiveness and competitive position of the organization. In this case, the cooperative relationship forms the basis for grounding and improving the market position of the organization under condition that the interaction is voluntary (Jagoda, 2003).

Relational adaptation

Organizational survival is determined not only by responding to changes in the environment, but also by finding strategic variables that can be used in order to shape the environment. Therefore, the variation takes different forms. Studies of much research on the strategic importance of inter-organizational relationships crystallize the main practices of variation based on inter-organizational relations (Stańczyk-Hugiet, 2013). Based on some results, it is possible to identify the main strategic intents, along with their expected

effects exemplified in the form of the relational development strategy of the organization. They also express the adaptation to the selective environment and at the same time shape the environment and conditions for survival.

The evolutionary approach is a different way explaining an emphasis of practice and theory on interfirm relationship management. It allows to explain this interest in terms of the self-organization mechanism.

Of course, it can be assumed that the organization has the freedom to choose between the top-down of intentionally structured relationships and the evolutionary approach highlighting self-organization. In terms of the intentional structure of the relationship, emergent changes restrict control, and the negative feedback is typical. The evolutionary approach is reflected in the interaction between different organizations, and self-organization is supported by a positive feedback loop in the process of experimentation (Englehardt, Simmons, 2002). Besides, generally, evolutionism does not provide an excellent scientific explanation especially useful for management science, but it has a large potential and is spreading into social sciences. The general principles of complexity can be successfully implemented to understand the dynamics of inter-organizational relationships and the development of relational capabilities. The complexity theory focuses on the unpredictability of the context.

Many scholars in strategic management also take a similar position. Thus, the characterization of the environment as the high velocity, volatility and expanding boundaries of organizations, significant advancement of technology, hyper-competition, innovation, and the intensity and complexity of information shift a large research area of strategic management into the inter-organizational relationships. This constitutes the platform for the construction of new structural forms configured from a bottom, as it is used with the demands advocated by evolutionists. Kinetic organizational capabilities are being brought to the forefront (Ma, 2000) and are associated with predictors such as entrepreneurship, technical, organizational and managerial skills which are reflected in the collaborative process, speed, and flexibility. Therefore, they become the basis of positional advantage resulting from the inter-organizational relationships. Other authors emphasize the importance of relational competence and the network competence. Yet another group indicates relational capability which for M. Mitreğa (2010) is the desire and ability to participate in the relationship, the ability to interact, which cannot only adapt to the changes, but also forms a network of relationships. It is mainly determined by the ability to accumulate knowledge. The above-average relational capability makes the company to act as an integrator. Network capability, in turn, is a set of processes and organizational routines aimed at exploiting the opportunities associated with the embeddedness in the network of inter-organizational relationships (Mitreğa, 2010).

It seems necessary to stress the relational strategy as the base strategy for the inter-firm relationships. The relational strategy, the strategy focused on developing inter-firm

relationships, refers to three essential conditions: the basic strategy of the business, the dynamics of the environment, and the portfolio of relations. The basic strategy of business explains why a particular relation is better than another is, and what contributes to attaining the strategic objectives of the company. The dynamism of the environment makes the relationship to be open and flexible. The portfolio approach is used to ensure the coherence of the inter-firm relationships with the business strategy and to ensure the consistency of multiple inter-firm relationships (cooperative policy). The dominant view explaining network strategies and the strategies inside the network is the parallelism of the competition and cooperation. Cooperation means seeking benefit from the group activities, i.e. what is typical of business organizations seeking synergies from relationships. B. de Wit and R. Mayer (2007) state that an organization should combine at the same time the discrete organization perspective and the embedded organization perspective, embedded in a network of relationships, to maximize the benefits and independent or discrete in order to maintain the potential flexibility and to build new relationships permanently. Anyway, just the idea of flexibility, or the 'increased flexibility imperative' has become the cornerstone of the networked economy construction. Thanks to inter-firm relationships, organizations can cope with uncertainty. The management or owners can shape the company's own future instead of passively waiting. This means there is a need for involving the external context in the processes of formulating the strategy, searching for new relationships and configuration with others and, as a result, building such inter-firm relationships which not only reduce the risk but also allow the acquisition of special benefits.

The evolution of inter-firm networks seems to some extent to have been linked to the mainstream in RBV and determined, in a certain period of strategic thinking, just by the perspective of resources and competences. Despite the criticism of this approach, its effects on thinking about the strategy are still notable, also in the context of relationships between the organization and the environment. Going still further, the RBV and the experience acquired in the past show how accumulating internal know-how and the processes of the evolution influence specific competences. This means that a company which participates in different external business coalitions has the capacity to deliver its knowledge and experience to the new relational systems more efficiently.

Going back to the evolutionary perspective, the teleological approach to variation, based on the relationship, has been developed, grounded on the data of frequency on the research addressing the inter-organizational relationships (Fig. 1).

Relational strategies are oriented to the access to resources and focused on gaining a rent from the resource pool. Relational strategies include options to the market position as evidenced by strengthening the market position of partners and increasing the bargaining power in the market relative to competitors and / or to other (not competitors) entities

in the environment. It reveals itself through creating a coalition and by strengthening the market position of partners held by supporting or lobbying (de Wit, Meyer, 2007). Relational strategies also identify the opportunities for the organization through the processes of knowledge. In particular, processes such as knowledge sharing, creation of knowledge and its conversion are exposed (Chai, Yap, Wang, 2011). The relational strategies focused on innovation reflect the growth opportunities in the process of establishing a relationship, giving the potential for creating innovation (Freel, Yang, 2009; Ritala, Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, 2009; Mention, 2011).

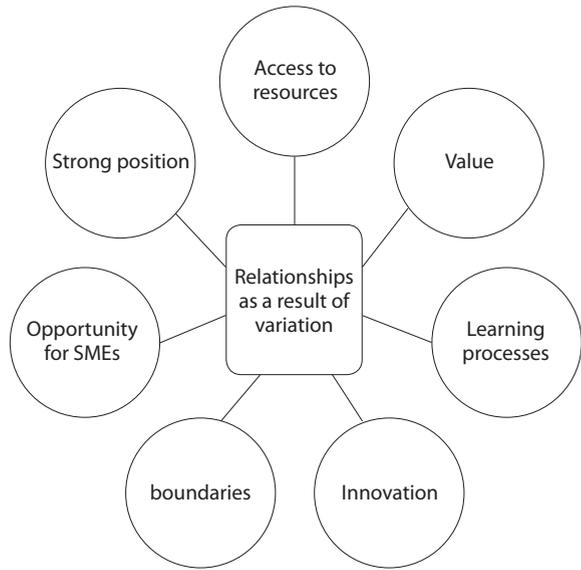


FIG. 1. Teleological framework of variation: relationship perspective

Source: own elaboration.

In the case of the relational strategy oriented to value, the role of relationships is to generate value (Castaldo, 2007). Inter-organizational relationships are part of the strategic actions also manifested in the increasing organizational boundaries, which is associated with a greater potential for innovation (Santos, Eisenhardt, 2005). Inter-organizational relations are also a strategy for the development of SMEs (Kontinnen, Ojala, 2011; Anderson, Dodd, Jack, 2010).

Generally, the competition for the relational value is a logical extension of the resource-based approach. In the RBV, relationships (relationship architecture) are recognized as intangible strategic resources and form the basis for a sustainable competitive advantage expressed as a relational rent (Dyer, Singh, 1998). Recent empirical studies conducted around the world, focusing on inter-organizational relations, confirm the hypothesis derived in the resource-based view.

The relevant role of inter-organizational relationships in practice leads to the recognition of this phenomenon in the socio-economic process. A comparison of research patterns used in evolutionary economics research and, on the other side, in inter-organizational network research allows a better understanding of the dynamics of changes in inter-organizational relationships.

R. Brennan (2006) states that evolutionary economics in its assumptions should take into account the fact that inter-organizational routine, but not intra-organizational routine, plays an important role in the process of evolution. Inter-organizational relationships as

routine behavior allow organizations to adapt, to integrate, and to reconfigure internal and external organizational capabilities, resources, and functional competences. The set of relations, therefore, can allow to adapt to and to survive in the environment that makes the selection. Making a comparison between evolutionary economics and a research located in the markets-as-networks approach, R. Brennan points out that both perspectives focus on explaining the phenomena occurring in the context of socio-economic development. It is, therefore, considered that the comparison of the two strands of research allows for the inclusion of evolutionary thought into studies of interactions, relationships, and processes taking place in the networks of inter-organizational relationships.

In the evolutionary perspective, adaptation is particularly important because it is one of the key ways to maintain a balance with the environment. Adaptation takes place incrementally as various resources occur and when the resources take values.

Survival becomes possible with establishing and nurturing relationships. So, if an organization is not able to survive in the selective environment due to adaptive limitations, it has a favourable relationship (or relationships) that put it in a comfortable position to survive (embedded organization). However, if the organization will remain a discrete organization (out of relationship), this fact can determine its difficult competitive situation that makes it impossible to survive.

The evolution of relationship patterns between an organization and its environment is a process that in the current practice is quite clear. Organizations rather co-create the environment. This process of co-creation is realized not only through the process of competition, but also through competitors' cooperation. The result is a real co-evolution of organizations in the population, which justifies the ecology of business, although this explanation does not address the cooperative relationship among competitors. Under certain conditions, the choice of cooperation partners is dependent on the potential benefits derived from such a relationship (Galeotti, Goyal, 2010).

Inter-organizational relationships *per se* are evolving to become an element allowing an adaptation to the changing requirements in the area of resources while shaping a new competitive landscape.

A particular strategic dimension of the relationship is the relationship among competitors. The cooperation strategy is a particularly distinctive relational strategy which can be reduced to a permanent adaptation to the situation. Cooperation undergoing qualitative changes means that its content becomes a quest to build competitiveness in relations among competitors (Stańczyk-Hugiet, 2011).

In view of inter-firm relationships, enterprises' competitiveness can take place via interaction, which results in gaining a competitive advantage over other non-interacting organizations, and interacting/cooperation or, otherwise, creating and putting into practice solutions based on different forms of interaction, is the basic value of the so-called

inter-organizational networks. Collaboration among companies is an alternative to competing. Its essence becomes a voluntary relationship of enterprises in their mutual interest. This relationship may take the form of more formality, but it may also have the nature of unwritten or unnamed agreements. The cooperation of companies has been present in the strategic management research for a long time. However, the specific nature of its renaissance is the connection with the dynamic change of business reality actually related to the emergence of the business network. Until recently, the problem of cooperation has been treated as processes of mergers and strategic alliances. Today, we see that many companies adopt the processes of cooperation – from informality to more formality. A special type of cooperation is cooptation. Cooperation needs to deal with the paradox that B. de Wit and R. Meyer (2007) identify as the paradox of competition *versus* cooperation. On the one hand we have single, independent companies (discrete organization s) and on the other hand the companies embedded in the network of relationships (embedded organizations).

Results and discussion

The evolutionary approach exposes a significant role of inter-organizational relationships. To confirm these assumptions, qualitative studies were performed. The research includes a direct interview technique which was used as a tool of providing a scenario of an interview. The study involved 13 respondents – top managers representing high technology sectors.

The main questions were as follows:

- Q1: What is the relative importance of strategic relationships for the development of your organization?
- Q2: What types of adaptation are most intensively undertaken by your organization?
- Q3: What attributes characterize relationships with other organizations?
- Q4: What mechanisms of adaptation offer opportunities for development?
- Q5: How did the number of strategic relationships change and how it affected the situation of the organization?

The answers to the questions are presented in the form of propositions. These propositions have the nature of hypotheses, which in the future will be subject to testing by statistical methods.

The ability to establish relationships in the opinion of interlocutors is important, but it is not of priority importance from the perspective of survival and development. The diagnosis related to the mechanisms of adaptation quite explicitly led to the recognition that the relationships are an important mechanism for adaptation. In the light of the previously

presented findings, such supposition is somewhat surprising, in particular that the current study shows quite explicitly the potential of inter-organizational relationships.

Another interesting finding related to relationship is connected with the following issues. Among the most important relationships, in the opinion of the respondents, there are competitive relations, because they mobilize and activate the action of an organization. Cooperative relations, both horizontal and vertical (with competitors), are seen at the same level of soundness, but relationships in the value chain gain an advantage.

Coopetitive relationship is a phenomenon observed in the sectors represented by the respondents. The motive for setting cooperative relations with competitors, according to the research results, can be reduced to:

- joint research and development,
- raising technical standards in the sector,
- building a shared competence centres,
- responding to changes in the sector(consolidation, alliances, strategic networking).

Proposition 1. The driving force of an organization's development is the competition in the sector and the cooperative relationship in the value chain.

Adaptation is an essential activity enabling survival in a selective environment. This is confirmed by the results of the interviews. The smallest intensity is indicated for reactive adaptation understood as a set of defense actions against the environmental impact by conducting activities along the formed routines. The interview results suggest that active adaptation is characteristic of modern sectors.

Proposition 2. The modern sectors are dominated by the logic of the active adaptation.

The greatest adaptation potential is primarily associated with the company's reputation, speed in the process of decision-making, innovation, and the existing knowledge and experience. In this regard, actually the feedback fully complies with the objectives and research findings located into the resource-based view. It is also worth noting that the relationship with business environment institutions in terms of adaptability is valued higher than cooperative relations with competitors. At the same time, the same variables related to adaptation, in the opinion of the respondents, most likely generate opportunities to gain efficiency.

Proposition 3. In the modern sectors, an effective way to differentiate in order to survive in the selective environment is to have and exploit the resource base.

Many studies conducted in the area of management stress the importance of inter-organizational relationships in building competitiveness. Inter-organizational relations are characterized by a variety of attributes that make them to have a specific value, and

therefore it is possible to obtain benefits from relations with organizations. In the study, it was undertaken to determine which characteristics of inter-organizational relationships are important to the organization from the perspective of the opportunity to obtain benefits. The attributes and functions of inter-organizational relationships to which special attention was paid are primarily the adaptation to changing conditions and complementarity. However, the respondents did not underestimate the intensification of the mobility potential in the sense of increasing the scope of activities. Also, the role of relationships that provide a platform for the transfer of knowledge and other resources among organizations was emphasized. The issue of asymmetric relations and their ambiguity in the opinion of the respondents does not express direct implications. The reason for this fact is that most of these relationships are supported by named contracts that govern the inter-organizational relationships and, at least partially, allow eliminating ambiguity and asymmetry. The expanding problems of adaptation allow to state clearly that adaptation is essential for survival in the market, and it is often possible only by establishing cooperative relations with competitors.

Proposition 4. Inter-organizational relations maintain the survival and development of an organization due to their idiosyncratic characteristics

The study was focused on changes in the number of inter-organizational relationships during the research period. A number of relationships with other organizations and competitors is declared by respondents at the same level or higher, while for cooperative relations an intensification of this number can be clearly noticed, and it is associated with their positive effect on the general condition of the organization. As to relations with other organizations and with competitors, they are not assumed to exert a direct and noticeable effect on the improvement of the situation in the organization; neither the negative influence of these relationships on the situation in the organization is clearly indicated.

Proposition 5. The number of inter-organizational relationships does not determine the survival of an organization.

Conclusions

Currently, the central problem of research is inter-organizational relationships, particularly the cooperative relationship. Interfirm relationships as the subject of research were raised in many scientific publications. From these publications, we assimilate the reasons regarding the need to equip organizations with the relational competence. Organizations, especially in the evolutionary environment, permanently trigger the mechanisms of adaptability and self-organization processes. Selection and chaos make subsequently continuous adaptation strategies (incrementalism) which may take the form of emergent

strategy as a response to the emergence of an opportunity. The evolutionary convention dominates the research paradigm perfectly visualized in the form of the Emery–Trist axiom. This axiom states that “the environment determines the modes and conditions of behaviour necessary for survival and / or achievement of organizational aspiration” (Ansoff, Sullivan, 1993, p. 27). In evolutionary terms, these aspirations are related to the survival of the organization.

The evolutionary perspective recognizes that an organization operates in a selective environment, and the variation processes lead to adaptation and survival. In the author’s opinion, the variation processes based on the relationships of cooperation and competition reflect, on the one hand, adaptation and, on the other hand, the expression of self-organization processes. In the evolutionary language, it means that collaborative relationships are a result of the variation processes to get the best match with the environment, which makes a selection. The spontaneous evolution of ecosystems (the networks of relationships) is an argument for that statement.

The conducted pilot studies form the basis for the development of a research program located in the evolutionary logic and at the same time in the relational logic. The above propositions (from 1 to 5) exemplify it in the form of research hypotheses. In fact, the results obtained so far indicate that there is still a gap in the research of inter-organizational relationships, especially when we look at these relationships from the perspective of variation mechanisms demonstrated in evolutionary terms.

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