

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PROCESSES IN ORGANIZATION. CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Introduction/background: The pandemic has had an impact on the rapid change in the conditions of the functioning of society, the economy and organization itself. Fundamental changes in decisions have occurred in various areas. The processes of strategic significance are of key importance, which determine the further functioning of society and the economy.

Aim of the paper: The basic aim of writing this paper is to highlight the extraordinary phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of the processes of strategic management in organizations. Moreover, the aim of indicating new challenges to managers of a crisis nature was adopted, which must be taken into account in terms of the strategic decisions of the organization at hand.

Materials and methods: The authors utilized an analysis of scientific works relating to the problems of strategic management, together with deliberations in the science and practice environment related to the challenges of the pandemic sphere. Similarly, the survey and statistical research methods were applied in the domain of strategies, and the development of customer service on the Internet in terms of public administration.

Results and conclusions: The research outcome was the indication of the following:

- the development of the Internet in strategic management in organizations with regard to the challenges of the pandemic,
- the utilitarianism of e-administration in serving clients of the administration offices of the province of Silesia (województwa śląskiego – 96 entities analyzed),
- the implementation of strategic management in qualitative and pro-social dimensions.

Keywords: strategic management, challenges of the pandemic, organization.

1. Introduction

The science and business practice is vividly interested in the problems of strategic management in organizations. The increase in importance and strategic problems is the result of changes taking place in the economy and society. The evolutionary nature of these changes

affects the nature and extent of updating strategic management issues. Radical changes caused by sudden and unpredictable phenomena affect strategic management processes.

Times of great and groundbreaking crises, not only the currently existing ones or dominating systems connected to organization of economic, social and political life, but also the crises of values, caused the awareness of threats in organizations. The pandemic revealed the drama of everyday life to many. It seems that the best solutions of the modern civilization system, such as: globalization, democracy system and modern models of organization management, lost their value during the pandemic. We realized that the structures of the mechanisms of organizing economic systems are not of the highest order, as low-quality solutions prevail. There is negligence in health and climate protection systems. It seemed that the initial periods of the pandemic would cause significant changes in many areas of modern life, that after the pandemic “everything will be different” (e.g. solutions in economic and political systems) and that strategic management systems in organizations would change significantly. According to the authors, the pandemic will not only bring about revolutionary changes, but will significantly deepen various crises, revealing new, hitherto unknown tendencies, as well as new possibilities of solving critical problems of strategic management.

Such positive, rediscovered potentials of further social and economic development, including new civilization progress, constitute the awareness of the strengths and capacities of social relationships of trust between people and between organizations, within increasingly wider boundaries, also on an international scale. In general, the real importance of cultural, and especially axiological factors shaping the quality of life of organizations and communities, has become clear, forcing the treatment of these factors as key to solving the current operational problems of management, but also in shaping the strategy of their further functioning and development.

2. Literature review

Strategic management can nowadays be considered the most intensively developed field of organizational and management sciences. In practice, it is treated as a particularly important competence of managers, based on the unjustified conviction of people that they have a chance to “manage the future”: their future and the future of the organization. However, it should be stressed that it is impossible for rational planning to predict all future phenomena and events and to determine their impact on the functioning of individuals and organizations. However, with a certain margin of risk, unfortunately high, it is possible to forecast the future and, on this basis, consciously plan the next phases of the organization’s functioning process as part of strategic management.

Strategic management in organizations generates new concepts and formulates objectives determined by the changing environment. The process of continuous change results from the needs of an organization that pursues its strategic management objectives. These objectives are integrated into the theoretical currents of strategic management assimilating changeability and practice development. Organizations develop strategies for the advancement of their core business, focusing on products and services (Hitt, Ireland, Hoskisson, 2017). An integral element of the strategy is social capital, which determines the development prospects of the organization (Dowling, Festing, Engle Sr, 2017).

A review of the research topics presented in the Strategic Management Journal in 2014-2016 by W. Dyduch and M. Bratnicki enables the identification of the dominant trends. These include: efficiency, knowledge and innovation management and a networked collaboration of organizations. The issue of corporate social responsibility in corporate strategies also deserves recognition (Dyduch, Bratnicki, 2017).

The main source of changes in the approach to strategic management is contemporary crisis challenges. The importance and complexity of cooperation and inter-organizational relations in the formulation and implementation of strategic management objectives in a crisis environment was confirmed. Sources of transformation in strategic management are important. The first source for the achievement of the organization's goals, which are increasingly common in networks, is decisions that enable the fulfilment of social criteria, with the exposure of ecological challenges and conditions. The second source is the management of knowledge, human resources competences and resources that generate network development in a strategic perspective. The inclusion of entities cooperating in organizations in the form of network nodes provides an appropriate resource for undertaking strategic challenges in the area of knowledge and for directing social capital transformation processes. The third source of strategic management issues is the social criteria for assessing an organization in the context of cooperation with all stakeholders. Increasing environmental requirements now and in the future, for example in the form of a climate package, must result in a redefinition of the organization's strategy, forced climate protests organized by young people. The expectations of the young generation are communicated to the staff of the organization, which must take responsibility for the quality of life of the society of the future in the decision-making process (Stachowicz, 2017). The fourth source is the functioning of the organization in terms of its duration and development within the framework of mutual interaction with organizations and institutions of the environment. Organizations are then created that are included in the network of other organizations that pursue their own goals, which require synchronization in strategies, as well as in current management processes (Kościelniak, Skowron-Grabowska, Nowodziński, 2017).

The processes of change in strategic management are increasingly determined by information systems (Scherer, Ptak, Lis, 2017). It is justified to indicate the virtuality of communication (Fig. 1).

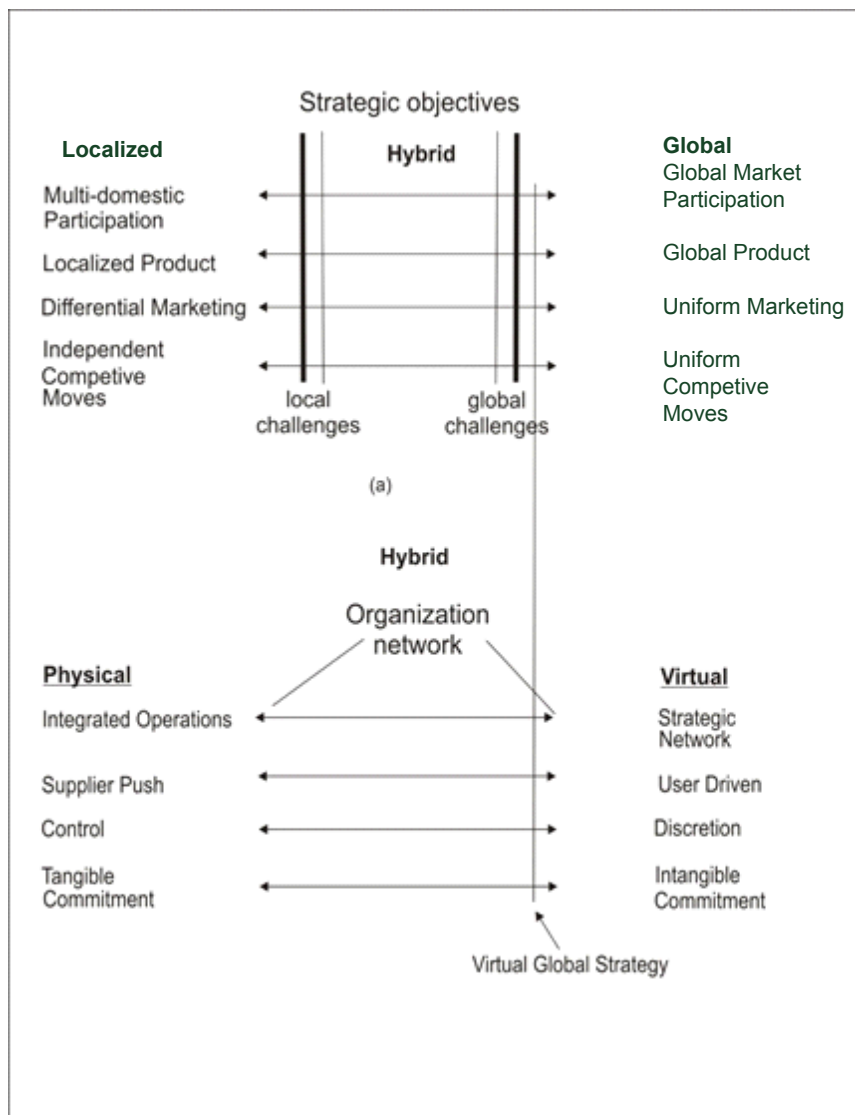


Figure 1. The virtuality of communication in terms of strategic objectives. Adapted from: Turner C. (2012), *Strategic Flexibility and the Emergence of Virtual Global Strategies*, “European Business Review”, vol. 24, no. 3.

Figure 1 shows that many companies carry out their activities by combining physical and virtual communication. Global challenges make the focus of business contacts move towards virtual communication in corporate strategy. This task is made possible by modern technologies that create strategic resources. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic played a key role in both global and local challenges towards virtuality. The crisis conditions created by the pandemic critically and creatively verified the organization’s strategies.

The business environment is nowadays (and especially during the pandemic) deliberately constituted by state institutions (e.g. aid programs). The ability to use these programs is connected with the ability of leaders/managers to be enterprising, knowledgeable and operational in building a business model in situations of intersecting cooperation and supply chains in circumstances of manipulating information and knowledge in cyberspace.

At present, the strategies of enterprises implementing the vision of socially responsible companies are of particular importance, as well as various innovative solutions fulfilling these strategies, which we count as social innovations. Good examples of these social innovations are crowdfunding and crowdsourcing. The methodological platform of these innovative solutions is Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) (Zbierowski, 2012). The positive theory of organization is a new point of view and treatment of organization as a specific phenomenon, positively perceived and developed and used by people (and not just problems and difficulties to be solved). POS puts the main emphasis on “positive” phenomena such as nobility, vitality, seriousness leading to perfection, positive transcendence or extraordinary efficiency, taking into account mainly social factors and criteria. POS is associated with the current of organizational entrepreneurship. Both in the current of organizational entrepreneurship and in the current of positive organizational theory, attention is focused on such phenomena as creativity, creativity and optimism. Their implementation requires interaction processes and appropriate personnel competences in organizations (Mesjasz-Lech, Skowron-Grabowska, 2016).

In the decision-making processes that make up strategic management in organizations, we observe an increased clash of two tendencies: a conscious recognition of trust between people and organizations as the driving force of social cooperation and solidarity and – unfortunately – a lack of trust as the driving force of crisis management activities. One can quote the following: “It should be clear now that implementation isn’t just another step that takes place after the modeling process is over” (Render et al., 2018). However, the problem of social responsibility in subjective terms is important (Stachowicz-Stanusch, Amann, 2017).

Entities that creatively design and implement business models in organizations are of course entrepreneurs, managers and leaders. Subjected to the crisis conditions of the pandemic, they shape the business models that make up enterprise strategies, which will be called further on entrepreneurial strategies.

3. Entrepreneurial strategies – organizational strategies dominant during the pandemic

The term “strategy” is understood today not so much as a “document” but as a cognitive process – a process of knowledge management in which creative managers – contemporary leaders – play a special role. The strategy understood and formulated in this way is more and more often called an entrepreneurial strategy. It is described by methodologies developed in the contemporary strategic management approach, called the configuration approach. The entrepreneurial strategy is a resource strategy in the sense that the dominant resource for the development of the organization, for building all the values for which the organization was

established, is the knowledge of the entrepreneur and other participants in the organization. It is also an emerging strategy, as understood by H. Mintzberg, i.e. it is the result of the interaction of the environment and organization and the reaction to these interactions. The entrepreneurial strategy is also a strategy in the meaning by K. Obłój. It is a model concept of a contemporary (entrepreneurial) approach to strategic management (paradigm), whose so-called configuration approach is a methodological recommendation rationalizing the actions and behavior of managers in strategic processes (Obłój, 2007). The methodological platform for designing and implementing an entrepreneurial strategy is the methodological approach in strategic management, called the configuration approach. The authors of this approach are S.L. Brown and K.M. Eisenhardt (1998). In Poland, this approach was developed by P. Kordel (2016).

The success of management in light of the configuration approach depends on the interaction and configuration of various factors, including internal and external, which are responsible for the development of the organization. In the period of crisis threats, these configurations are in turn derivatives of the process of identifying development opportunities for the organization. One of the main assumptions in the configuration approach is eQuality, which means a variety of ways to achieve the same goals in the same environment. The next assumption of this approach is the concept of matching, understood as the compatibility between different conceptual domains of the organization's development, internal success factors and external conditions. This concept is subject to reduction mechanisms, which means that a finite number of types of organizations can be distinguished, understood as bundles of matches. Another assumption of the configuration approach is to describe the development of the company by making qualitative leaps and not by relying on an evolutionary adaptation to the environment. According to the configuration theory, an organization is characterized by specific domains, i.e. conceptual constructions composed of mutually interacting dimensions: managerial leadership, organizational structure, development strategy of the organization and its environment (Miller, 1996). Further, D. Miller recognizes – as the main methodology for creating configurations – the construction of specific mental patterns of these configurations on the basis of empirical observations, but above all on the basis of case studies. Crises are a special kind of case. As the main concept of the processes of “discovering the configuration”, the author considers their construction as a methodological platform for formulating and implementing entrepreneurial strategies. These processes are undertaken and implemented by the leaders – strategists, and the efficiency of these processes translates into the success of entrepreneurial strategies, especially important in crisis strategies. The result of the work undertaken in the project is, among other things, the development of the author's own concept of a model for the rationalization of the strategic process of development of high technology enterprises in terms of configuration (Stachowicz, 2016).

The majority of companies during the pandemic were subjected to new qualitative influences, shaped both by drastically changed factors and processes building the company's environment and by new factors, quite significantly changing the work organization processes that have been used so far. These are processes such as mass remote working, process organization with social distance and others. These new conditions force entrepreneurs, on the one hand, to change their behavior and launch specific corrective processes and, on the other hand, to create new business models and new strategies (with a high share of social innovation, strategies for maintaining brand attractiveness, entrepreneurial use of various forms of aid from the government and the European Union) with a significant share of technological innovation, in particular in terms of taking advantage of the opportunities and facing the threats posed by the "Industry 4.0" revolution. This rather contradictory assortment of strategic actions is particularly reflected in the contradictions and difficulties of the "management comfort" of entrepreneurs, strategists – leaders. They must resolve in their systems of moral and organizational values, acquired competencies and skills rational decisions concerning the structure, business models and strategies in the subsequent phases of their organizations' pro-social and pro-ecological functioning processes (Seroka-Stolka et al., 2017). In conclusion, therefore, reference may be made to terms put forth by M.A. Hitt, R.D. Ireland and R.E. Hoskisson, which state that the role of managers is very important: "the manager is able to anticipate, envision maintain flexibility and empower others to create strategic change as necessary. Strategic change is change brought about as a result of selecting and implementing a firm's strategies" (Hitt, Ireland, Hoskisson, 2017).

Contemporary companies managed by managers are particularly important entities, too often building their own "greatness" by the means of maintaining their advantage of influencing other organizations (often falling into crisis situations). To maintain their competitive advantages, these large corporations over time formulate marketing strategies that promote their brands and are based on innovation and social strategies, such as environmental protection (ways of introducing technological and social innovations), accelerated development of new diagnostics and treatments, the use of carbon elimination technologies or the use of clean energy sources. Of course, in most cases, these are entrepreneurial strategies based on value, knowledge and regional development visions (Knop, Brzóska, 2017).

Often these are also strategies that prove to be inconsistent with business models during periods when organizations are struggling with the pandemic and benefit from state or European Union aid. The development and implementation of these strategies is greatly influenced by the networks of political processes, including the decision-making processes within the European Union. Above all, however, mutual relations within networks have a significant share in these decision-making and strategic processes: large corporations, large organizations and networks of social stakeholders (trade unions, state authorities). The networks of these interactions are the clash of various activities and processes forming mutual trust. Levels of mutual trust and lack of trust are the main platform for building and putting new models and strategies into

practice. Specific leaders, managers and politicians in the various roles of the governance structure have an important role in these processes.

Among the strategies which were particularly taken into account in the pandemic period are the groundbreaking ones. The time of the pandemic highlights and reveals the intentions, all too often dishonest, of large companies applying these strategies to small, innovative organizations or start-ups. This unreliability of the “big ones” lies in the willingness to take over the innovative solutions generated and developed in startups and subsequently limit the progress of work on these innovative solutions (Hisrich, Ramadani, 2017).

These are market game strategies for shaping the market for the products and services of these innovative companies. Technological entrepreneurship as the main capital, i.e. the driving force behind the development of an organization, fulfilling, but also – what is particularly important – shaping specific social needs for new products (constituted by the products of new innovative technologies), are organizations in which specific technological breakthroughs (disruptive innovations) are made, i.e. significantly distorting the existing patterns of demand. This process is particularly noticeable today in the IT industry and in eco-innovation (Mesjasz-Lech, 2020). Strategic management theorists are obviously undertaking intensive work to explain the process of change and the structure of the markets in relation to these breakthrough innovations, including research on corporate strategies for effective changes in client preferences (Stępień, Łęgowik-Małolepsza, Łęgowik-Świącik, 2019). In general, the theory of breakthrough innovations is being created and developed, and such authors can be cited here: M. Clayton, M. Christenson, M.R. Raynor, M.P. McDonald (2016), J. Gans (2016), and in Poland – M. Romanowska (2018), J. Machnik-Słomka (2014), P. Kordel (2016).

The changes in the importance and role of new innovative technologies implemented in modern companies and regions should be emphasized (Mayer, Masehla, Kot, 2017). In these processes of implementing innovations, which have become social innovations, the role of so-called innovation catalysts in decision-making processes should be considered. The limitations and barriers to innovation management in large corporations are primarily due to extensive client expectations and the rebuilding of the innovation management system in modern innovative companies. The need to organize a new role and function in enterprises, the so-called innovation leaders’ functions, called development catalysts, was identified. New models of innovation management are characterized by the consciously organized new role and organizational function of innovation leaders who are able to actively rebuild the environment of an innovative company, constructing new opportunities and new needs and creating social networks catalyzing the development of modern enterprises supported by public administration (ThurLOW et al., 2017).

Specific tasks must be carried out by companies. “Companies use three processes to select and manage their strategic initiative portfolios:

- Choose strategic initiatives,
- Fund the strategy,
- Establish accountability” (Kaplan, Norton, 2008).

Medium-sized and small enterprises are, of course, building their crisis business models with a significant consideration of the impact and role of networks of organizations, institutions and various forms of assistance from the state and the Union. The strategies of these companies are, as already noted, entrepreneurial strategies. The rationality of these strategies is, of course, dependent on the competence and skills and, above all, on the moral credibility of the managers – the leaders of these companies.

The pandemic period has particularly emphasized the role of the health care system, education, environmental protection, the institutions of state and law, the institution of fair distribution and use of aid funds. It also made the case for increasing trust in institutions, including, in particular, the organization of public administration as a platform for constructing instruments to protect and combat the effects of the epidemic as a strategic challenge.

4. Research method

The preparation of this paper involved the use of survey research in the sphere of serving clients in the chosen administration offices of self-government in the province of Silesia. Research was directed at indicating the ranking of importance and the indicators of the evaluation of the level of customer service in terms of strategic decisions.

Likewise, statistical methods were applied in the form of calculating the correlation between the analyzed variables which characterize the level of customer service in the administration offices of public administration in the province of Silesia.

A comparative analysis of the self-conducted research findings was also carried out against the results of evaluation, with the aid of the method of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) applied by other authors.

The following research questions were posed:

- What activities of a strategic nature should be undertaken in terms of public administration with regard to the pandemic (informatization, pro-social activities, others)?
- How do clients evaluate the systems of e-administration?

5. Results – strategic challenges for public administration in periods of crisis

With relation to the questions, the findings of the pilot research have been presented.

The answers to the questions relating to the strategic activities of the administration offices of self-government have been presented as follows (Figure 2):

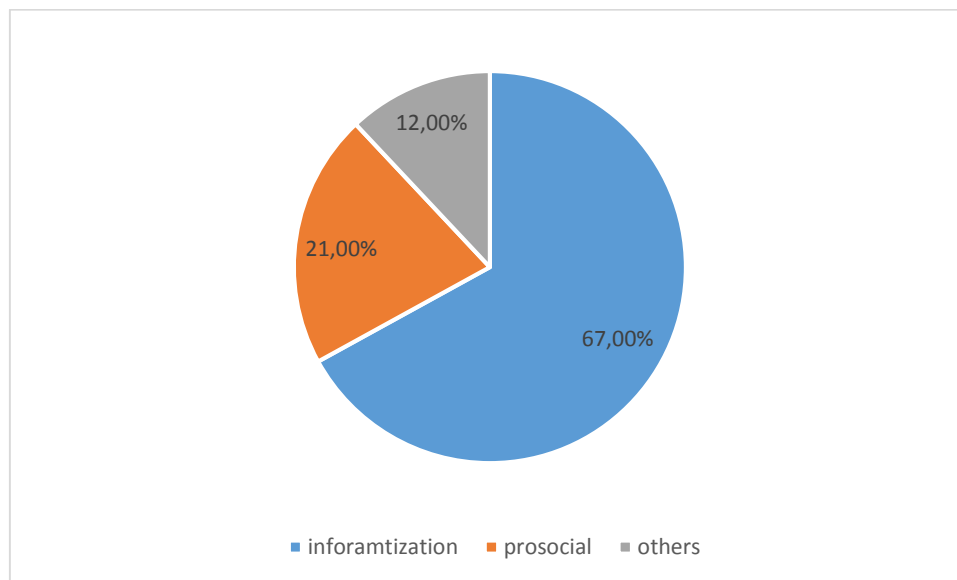


Figure 2. Types of strategic activities in administration offices of self-government indicated by clients during the course of the pandemic. Source: Self-analysis on the basis of surveys.

Evaluation of systems of e-administration as an answer to the second question is illustrated in Fig. 3.

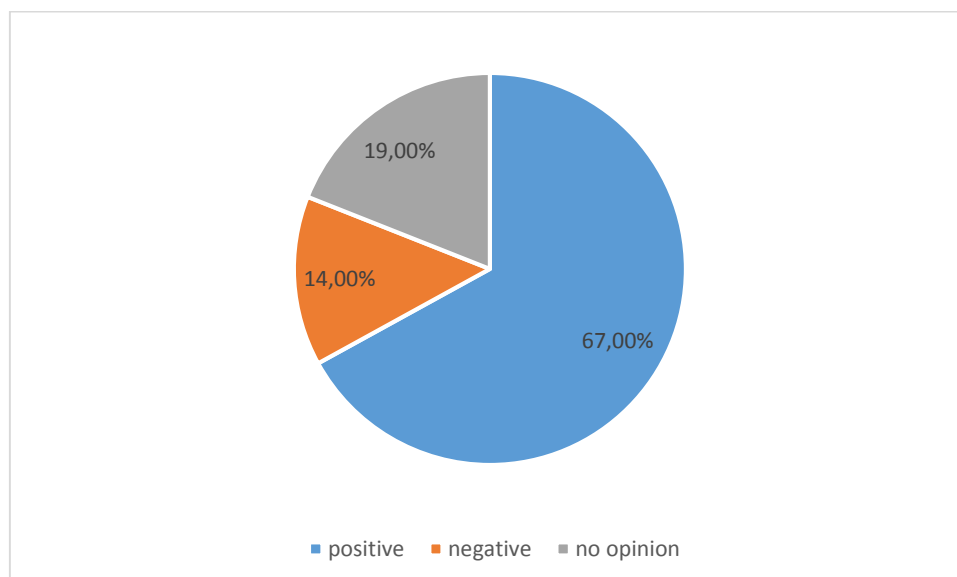


Figure 3. Evaluation of systems of e-administration by clients of administration offices of self-government. Source: Self-analysis on the basis of surveys.

The aforesaid charts indicate informatization as the fundamental activity of the administration offices of self-government.

E-administration is assessed in a positive manner by 67% of the clients of the administration offices of self-government, which simultaneously confirms that informatization is the fundamental strategic activity during the course of the pandemic. Pro-social activities are also of significance.

Public administration performs tasks for economic entities, regions and society. Implementation of the tasks requires an efficient, effective and modern public administration which implements new directions of strategic management. Among them, methods and techniques aimed at a high level of client service are important. Ensuring a high level of client service is possible when tasks are concentrated and modern IT systems are used, according to the strategic challenges formulated for public administration. These challenges set out visions and missions, according to which goals and tasks are defined, which enable one to increase the level of client service through a positive response to higher quality standards for public administration in the country. Projects aimed at increasing the level of client satisfaction are also defined on a transnational basis, i.e. through the OECD's Public Governance Committee, as well as through the activities of the EUPAN European Network on Public Administration. Thanks to the consistency of criteria and requirements, the implementation of integrated undertakings generates a system of optimal configurations within the framework of network cooperation facilitating the functioning of a mobile client of public administration bodies.

In the strategic challenges for public administration during the crisis, the importance of those bodies that have undertaken complex and socially necessary actions, especially those of an informational and preventive nature, has increased. Thanks to the popularization and improvement of IT systems of client service, the lack of personal contact in public administration did not cause the collapse of the functioning of government offices during the crisis. The administration is required to have continuous interaction with its clients (Ślusarczyk, Grondys, 2018). The public administration must carry out activities in the area of (Jakubiec, Barcik, Dziwiński, 2018):

- increasing the level of social inclusion,
- increasing the level of intellectual and social capital,
- improving the quality of life and public health,
- sustainable exploitation of natural resources together with the reduction of environmental devastation,
- ensuring human rights.

Furthermore, it seems justified to refer to the client satisfaction model in local government offices. This model is based on quality, assuming the characteristics of the product or service received by the client in qualitative terms. The qualitative dimension concerns many areas, which include: services, client service and their expectations, employees, information and a specific organizational unit (Biesiok, Wyród-Wróbel, 2016).

In each of the areas mentioned above, indicators enabling the evaluation of the local government office by clients were also adopted. Among the indicators, the following have been distinguished: the effects of the handled issue, the degree of formalization of the service, timeliness, forms of contact with the government office, knowledge and competences of employees. A scale from 1 to 7 was adopted, with 1 being a very bad rating and 7 a very good rating. The data set makes it possible to calculate the average marks, on the basis of which an opinion on client satisfaction is obtained in a given local government office.

In the aspect of strategic challenges in public administration management, one can refer to research conducted on the level of client service in selected government offices of the Silesian Province (Nowicka-Skowron, Mazur, 2019). It was assumed that there is a possibility of a 10% statistical error and a 5% materiality level. The above assumptions became the basis for determining the number of examined public administration bodies at a level of 96 units randomly selected in the Silesian Province. The subjects of the research were individuals and entrepreneurs. 143 questionnaires correctly completed by entrepreneurs and 281 questionnaires from individuals were received. The respondents answered questions regarding: achieving the purpose of the visit, competence of the employees, waiting time for the issue to be handled, knowledge of the regulations, level of satisfaction with the service, choice of place and location marking, providing information in the press, Internet and other types.

The research shows that the overall assessment of the level of client service in selected public administration offices is positive. From the point of view of the crisis, the choice of the form of handling the issue is worth emphasizing. Written correspondence followed by a personal visit was considered the most effective form. The Internet placed third. The current situation of the pandemic has made significant changes in the contact between the client and the public administration office. The Internet has become the dominant form.

It is also important to point out the implementation of the principles of social responsibility in client service, which is mostly considered to be positive; however, by summing up the negative assessments with the lack of answers, it can be concluded that there is significant potential for improving the service in a strategic perspective. Future activities, especially in the area of strategic management, must take into account the lessons learned from the research.

Further research shows that there are significant relationships between the selected variables, confirmed by correlation coefficients. For example, there is a strong statistical positive correlation ($\Gamma = 0.639$; $p < 0.0001$) between the realization of the purpose of a visit to a public administration office and the quality of service (Nowicka-Skowron, Mazur, 2019).

From the point of view of the subject of analysis, the research conducted by J. Łuczak and R. Wolniak can be considered interesting (Łuczak, Wolniak, 2013). The authors applied the CAF (Common Assessment Framework) method in the evaluation of public administration. The method has gained a high level of utility. The implementation of strategic management, which is focused on the process of marketization of public administration activities, has been considered an important research area. The implementation of the tasks and objectives of

strategic management poses challenges to the management staff, especially the necessity of continuous improvement and taking into account social criteria to increase the quality of client service in public administration units. The pro-social orientation of public administration activities is also confirmed by the results of research on a group of people with disabilities who use e-administration in Gliwice. Positive evaluations of clients group focused on answers with better and more efficient service (no queues, easier access to services that people with disabilities can use) (Wolniak, 2015).

The above research results allow the authors to conclude that pro-social orientation and an increase of service through e-Government is a significant element of strategic management in public administration offices. The results of the research are in line with the trend of Internet service, which is practically the only form available in crisis situations. Research in the area of strategic management in public administration organizations indicates that there is a continuous process of changes in the government office – client relationship. The changes primarily concerned an increase in the level of service provided to clients handling issues with public administration through the use of IT systems in official contact. However, the diametrical nature of the changes occurred during the crisis and consisted primarily in the use of IT systems as almost the only form of communication between clients and public administration offices in a specific period of time (March 2020 – April 2020). The experience of the crisis period shows the directions of improvement of strategic management in organizations.

6. Summary and research findings

The analyses carried out in the area of strategic management in organizations during the pandemic provide a basis for the conclusion that the current processes can be compared to the conditions of 100 years ago during the occurrence of the widespread so-called Spanish flu. Such a remote period of disease, in a world diametrically different from the present day in all areas of social, political and economic life, could not be used as a benchmark for strategic management. However, it has become necessary to rapidly seek decision-making instruments to protect society, economic organizations and institutions. Society has been subjected to a test of responsibility on a macro scale, as well as in relation to each individual member of the community.

This responsibility results from social challenges, especially health care, which determine the strategic directions of measures. Their essence in further measures comes down to restoring business activity in organizations, maintaining employment and systematizing the hierarchy of current and strategic objectives. The achievement of these objectives is possible primarily by public administration bodies with competent human resources, which have enabled the popularization of carrying out social services with the use of improved IT systems.

The indication of the management methods and techniques used confirmed their importance in overcoming the dramatic experiences of the pandemic. Strategic management, only signaled in this paper, will require the full mobilization of resources in the perspective of pandemic times challenges. In this sense, the thesis that in times of pandemic, particular challenges for strategic management arise.

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