

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN POLISH ENTERPRISES

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Abstract: The main purpose of the paper is to identify the role of relationships in successful functioning of contemporary enterprises, and to describe the expressions of relationship management, on the example of a group of Polish enterprises.

The method of critical analysis of the literature is applied in the work, and the survey method is used for the needs of own research (conducted on a sample of 156 Polish enterprises).

The work presents the issue of relationships between organizations and the way they are managed. It is shown that even though entrepreneurs do not declare that relationships are managed in their companies, still many actions proving that relationships are the object of managers' interest are observed.

The results of the study show that relationships are perceived as important in companies; however, at the same time, a low level of awareness in this area is observed. Although companies do not declare managing relationships, they implement a lot of activities in this sphere. This confirms the possibility of practical use of the knowledge gained in the area, which is presented in this study.

Keywords: relationships, relationship management, the role of relationships, benefits of relationships.

1. Introduction

The development and growth of an enterprise in conditions of complex, changeable, unfriendly and highly competitive environment forces the company managers to focus on the issues of creation of conditions and mechanisms supporting this development.

The development and growth of a company in the conditions of a complex, changeable and unfriendly, highly competitive environment requires focusing the attention of the company's management on the issues of shaping the conditions and mechanisms of this development. The company management, specifically senior managers should focus most of their intellectual and emotional energy on identifying, and finding solutions to most important problems associated with development and growth of an organization through application of new management methods (Pierścionek, 2007, s. 11).

This is because contemporary managers have to face the problem of what should be done to cope better with individual needs of customers and other co-workers faster and cheaper than competitors in changeable and frequently unpredictable circumstances. Solutions that apply the whole dynamics, the entire knowledge and human potential existing not only in a specific enterprise but also outside, is found in the main trend of search for the relevant answer. This forces the necessity to establish several types of relationships.

On the basis of the deliberations it can be stated that establishment and development of good relationships allows, in strategic perspective, to achieve synergic effects and accelerate the time of reaction to changes occurring in the environment, among entities applying these relations. The issue of relationships has been discussed in the literature form many years (Krupski, 2009).

However, nowadays because of the growing speed of changes and unpredictability of the conditions of functioning, progressing competitiveness and resulting interdependence of entities involved in exchange, brought by the necessity to complete internal competences, relationships gain a special significance. In these circumstances they become the basis for strategic and operational activities of the enterprise (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2014, p. 20).

Therefore, it can be assumed that establishment of successful relationships is a necessary condition for market success, provided that the relations are efficiently managed.

In the light of these observations, the purpose of the paper is to identify the role of relationships in successful functioning of the contemporary organizations, and to verify the issues in the empirical way. This will allow to state whether relationships are managed in Polish enterprises.

2. Interorganisational relations and their role in enterprise functioning

T. Peters defines a great paradox of contemporary management consisting in the fact that growing competition demands growing cooperation (Adamik, 2008, p. 72). This paradox is an explanation for the increasing role of relationships and interest in all the forms of interorganisational cooperation that are the elements of fundamental strategies of growth and development of contemporary enterprises (Pierścionek, 2006, p. 383).

Many organizations started to notice the opportunity for their faster development in the concept of cooperation associated with formation of diverse types of market relationships. They allow to create and modify their competitive advantage quickly and successfully (Kaczmarek, 2000, p. 65).

M. Romanowska (Romanowska, 2002, p. 304) states that a cooperative enterprise, searching for cooperation and not competition, concluding numerous agreements with suppliers and buyers as well as forming alliances with competitors to develop a complete

offer without its own resources is an ideal. Every company establishes and maintains relationships with other market players because contacts and market exchange are necessary conditions for market functioning. Nevertheless, apart from flow of money and goods, the relationships occurring between organisations may lead to creation of new knowledge and skills (Ciszewska-Mlinarić, et al., 2011, p. 23).

Interactions, bonds and relations are the basis for cooperation.

Interactions represent mutual influence of people, objects or phenomena. In sociology, interactions mean interactions between social entities with the use of a language and other cultural codes. The scope of these interactions is determined by many factors resulting from a specific situation. Interactions are an element of activity in every aspect of human life, including the sphere of management (Sztompka, 2002, p. 75). On the basis of the theory of social interactions, conclusions about superiority of relations over interactions can be formulated. They consequently bring the need to build relationships.

Bonds are kinds of interactions between enterprises in which there is information, material or energy exchange; furthermore, both parties to the exchange show involvement and this attitude is reciprocal. This means that interorganizational bonds are characterized by three features:

1. Exchange – refers to the subject of the bond, including financial, energy and information flows which go in both directions.
2. Involvement – consists in strengthening and expansion of existing exchange relationships. Multidimensional involvement allows to differentiate between common transactions and cooperation within interorganizational bonds.
3. Reciprocity – takes into consideration the importance of some symmetry of involvement and exchange, and represents common goals (Czakoń, 2007, p. 45).

In the theory of organization all the bonds are approached as relationships, but not all relationships are perceived as bonds. This results from the definition of bonds that are understood as correlation (a type of relations). In practice, it means that relationships are a broader category than bonds (Rupik, 2009, p. 69).

Relationships are reciprocal interactions of service providers and customers, as well as simultaneous experience of these interactions. Formation of relationships between entities has its origins in relational approach that includes all relationships established between entities in the sphere of content, quality and structure (Czakoń, 2005, p. 10). The relational approach perceives cooperation as the way to avoid competition. It assumes that competition has a secondary character, and privileged relations are established between an enterprise and its partners.

Relationships constitute the most important foundation for contemporary economy from the point of view of organizational structures (Westerlund, et al., 2008). While building relationships and starting cooperation, the companies aim at achievement of goals they could

not achieve individually. Depending on possessed relational competencies and defined goals, the companies enter various types of relationships, and function in conditions of various risk.

Therefore, the ability to create relationships between an organization and environment is extremely valuable as:

- it determines the ability to identify the needs and expectations of stakeholders and defines the context of company functioning in market, as well as financial, social, cultural, technical, technological, political, legal or ecological dimension. This should support identification of the key success determinants resulting from the establishment of relationships,
- it determines identification of the goals of an organization and affects their implementation (linking the process of formulation of goals with relationship management and with the parties that are interested in their implementation supports limiting the possibility of emergence of conflicting objectives),
- it affects the process of an organization management (management of relationships with stakeholders) and determines the decision-making process, while constituting a risk factor (uncertainty); however, it provides a chance to benefit from occurring opportunities and avoid dangers, which may significantly influence durability of an organisation success. (Jedynak, 2015, p. 324).

Gathering adequate relationship resources provides the enterprises with desirable flexibility in searching for and establishment of cooperation with partners offering financial and non-financial resources. Unique relationship resources bring strengthening of advantage (Hillman, and Keim, 2001, Ruf, et al.2001, p. 143 i n.), and help the enterprise to maintain this advantage (Choi, and Wang, 2009, p. 895).

As it is emphasised by Gulati (Gulati, Nohria, and Zaheer, 2000, p. 207) – “enterprise relationships allow to obtain the access to key resources (...) that have the potential in the sphere of maintenance or strengthening of competitive advantage”.

Expanded relationships of an organization enable acquisition of current and valuable knowledge, and the more interesting knowledge the organisation possesses, the more likely it is that it will build new relationships.

3. Relationship management

Efficient relationships are one of the determinants of a competent and successful management of organizations on contemporary market, thus they should be managed in the way that reduces the costs and improves innovativeness, as well as competitiveness of the company. Therefore, we should answer the question of what relationship management actually is.

The ability to cooperate (relationship capability) is the basis for establishment and management of relationships. This capability initiates creation of a specific mechanism inside the organisation that concerns management of internal relationships (Kale, et al., 2002, p. 747). It also emphasises the pursuit of integrated management of a broader group of relationships with external partners, implemented while taking into consideration common interests of the parties in the relationships (Capaldo, 2007, p. 585).

Relationship management is an innovative approach or management model, the functioning of which is defined by the fact that the needs of the parties in the relationships are satisfied in possibly most successful way. Relationship management should be approached not only as a tool, but also as an element of a strategy and philosophy of operation of an organization, where continuous contact with participating entities and their satisfaction are the key values.

Multidimensional character of the relationships, the reasons why they are created as well as their actual effects, makes relationships management a complex process. On the other hand, building relationships in an appropriate way, allows for successful management of these relationships and of the whole organization.

Relationship management can be presented as a typical management process which includes four basic functions: planning, organizing, motivating and controlling (Danielak, 2012, p. 99).

Planning represents reflection over the role of relationships in cooperation, the analysis of the potential of an organization, and the possibility to adapt a concept of relationship management in the enterprise.

Organizing is associated with selection of entities and forms of cooperation, establishment of cooperation and designing information and decision-making systems. The ability to coordinate the processes, structures and strategies as well as to develop cooperation are essential here.

Motivating requires identification of factors which stimulate successful cooperation and development of incentive system that shall increase operational efficiency of employees' in the sphere of shaping relationships.

Controlling – it is a typical element of the system because relationships are not a property of one party, but are jointly controlled by both parties involved in the relationships.

Expected situation of relationships as well as applicable assessment factors should be taken into consideration, scenarios of possible events ought to be analysed, and then current situation of relationships needs to be controlled, deviations from adopted assumptions analysed and applied solutions improved.

In a different approach, relationship management is mostly limited to creation of appropriate portfolio of relationships adequate for tasks, and shaping the bonds linking the involved parties (Kwiecień, 2015, p. 125).

It results from the previous deliberations that the concept of relationship management can be based on classical functions of management, but it can also be a result based on many other well-known concepts of management. Bearing in mind how important relationships are for successful functioning of an organization, the determinants that shall support the process of their management must be searched for. We can indicate the actions which prove that organization forms relationships and manages them while not leaving them neglected.

For the needs of conducted research, operationalisation of the notion of relationship management was performed in the paper to identify the symptoms of relationship management in Polish enterprises (presented in point 4 – Research methodology).

Initial analyses allow for stating that few Polish enterprises declare that they manage relationships; however, they show a lot of features that prove that they value relationships, and they perceive building and maintaining them as vital (conclusion from interviews conducted by the Author with representatives of Polish enterprises before starting the major research).

The author of the paper attempts to verify the assumption in the research.

The research aims at showing that in analysed enterprises there are elements that form operations which could be perceived as empirical reflections of relationship management, and that relationships are approached as significant for functioning of contemporary enterprises.

4. Relationship management - empirical research

4.1. Research methodology

The considerations presented before encouraged the author to design research aiming at identification of the manifestations of relationship management (while taking their operationalisation into account) in Polish companies. Identification of the symptoms of relationship management is a part of a broader research, the objective of which is to determine the role of relationships in creation of company success.

The need of operationalisation results from the fact that the notions theoretically defined, such as for example relationship management are not directly verifiable (Blalock, 1975, p. 22). Therefore, to verify the theoretical assumptions it is necessary to apply the notions operationally defined¹.

¹ Operational definitions describe the notions with the use of fully observable terms. This is achieved through presenting observable or measurement operations with their appropriate results that are sufficient to state that a phenomenon defined in this way occurs, or that some quality has an operationally defined intensity (Nowak, 1985, p. 74).

To operationalise relationship management, the attention was focussed on empirical expressions of this notion. This means that the actions, the implementation and performance of which prove that relationships are managed in a given company were indicated.

On the basis of features of relationships and expressions of relationship management described in the literature, the following assumptions are made:

Relationships – bonds between organisations; they constitute the most important structure of contemporary economy from the perspective of organisational structures (Westerlund, Rajala, and Leminen, 2008, p. 342). It is assumed that every enterprise functioning on market has relationships. However, their number and quality are diversified.

To establish beneficial relations, it is necessary to have a specific relational capacity (Pagano, 2009, p. 903), i.e. the ability of a specific entity to cooperate with other players in the environment; this provides access to external knowledge and accelerate its transfer (Lorenzoni, and Lipparani, 1999, p. 317).

Independently of how an enterprise will communicate with its stakeholders, appropriate identification of relations should be the first step in relationship management.

1. It is assumed that parties participate in particular relationships because of a specific level of benefits, and success that cannot be achieved individually.
2. It is assumed that development of the strategy based on shaping relationships is a determinant enabling creation of an organisation success.

Due to adopted assumptions, on the grounds of the literature, it is stated that the notion of relationship management can be operationally represented by the following components that are operations possible to be observed in economic practice:

- identification of the nature of enterprise relationships,
- identification of stakeholders,
- diagnosis of relational capacity,
- identification of benefits from relationships,
- development of the strategy based on shaping relationships.

To study the expressions of relationship management in Polish enterprises a survey was applied. Questionnaires are one of the most popular methods of gathering information in market research.

The survey was performed by interviewers between October and December 2016.

The research was conducted all over Poland. It included 156 enterprises. It was a random-quota sampling, according to the following assumptions:

- exclusion of microfirms - because of the specific character of activity of such companies, where interpersonal relationships significantly affect relationships in general,
- operating on market for at least 5 years – a shorter period of functioning is not enough to speak about durable relationships.

The research was based on the questionnaire containing 19 basic questions concerning analysed issues and 5 questions about respondent's particulars. For the needs of this paper, only a part of obtained results that are considered important for illustrating the discussed issues are applied and presented. Presentation of research results in whole would be too broad and would go beyond the area analysed in this paper.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and semi-open questions. Most of them belong to the so-called conjunctive cafeteria questions, i.e. it was possible to select more than one answer.

4.2. Relationship management- results of the empirical research

The aim of the research was to show that relationships play a significant role in successful functioning of contemporary enterprises and to identify the expressions of relationship management in the studied group of Polish enterprises.

As explained before, initial interviews allowed to state that it is not declared in Polish enterprises that relationships are managed. Therefore, the research should show that in analysed enterprises, there are components constituting operations that can be perceived as empirical manifestations of relationship management and that relationships are perceived as significant for functioning of contemporary enterprises.

The research has been conducted in 156 companies, including 52 productive companies, 54 trading companies. and 50 service-providing companies. Most of the companies employed between 10 and 50 employees and they constituted 62.2 % of the researched group.

Entities functioning on market for longer than 20 years form the largest group (they constitute 44.2% of the studied group). Young enterprises (5 to 10 years) are the smallest group – 16%. Enterprises operating on market for 11 to 15 years and for 16 to 20 years constitute in total almost 40% of the studied group. The group of enterprises of an international scope was the largest group (61 entities – 39.1%), the second position was occupied by the entities of a national scope (47 – 30,1%), and global enterprises constituted only 3.8% of the studied sample. Almost all researched companies show profit in 5 recent years of their activity – 96.8%. Only 5 companies (3.2%) revealed loss in this period. Detailed information about the characteristics of the studied sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

The structure of the studied sample

Specification	Frequency	Rate of structure in %
predominant type of activity		
Production	52	33.3
Trade	54	34.6
Services	50	32.1
Total	156	100.0

the number of employees in the enterprise			
10-50 people		97	62.2
51-250 people		35	22.4
over 250 people		24	15.4
Total		156	100.0
period of operation on market			
5-10 years		25	16.0
11-15 years		32	20.5
16-20 years		30	19.2
over 20 years		69	44.2
total		156	100.0
geographical scope of activity			
local		12	7.7
regional		30	19.2
national		47	30.1
international		61	39.1
global		6	3.8
total		156	100.0
gained profit			
last year	yes	151	96.8
	no	5	3.2
last three years	yes	151	96.8
	no	5	3.2
last five years	yes	151	96.8
	no	5	3.2

Source: Own study.

The sample is not representative for the entire population. Thus, the research does not allow for generalisation and forming conclusions about the entire population, and obtained results only show the situation and relationships occurring in the studied sample.

Representatives of individual entities were asked what management model is implemented in their enterprise. According to the statement presented before (defined on the basis of initial interviews before the research), only in three cases (1.9%) relationship management is indicated, whereas 85 entities (which constitutes 54.5% of studied sample) declare that they do not have a defined management model. Almost 20% of the entities declare management by objectives, 9% management by value, 4.5% process management and 10% by other management model (mainly quality management).

In the light of these findings an attempt was made to show that even though entrepreneurs did not declare that relationships were managed in their companies, there is a lot of evidence that prove how important for functioning of entities on contemporary market are the relationships that can be perceived as expressions of relationship management.

The answer to the question of how success is identified in individual enterprises (Figure 1), and identification of determinants fundamental for success (Table 2) are the starting point for further analyses. Success is perceived here as an expression of operational efficiency.

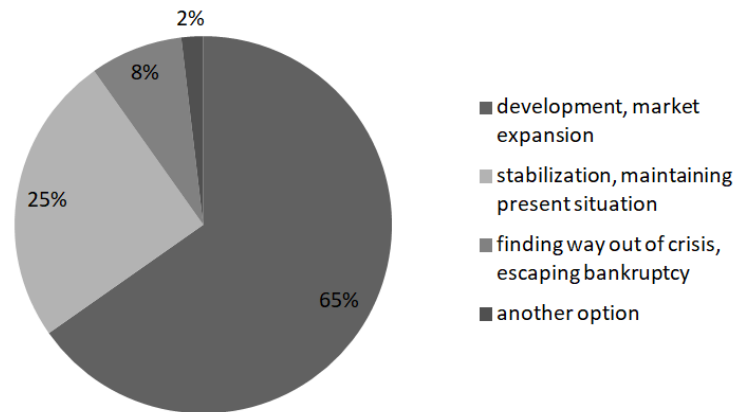


Figure 1. Definition of success. Source: Own study.

A clear majority of the respondents (65%) show that they associate success with development, expansion, or business stability (25%).

However, it is not easy to identify the most important determinants that contribute to success. The list of suggested determinants and their average evaluations (with the use of the scale from 1 – little important, to 5 – very important) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Success determinants and their average evaluation

Specification of success determinants	Average evaluation	Mode	Standard deviation
material resources owned by a company (machines, devices, raw materials etc.)	4.10	5	1.22
non-material resources owned by a company (knowledge, technology, reputation, trust etc.)	4.44	5	0.93
gifted employees	4.22	5	0.98
localization	3.42	4	1.15
implemented strategy	3.89	4	0.96
market position	4.06	4	0.86
flexibility (adaptability to changes)	3.95	4	0.92
innovativeness	3.94	4	1.02
all relationships established on market	4.10	4	0.91
some relationships (perceived as especially profitable)	4.22	5	0.87
loyal clients	4.48	5	0.72

Source: Own study

It results from the presented comparison that practically almost all proposed determinants are approached as important or highly important (4th or 5th mode level) and in 7 out of 11 examples their average evaluation is over 4. Loyal customers are the determinant that obtained the highest indications – 4.48; non-material resources – 4.44; skilled employees and some relationships – 4.2, and all relationships and material resources – 4.1. Therefore, it is clear that relationships are perceived as an important determinant for enterprise success. The determinant with the highest average, loyal customers, is also an expression of durable relationships.

Then the respondents were asked how they approach the importance of relationships established by their companies (Table 3), and what are the reasons for their formation.

Majority of respondents indicated relationships in which their organizations participate as significant or highly significant. This is clearly seen in the case of long-term relationships; here, 80% indications prove that these relationships are extremely important for the enterprise.

Table 3.
Importance of relationship

Specification	Frequency	% of indications
Relationships - one transaction only		
not significant	44	28.2
of some significance	60	38.5
highly significant	52	33.3
total	156	100.0
Short-term relationships - several different transactions, without any influence for the company strategy		
not significant	23	14.7
of some significance	67	42.9
highly significant	66	42.3
total	156	100.0
Long-term relationships- related to the company strategy		
not significant	3	1.9
of some significance	28	17.9
highly significant	125	80.1
total	156	100.0

Source: Own study.

Figure 2 presents the reasons why relationships are built in individual organizations, i.e. possible benefits from their establishment.

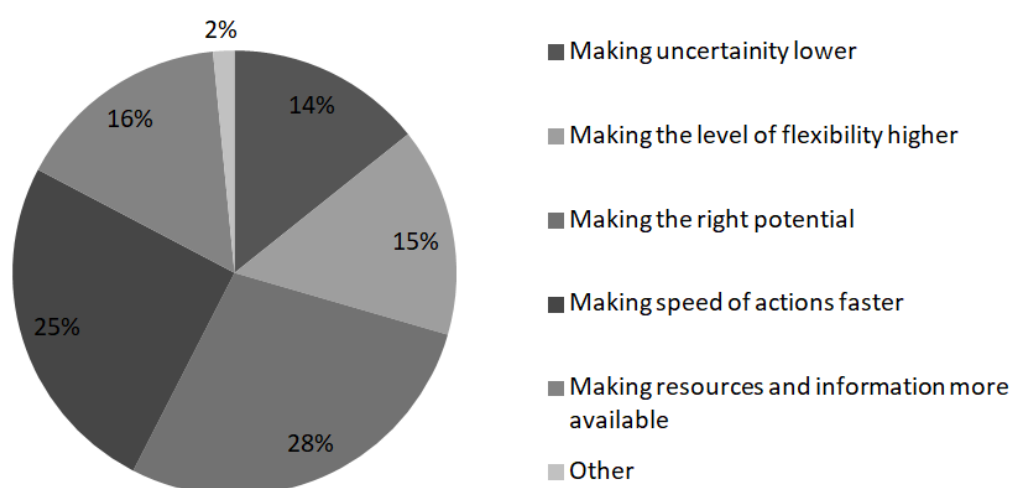


Figure 2. Reasons why relationships are built. Source: Own study.

The need to provide appropriate potential for operation, and the need to accelerate the speed of acting, i.e. the factors essential for efficient actions that will satisfy growing and changing needs of participants in the relationships are the main reasons why relationships are built.

To emphasize the actions undertaken for relationship management, the respondents were asked if benefits resulting from relationships established with stakeholders are identified and how they are recorded. The results are shown in Figure 3.

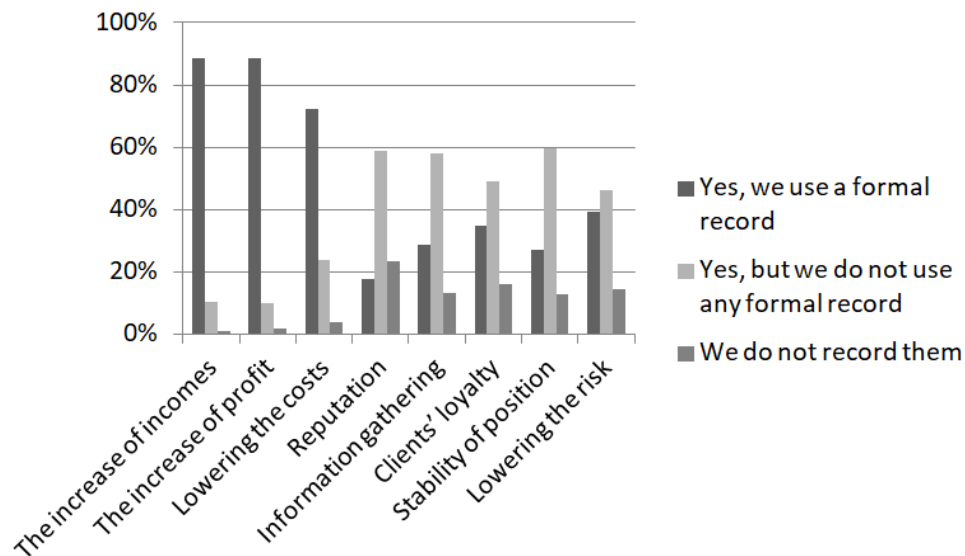


Figure 3. Observing and recording benefits from relationships. Source: Own study.

It results from the diagram that enterprises are aware of multiple benefits coming from relationships, and notice both material as well as non-material benefits. Material benefits (mainly financial: growth of income, profit or cost reduction) are identified and recorded formally, whereas formal record is not applied in the case of non-material benefits (such as reputation, loyalty or stability of operation).

To confirm the actions in the sphere of relationship management, the respondents were asked to evaluate various actions undertaken in their enterprises that are important in the context of relationships. The expressions of management constitute the elements distinguished in the process of operationalisation. The results of the evaluation are presented in Figure 4.

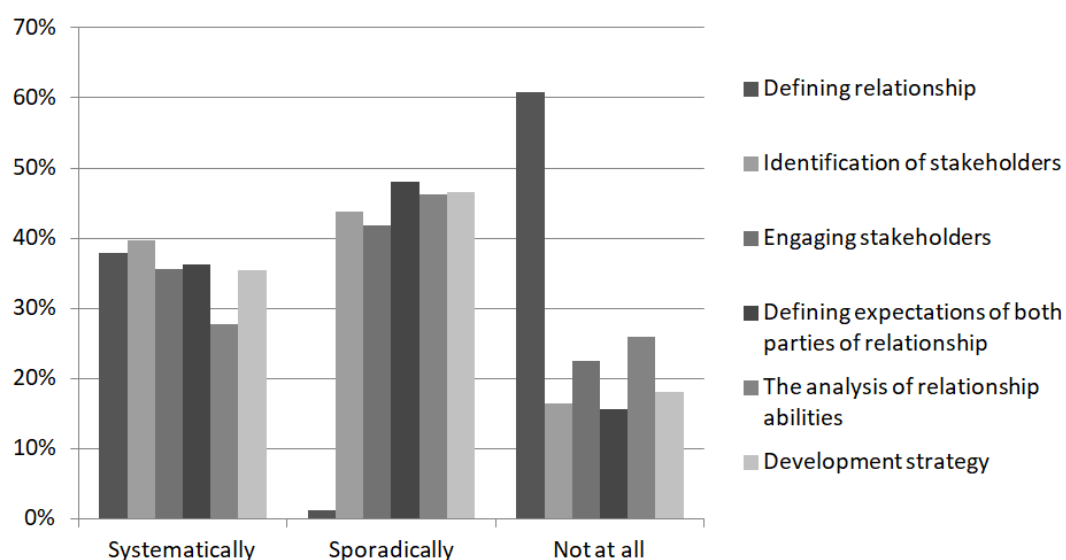


Figure 4. Crucial actions concerning relationships. Source: Own study.

What seems surprising in the diagram is the result of 60% which suggests that relationships and their role in the enterprise are not defined. This confirms the previous assumption that there are no declarations in Polish enterprises that relationships are managed. However, other indications should also be mentioned. The respondents show that they identify stakeholders regularly – 38.5%, and occasionally – 46.8%; they involve stakeholders in 36.5% and 43.6% respectively; they define expectations of both parties in the relationships – 37.2% and 47.4% respectively.

Therefore, we can conclude that they undertake many actions which are important for defining relationships, even though they do not explicitly name what they do. Therefore, expressions of relationship management are clear in studied enterprises because in majority of studied entities actions that are defined in this paper as the components that can be observed in economic practice, and operationally represent relationship management are implemented.

To confirm the role of relationships in an enterprise operation, the respondents were asked if the strategy of their company development includes the aspects of shaping the relationships. The comparison of obtained responses is presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
Importance of relationship

Does the strategy of your company development include the aspects of relationships formation?		
specification	frequency	% indications
yes, relationships are its fundamental part	19	12.2
yes, relationships are one of its elements	115	73.7
no, the strategy does not include building relationships	22	14.1
total	156	100.0

Source: Own study.

The table shows that nearly 86% of the respondents gave a positive answer which means that relationships are one of the elements of the strategy in their company (73.7%), or they are its fundamental part (12.2%). Only 14.1% responses are negative which means that the respondents state that relationships are not included in the strategy of their enterprises.

5. Conclusion

Summing up the short presentation of the results of research concerning the role of relationships in functioning of contemporary companies and the manifestations of relationships management in these enterprises, it can be stated that:

- according to adopted assumption, Polish enterprises do not declare that they manage relationships; only 3% of positive indications,
- success is identified with the development or maintenance of the present situation and relationships are perceived as the key factor which helps to achieve this success; this confirms the role of relationships in successful operation of the enterprise,
- majority of the respondents indicated high or very high level of importance of relationships in an enterprise operation, which also confirms that the role of relationships in successful functioning of enterprises is understood and recognised,
- entrepreneurs clearly notice possible profits resulting from establishment of relationships, while explicitly indicating the reasons for their establishment, i.e. the willingness to provide appropriate potential and increase the speed of actions,
- the respondents also state that both material and non-material benefits resulting from relationships are defined in their enterprises. In the case of some of them (mainly material – financial), formal record is applied. This confirms that the actions concerning relationships are formalized,
- the respondents also show that several actions, perceived as fundamental in the context of relationships, that are the premises for relationship management such as identification of stakeholders, involvement of stakeholders or analysis of expectations of both parties to the relationships are implemented in their companies,
- relationships are one of the elements of strategy in majority of the studied enterprises.

All these conclusions allow for stating that it is shown in the studied sample of enterprises, that relationships perform a significant role in successful functioning of contemporary enterprises, and actions typical of relationship management that can be approached as the expressions of relationship management are observed in this group of enterprises. According to the previous description, the elements of planning (noticing the role of relationships), organizing (identification of stakeholders and engaging them), motivating

(identification of gains) and controlling (verification of the expectations from both parties of relationships) can be seen in these actions.

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