

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL MANAGERIAL PRACTICES – MANAGING AMBIDEXTERITY IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

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**Abstract:** The main aim of the paper is to understand how managers of creative industries (CI) decide on the use of ambidextrous solutions. Managerial actions of business managers of CI enable to connect the volatility and variability of the environment with the high level of creativeness that this requires. As such, it is interesting to study how these managerial actions are decided is of utmost importance, especially in a volatile and subjective environmental context as it seems to be the one of CI (Banks et al., 2000). We aim at investigating the managerial practices that enable to find the balance between the simultaneous pressure on innovativeness and the effectiveness of the actions taken. We wanted to know the way managers deal with the paradoxes that can result. We interviewed managers of 10 companies located in a second tier group of countries, where for governments, CI are apparently strategic, but where the value they add and the jobs they can create can still be improved.

Results show that there are two main paradoxes in terms of managerial actions – the priority in relations (external or internal) and the approach to strategy (flexibility or planned actions). Results also show that in what concerns strategy formality and external priority in relations there are consistencies in the degree of strategy formalization. However, in what concerns the practices used in shaping the internal relations, there is no consistency identified in our sample. Our overall conclusions are that companies are more and more moving away from the traditional option of informal approach, focused inward to a more hybrid approach in which formal focus outward is also considered. This confirms the thesis that ambidexterity is becoming a characteristic of the companies in the CI sector.

**Key words:** ambidexterity, paradox theory, strategy, relations, CI

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### Introduction

The definitions of CI differ significantly in content, which makes comparability of all statistics about entities operating in this sector difficult and provides the basis for considerations that call into question the validity of considering certain types of activities (Mäe, 2015). However, in most research, creative industries (CI) is a business field characterised by the existence of creativity, permanent adjustment and volatility that sets the ground for investigating the managerial practices. Moreover, the sector seems to be of strategic importance for the growth of

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economy in different countries. In the paper presented, the perspective of Poland and Portugal will be explored. According to the European Commission, the level of revenues in the creative industry in Poland and Portugal is comparable (Poland – 6235 mln EUR, Portugal – 6358 mln EUR) (European Commission, 2006). However, CI account for 1.4% of GDP and employment in Portugal, whereas in Poland we can see that the contribution is higher as for the employment - 1,75% - but smaller as for the GDP - 1,25%. (Nota Estatística, 2008).

The creative job creation in Poland is comparable to the Netherlands (873 000 workers) even though it represents a rather small percentage of employment. Nevertheless it presents a growing trend, even at a smaller pace than, for instance, in the Netherlands or the UK. For Poland, experts predict a growing tendency and stronger impact of this business sector on the labour market (Szara and Wojtowicz, 2016). For that reason, there is a growing tendency to emphasize this industry. In fact, by the development of this sector in the context of the entire economy (Potencjał Małopolskich Przemysłów Kreatywnych, 2012) it is regarded as a relevant and strategic sector for Poland. It is perceived as an important factor influencing the regional development as well as the sustainable economic growth (Kasprzak, 2015) and spillover effects. That significance is manifested by the introduction of programs supporting the managerial trainings and innovative sources of financing (Ratalewska, 2015).

If we want to compare Poland with another European country in which the sector has a similar relevance, we can compare it with Portugal. As for Portugal, this sector has assumed a profitable role, with potential for job creation and as a privileged arena for the implementation of competencies and skills associated with creativity. It has been assumed that CI empower professionals that detain distinguishing abilities (Mateus, 2010). The activities of this sector were responsible for a growth on exports of almost 40% from 2007 and 2015, which reinforced the importance of this sector for the economy, namely in the crisis period. In 2015 the value created in this industry contributed for 4% of Portuguese GDP (Mateus, 2016). Having stated the relative importance of this sector in the European countries' economies and considering that governments are more and more focusing their attention on the strategic role displayed by the sector, we can also note that within the creative industry, regardless of the countries analysed, there are significantly more small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) than large enterprises.

### **Literature Review**

The main aim of the paper is to investigate the managerial actions that enable to connect the volatility and variability of the environment described with the high level of creativeness that is required. Therefore it is necessary to investigate the managerial practices that enables to find the balance between the simultaneous pressure on innovativeness and effectiveness of the actions taken and in that way manage the paradoxes that could be identified. As stated by Smith and Lewis

(2011), a paradox is defined as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”. Although the paradox approach is used mainly to describe the simultaneous pressure on exploitation and exploration (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004), the paradox theory (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989) could be used as a theoretical perspective describing the approach to strategy (de Witt and Mayer, 2005). The argument for choosing that approach comes from the statement that “(at) the heart of every set of strategic issues, a fundamental tension between apparent opposites can be identified” (de Witt and Mayer, 2005), which means that the managerial actions and decisions are a result of converse priorities. In the creative industry those tensions are extremely important as the organizations operating in that industry aim at converting the intellectual and social capital into economic capital measured by the final economic outcome (Chen et al., 2013). That variety of the capital involved makes the environment more complex and volatile (Townley et al., 2009), while the diverse and fast changing knowledge flows influence its variability (Jeffcutt and Pratt, 2002).

The paradox lenses are the perspective applied to understand the concept of ambidexterity (Papachroni et al., 2015) that is defined as “the capability of a complex and adaptive system to achieve and manage conflictive activities” (Nosella et al., 2012). That capability seems to be important especially in the CI, where the companies are forced to cope with conflicting priorities. On the one hand, the growth of that sector contributes to building knowledge capacity of the economy and on the other hand it creates economic growth for the country, as well as other industries. The specification of the CI is the result of the development of an innovative, knowledge-based economy, evolving on the basis of intangible resources with a measurable financial value (dos Santos-Duisenberg, 2015). On the other hand, such a change of competitive advantage, based on intangible resources has become a source of building creative potential and an impulse to support its development (Wuwei, 2011). It is however necessary to ensure coherence between the qualitative, original effect of creative work and its quantitative, measurable, economic aspects, and so it is necessary to integrate the pressure to develop creativity with the pressure for economic performance (Jones et al., 2004). Therefore, companies operating in the creative sector are subject to managerial pressure to ensure consistency between creativity and economic efficiency (Jones et al., 2012), which is considered one of the manifestations of the aforementioned duality (Wu and Wu, 2016).

#### Internal vs. external relations

The first paradox identified - priority in relations - concerns the type of relations that are crucial for operating in the creative industry. On the one hand, the managers are forced to find solutions to reduce the tension that could be observed inside the company where the employees are forced to generate new ideas and to be committed to delivering standardised processes (Knight and Harvey, 2015). On the other hand, managers must find the balance between competition and cooperation which means that focusing on the external relations also seems to be

important. Therefore, external relations become a strategic priority as important as financial objectives and its implementation requires the integration of many actions (Fillis, 2002). According to Potts and Cunningham (2008), this is the basis for redefining the creative sector in terms of social network markets.

Flexibility vs. planned actions

The second paradox concerns the approach to strategy – whether the development concept requires more flexibility or rather planning processes and methods used. It is worth mentioning that many authors pay attention to the influence of uncertainty on the ability to run a creative industry business, pointing to its specificity (Hirsch, 2000) and its unique character (Lampel et al., 2000). Because of that, the flexibility, improvisation and an opportunity-seeking approach become more important (Winkel et al., 2013). On the one hand, because the knowledge is the key resource, it is necessary to undertake non-standard activities that go beyond established paradigms and to constantly search for new ideas (Ismail, 2016), which may mean *ad hoc* activities (de Klerk, 2015). On the other hand, these activities are embedded in organisations whose activity is based on repetitive processes and schemes with certain limitations, including those of resource nature (Hotho and Champion, 2011). That is strongly connected with the population of industries, where micro and small enterprises predominate (Hartley et al., 2013). It could be observed that prioritising one process (flexibility and choosing the perspective of emerging strategy) over the other (planned actions and standard planning process) creates clashing tensions for managers.

The approaches described above are plotted in a outline that summarizes the various alternative ways of consider managerial practices in CI (see Figure 1).

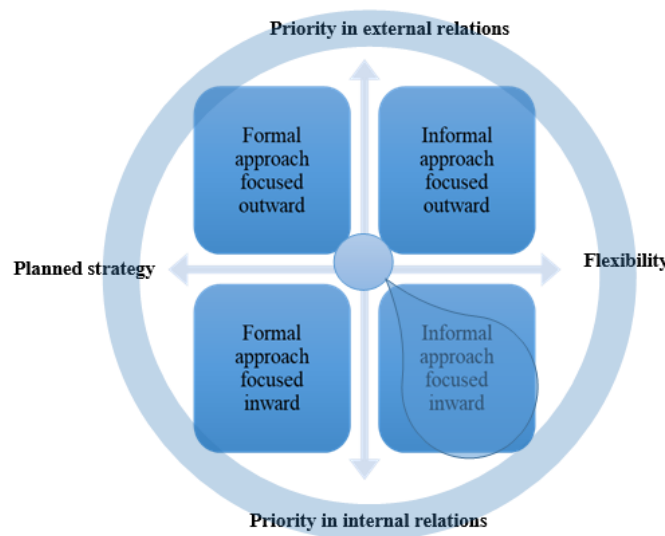


Figure 1. Theoretical approaches explaining the paradoxes in creative industry

Based on the literature reviewed, it could be observed that the intellectual capital which is the basis of creative potential possessed, comes from the employees and therefore, supporting the internal relations seems to be the priority. Secondly, because of the high volatility and variability of environment, creative companies are perceiving flexibility as their core capability and therefore, rather informal managerial practices are executed. Furthermore, as time constraints seem to be impacting the actions of managers operating in this area that have to cope with volatility in their environment on an everyday basis, planning activities are normally hindered and considered only when time is not affected to dealing with everyday situations.

### **Methodology**

To describe and explore the research problem, a real-life context, a descriptive approach is used. The appropriateness of this research method for the present work is supported by Yin (2003). As confirmed by Parry et al., (2014), case study using semi-structured interviewing and document analysis provide the details about the context and specific factors that are considered in decision – making process. As the research aims to investigate the managerial practice, the study of particular companies is appropriate. The empirical basis for this investigation is provided by case studies of 5 Portuguese and 5 Polish firms that operate in the creative industry. The companies were located in Porto and in Wrocław. According to Yin (2003), a case study is an empirical enquiry used to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between it and the context are not clearly evident and multiple sources of evidence can be used. We followed this approach by selecting cases that fulfilled the following conditions: (1) the firm should be registered in Portugal or Poland and owned by Portuguese- or Polish-based interests; (2) the firms should belong to different sectors the creative industry, and be of different sizes.

Structured interviews were conducted with the executives of each firm. These interviews allow interviewers to “*be free to explore interesting or unexpected findings as they arise*” (Adams et al., 2005), which is important in exploratory studies such as this one. In all the cases, the interviewee was one of the founders and currently a chairman of the firm. All interviews on average lasted an hour. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for content analysis. The two initial categories considered were formal and informal managerial practices. The interview transcription ensured the consistency of analysis. Reliability was ensured concerning the constructs extracted.

### **Data Analysis**

#### Market research and information gathering

None of the interviewees has a formal research method or any kind of structured plan to gather information, research the market or the competition. All of the

answers showed that the research process is done informally, when the need arises or they simply gather information while working. There were three types of information sources consistently pointed out: online/internet, trade fairs or specialty seminars/shows and clients. All of the interviewees considered their clients inputs as some sort of information research or market understanding and for some this is the only kind of information that is gathered, this can be seen by the informant's PT4 statement "*It is not usual to gather exhaustively that kind of information, only at specific times and informally, whether by talking with people from this area or searching online for the newest trends*". The same way is perceived tracking of competitors' activity, which is done informally, casually searching online, or when talking with a client or even when a cooperation situation arises and two competitors work together. There is no formal process in any of the companies. In some cases there is cooperation instead of competition, which means that the companies informally know about the competitor's actions.

#### Planning Process

The majority of the interviewees revealed that there is no plan or process. The work is ruled by the customers' needs and, therefore, the work is client oriented. Every project is generally different and the scope of the job dictates the plan to follow at that moment. In a minority of the cases analysed, every week there were scheduled meetings but, even in those cases, the work was customer oriented. Some companies perceived the process of budgeting as a way of formal planning, but they didn't strictly stick to that document, as can be verified in the following statement (respondent PL4) – "*We plan the overall budget but we don't stick to that plan very strictly.*" For that reason, several strategic priorities were mentioned but one that stood out was the attractiveness of the job. Because of the importance of the work portfolio in creative companies when presenting themselves to new customers, some of them mentioned this attribute. It may be observed that strategy execution is generally measured through three simple indicators: revenue, project budget and number of clients. Each of the interviewed companies uses one or several of these three indicators. Even when there are teams within the organizations, the interviewed companies' mentioned there were only organizational goals that were pursued, and the projects were made with the sole focus of delivering an exceptional job for the client and working for the companies' success. There are no individual goals.

#### Capturing feedback and motivate or foster creativity

All the business owners revealed there is some sort of capturing of feedback, whether when in meeting or informally. Some was captured in formal meeting, scheduled at the end of a project or weekly, and some was captured in meeting developed when necessary. All the interviewees referred that feedback was often captured as a way of improving or even assessing morale or other type of information. However, in regards to the motivation aspect, the answers provided showed a clear distinction between Portuguese and Polish companies. The Portuguese companies mentioned a variety of informal motivation policies such as

providing a flexible working time, informal working environment, having no work process and working as a team. The Polish companies mentioned bonuses and financial rewards after every project as a procedure used to motivate and foster creativity. The most mentioned process was the creative process itself. Although the companies are based in accounting and financial procedures that are formal and are inevitable, they consider the creative process the key business process that originates meaningful work. For that reason they pay attention to the aspect of fostering the creativity.

#### Flexibility

The majority of the interviewees mentioned the great flexibility they have in their approach to the market, mainly tackling opportunities as they arise. Some referred focusing in goals, deadlines and even some strategic orientation but, nevertheless, the existing plans are fluid and easily changeable when the market or the clients dictate as we can see in following statement (PL4) *“Our company was a start-up with people who had no economic education. Our industry is very dynamic and rapidly changing. We have to change our approach very quickly and that's why we are trying to have more formalized decisions. But as our employees are mainly millennials, they are allergic to plans. Our plans evolve, we are setting the budgets and expenditures but we are not thinking about the ways of achieving them. There is sometimes the information that forces us to change our initial plan.”*

#### External relations

The external relations with partners are seen as crucial, very important and very valuable by most of the interviewed companies. They mention that the collaborative work is regular because a lot of projects demand the involvement of several complementary companies with complementary skillsets. Another factor pointed out is that external relationships are important as a way of lead generation, which was confirmed in the following statement *“Relations are the basis of our marketing activities and having close relationships is our main goal”*. It could be pointed out that partnerships in the CI are recurring and a large part of the jobs are concluded through partnerships between different companies, sometimes competitors with different skillsets. When preparing and defining objectives, budget and type of service for a client, the companies evaluate possible partnerships within their network or the client's network as we can see in the following statement (respondent PL2) *“Many projects are joined within the network and being able to get the client is connected with other partners”*. Therefore, having close relationships with partner companies can facilitate the planning process and definition of objectives.

#### Internal relations and supporting the team creativity

The majority of the companies practice the involvement of the team in the creative development. When the companies are smaller (<10 employees), all the members are involved in the process that is confirmed by respondent PT1: *“Every time we have people working with us, everyone participates in the process”*. However, when the companies are larger, there is a chosen group of 5-10 people participate in

the creative process, as we can see by this informant's statement (PL1) – *“The concept of development is discussed every month between the owner of the company and important employees (5-6)”*.

There were basically two factors mentioned: atmosphere and informal activities. Atmosphere is regarded as a way to support creativity, and so, maintaining close internal relationships is used to accomplish it. Activities such as team building and informal team meetings or team meals are also ways to foster creativity and innovation. It is manifested by the usage of informal tools, as can be verified in the following statement (respondent PL4) *“We also have the whiteboard where employees can show their mood (by choosing the type of sticker) but also show the timeline of the project and resources that are necessary”*.

## Discussion

From the data analysed we were able to draw some findings that allow us to conclude that the external relations are crucial to maintain the competitive advantage in the creative industry and that although there is a high level of flexibility, the companies are more and more also relying on some formal tools (budgets or project-working) to plan their activities.

### 1) Degree of formality in strategy formulating and executing

Among the interviewed companies, there is a low degree of formality. However, we were able to observe that among managers of CI companies, the work is generally conducted by project and the process is normally customer-oriented. Although when planning is considered, the approach is usually informal, there are formal tools used. Those tools (mainly budgets and projects) aim at focusing on each client's needs, and deciding with a short or mid-term perspective. When we refer to the strategy effectiveness measurement – it is usually conducted at least annually and is done considering at least one indicator. Although it is a very basic form of measurement, it is formal. Moreover, when discussing the strategy, the capturing of feedback is done consistently, in a formal setting (meetings) but with an informal approach (asking for opinions). All these findings support the idea proposed by Bērziņš (2012) which, considering its specifics, described the formal strategic management process in organizations from the creative industry. The research findings allow to conclude that using formal practices while perceiving flexibility as the core characteristic of competitive advantage, enables to resolve the paradox.

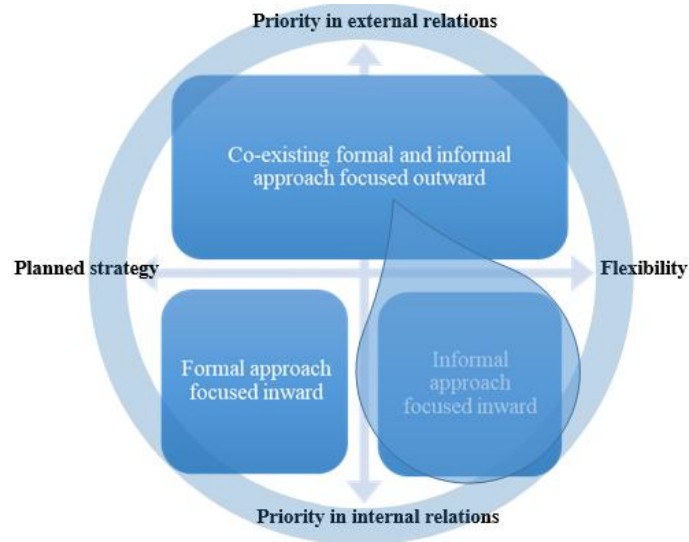
### 2) Priorities in relations (external and internal)

Our research allowed to conclude that the existing external relationships have influence in the decision-making process in the sense that the available network of partner companies can limit or expand the work possibilities in terms of existing combined skillsets. In the case of external relations with partner companies and other stakeholders as the press, this also is another aspect considered crucial for the business. On one hand, partner companies are important because of a network effect that leads to referrals and lead generation. On the other hand, having good



relations with partner companies can facilitate some projects because companies in the creative industry often work together in cooperation.

Our main findings showed that although the internal networks are important and supported by formal and informal practices, the main priority is given to external ones, which means focusing outward. That conclusion is consistent with the view presented by Dempster (2006). The perspective presented on Figure 2 seems to enable more coherent analysis of the issues discussed, with companies moving more and more from right down corner into a upper situation focusing outward.



**Figure 2. Approaches explaining the paradoxes in creative industry**

The basic assumption derived from the literature review on the conflicting priorities in creative industry, considered that the informal approach focused inward would be the most common approach among companies operating in the creative industry. However, after analysing the case studies presented, it could be concluded that companies operating in the creative industry in the two countries analysed, despite minor geographically justified differences among their attitudes and behaviours towards planning, use three (instead of four) approaches explaining the paradoxes defined. This substantiates an ambidextrous characteristic of firms in this business sector. Conversely to basic assumption, in the case of approach focused outward, it could be observed that the managerial practices are concentrated on blending the formal and informal approach to strategy, while giving the priority to creating and maintaining the external relations, which is the expression of ambidexterity. As presented by many research studies, there are companies that successfully manage the paradoxes by using the ambidextrous approach (Andriopoulos and Levis, 2009). Our research confirms that results and

shows that in the case of external relations, in the companies operating in creative industry sector managers are using ambidextrous solutions to find the balance between formal plans and unplanned responses to the changes observed.

### Conclusions

The main contribution of that research is the approach where we showed that ambidextrous managerial practice is important in CI due to existence of certain paradoxes, which were also identified. Our results confirm the argument presented by Heavey et al., (2015) who stated that the extensiveness of social networks inside and outside the company, increases the dual knowledge flow and are beneficial for dealing with ambidexterity paradoxes. Moreover, it could be mentioned, that there is a loop between the managerial practice and ambidexterity, with mutual relationship revealed over time. The main managerial finding that could be stated here is the overlap of roles which is the result of certain paradoxes identified. The manager should be both – creative and focused on effectiveness, therefore the individual ambidexterity with the co-existence of formal and informal approach focused outward is recommended.

The major limitation of this study is the small number of case studies, which should be increased in future studies to guarantee reliability (a rather difficult process considering the sensitive information needed). It would also be useful to observe, from a financial point of view, the performance results in companies presenting the approaches described to compare the results achieved. Other paradoxes could also be investigated (i.e. evolutionary or revolutionary strategic change approach), as well as more focused research perspective where only a particular type of activity would be analysed.

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**RÓWNOWAŻNOŚĆ POMIĘDZY FORMALNYMI I NIEFORMALNYMI  
PRAKTYKAMI ZARZĄDZANIA – WSZECHSTRONNE ZARZĄDZANIE  
W BRANŻACH KREATYWNYCH**

**Streszczenie:** Głównym celem artykułu jest zrozumienie, w jaki sposób menedżerowie branż kreatywnych (CI) decydują o zastosowaniu wszechstronnych rozwiązań. Działania menedżerskie menedżerów biznesowych CI umożliwiają połączenie ulotności i zmienności środowiska z wysokim poziomem kreatywności, który tego wymaga. W związku z tym interesujące jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób podejmowane są decyzje dotyczące zarządzania. Ma to ogromne znaczenie, zwłaszcza w niestabilnym i subiektywnym kontekście środowiskowym, co jest jednym z wyróżników CI (Banks i wsp. 2000). Naszym celem jest zbadanie praktyk menedżerskich, które pozwolą znaleźć równowagę między jednoczesną presją na innowacyjność a efektywnością podejmowanych działań. Chciano poznać sposób, w jaki menedżerowie radzą sobie z paradoksami, które mogą wyniknąć. Przeprowadzono wywiady z menadżerami 10 firm zlokalizowanych w drugiej grupie krajów, gdzie dla rządów branże CI są strategiczne, ale tam, gdzie wartość dodaną i miejsca pracy, które mogą stworzyć, można jeszcze poprawić. Wyniki pokazują, że istnieją dwa główne paradoksy pod względem działań zarządczych - priorytet w relacjach (zewnętrznych lub wewnętrznych) i podejście do strategii (elastyczność lub planowane działania). Wyniki pokazują również, że w zakresie formalności strategicznych i zewnętrznego priorytetu w relacjach występują konsekwencje w stopniu formalizacji strategii. Jednak w odniesieniu do praktyk stosowanych w kształtowaniu stosunków wewnętrznych, w naszej próbie nie ma

spójności. Nasze ogólne wnioski są takie, że firmy coraz bardziej odchodzą od tradycyjnej opcji nieformalnego podejścia, skupiając się na bardziej hybrydowym podejściu, w którym również bierze się pod uwagę formalne ukierunkowanie na zewnątrz. Potwierdza to tezę, że wszechstronność staje się cechą charakterystyczną firm w sektorze CI.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wszechstronny, teoria paradoksu, strategia, relacje, CI.

#### 形式和非正式管理实践之间的平衡 – 在创意产业中管理不确定性

**摘要:**本文的主要目的是了解创意产业管理者(CI)如何决定使用灵巧解决方案。CI业务经理的管理行为能够将环境的波动性和可变性与这种高要求的创造性联系起来。因此,研究如何决定这些管理行为是至关重要的,尤其是在动态和主观环境背景下,因为它似乎是CI(Banks等人,2000)。我们的目标是调查管理实践,以便在创新的同时压力和所采取行动的有效性之间找到平衡。我们想知道管理者处理可能产生的悖论的方式。我们采访了位于第二级国家集团的10家公司的经理,对于政府而言,CI显然具有战略意义,但他们增加的价值和他们可以创造的工作仍然可以得到改善。结果表明,在管理行为方面存在两个主要矛盾关系中的优先级(外部或内部)和战略方法(灵活性或计划行动)。结果还表明,在战略形式和关系中的外部优先权方面,战略形式化程度存在一致性。但是,在形成内部关系所使用的实践中,我们的样本中没有确定一致性。我们的总体结论是,公司越来越偏离传统的非正式方法选择,将注意力集中在一种更加混合的方法上,在这种方法中,外向的正式关注也被考虑在内。这证实了这样一个论点,即双重性正在成为CI行业公司的一个特征。

**关键词:**二元性,悖论理论,策略,关系,CI。