

IMPLEMENTATION OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY CONCEPT IN SMES IN MALOPOLSKA

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Purpose: The aim of the article was to present the status of implementation of the CSR concept in small and medium-sized enterprises in the Małopolska province.

Methodology: The questionnaire contained closed and open questions, which enabled obtaining more precise answers. The first stage – the selection of enterprises – was carried out in a purposeful manner, based on their belonging to a determined sector. Then, on a random basis, 250 companies were selected in systematic selection from a base constituting the survey frame. The survey frame was the list of SME in Małopolska province. In total, 386 small and medium enterprises were randomly selected, from which a lower number of entities proceeded to participate in the survey. The remaining entrepreneurs refused to participate in the survey for unknown reasons.

The compared partial and synthetic results present primarily assessments with regard to the level of acceptance of entrepreneurs participating in the survey in relation to the issues of the survey. As a rule, positive replies usually have the character of quality features. The χ^2 (chi-squared) test was used as a verification tool to evaluate the results obtained in this manner. Irrespective of this, the interview questionnaire prepared for this survey enabled giving the character of quality features to its results.

Findings: 55% of respondents, admit that the very concept of corporate social responsibility is familiar to them, but they are not familiar with the details of the idea. Thirty per cent of respondents had never encountered the concept of CSR before, and 15% of respondents stated that it was well or even perfectly familiar to them.

Most respondents indicated concern for the environment (68%) or support for the local community (57%). Good contact with customers and concern for their satisfaction was indicated by only 48% of respondents.

The responses received show that the vast majority of respondents carry out their CSR activity in connection with increasing competitiveness (44%) or improving the company's image (48%). Among the respondents, about 13% indicated that the lack of appropriate tools used to promote the companies makes them undertake such activities. Only 11% of respondents stated that the reason for implementing CSR was socially motivated

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), small and medium enterprises, competitiveness.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the economy has gone through the post-industrial era, characterized by the dominance of knowledge and provision of services alongside progressing automation of routine work. Leading companies in nearly all sectors are able to develop new models of business, while many companies struggle due to the lack of flexibility, low level of the staff's dedication, increasing complexity of the environment, and disturbances in process of the implementation of changes (Pasmore et al., 2019). Competition, its intensity, character and applied instruments undergo changes. There is a growing number of aware consumers, whose decisions are based on several criteria and the price is no longer most important. They become involved and engaged, often *pro publico bono*, in social activism, through which they shape the main current in the public and media discourse.

Conditions for running a business are changing rapidly and social reality and general living conditions are also constantly transforming. Furthermore, the network of relations between these two spheres is becoming more intense and complex. Overlapping boundaries between work and domestic life are one such example. The development of science, technology and access to a wide variety of solutions results in situations where choices between environmentally friendly and unsustainable solutions are being made within the framework of existing law. It is worth, therefore, considering issues related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

2. Review of Corporate Social Responsibility in literature

Corporate social responsibility refers to the formulation and implementation of social goals and programmes, and to the integration of ethical sensitivity in all decision-making processes, policies and actions (Carroll, 1991).

Since the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the European Commission has been supporting and promoting CSR. In a statement published in 2011, the Commission defines CSR as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impact on society” (European Commission 2011, p. 6). Along with this simplified definition it is stressed that a prerequisite for meeting that responsibility is respect for the applicable legislation and collective agreements between the social partners.

CSR is generally perceived as a complex set of policies and practices which are integrated with the actions and decision-making processes of a company, embracing issues related to business ethics, local society and environmental protection, human rights and the rights of employees and consumers (Koh, Heather, Yen, 2022).

The public awareness of social responsibility of any undertaken business activity is a relatively recent development, although its historical roots can be sought in the Roman Empire (Chaffee, 2017, pp. 347-373) and even in ancient Greece (Hetzner, 1987, pp. 23-37). In the past few decades, the firm's responsibility to the society has become a subject of social debate but has been developing in a variety of ways. Differences occur in the scope of the CSR notion, its origin, development pathways, character of the engagement of stakeholders and in the institutional aspects (regulations, cultural and cognitive questions) (Yevdokimova, Zamlynskyi, Kuznietsov, Sakovska, Anatolii, 2018, pp. 69-78; Garriga, Melé, 2004, pp. 51-71) drew attention to the multitude of CSR theories and classified them into four major groups:

1. instrumental theories, focusing on economic factors,
2. political theories, concentrating on the social power of corporations and a responsible use of this power,
3. integrative theories, demonstrating that corporations should be socially integrated,
4. ethical theories implicating that relationships between corporations and the society are based on ethical values, and social responsibility is seen as a corporation's ethical responsibility.

The essence of Corporate Social Responsibility is reflected in the definition published in 2010 by the International Organization for Standardization. In the first-ever management standard providing guidelines for social responsibility (ISO 26000) CSR is defined as "The responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparency and ethical behaviour that (Makuch, 2011, p.20):

- contributes to sustainable development, including health and welfare of society,
- takes into account the expectations of stakeholders,
- is in compliance with applicable laws and consistent with international norms of behaviour,
- is integrated throughout the whole organization and practiced within its sphere of influence".

The definition emphasizes the responsibility of an organization, which must certainly mean compliance with legal obligations and generally recognized ethical rules. Attention is also drawn to the expectations of stakeholders, which companies should incorporate in their strategy.

ISO 26000 also names and describes areas of Corporate Social Responsibility crucial for stakeholders.

According to ISO 26000, the perception of an organisation as socially responsible and its actual social responsibility activities can have an impact on:

- competitive advantage,
- the organisation's image,
- the ability to attract and retain employees, shareholders and customers,

- employee morale, engagement and performance,
- opinions of investors, owners, donors, community sponsors,
- the organisation's relationships with businesses, government agencies, the media, suppliers, partners, customers and the community within which the organisation operates.

Practical approaches to CSR can be diverse in nature and need not to be complex or involve large expenditures. In practice, CSR most often includes activities (Koncepcja CSR w MŚP):

1. addressed to the company's employees, e.g. improvement of working conditions (including health and safety), provision of greater professional satisfaction and development opportunities, work-life balance, equal treatment, training and professional development of employees (including career planning), communication/information to employees and their involvement in the company's decision-making process, responsible and fair remuneration or financial assistance to employees (e.g. pension insurance schemes, interest-free loans),
2. market-oriented - involves customers on the one hand and business partners and suppliers on the other e.g. improving the quality and safety of products, ethical advertising activities, providing voluntary services to customers, fair pricing, paying on time, honouring the terms of trade agreements, working with local partners, promoting standards through supply chains, supporting the creation of local/regional business agreements,
3. aimed at the public e.g. improvement of local infrastructure, financial support of local institutions of public interest, measures towards integration with society and/or the labour market at community level, support of the public in a broader context (e.g. the population of developing countries),
4. for the environment e.g. use of environmentally friendly products and production processes, efficient use of resources, use of "green rating" of suppliers in terms of their environmental standards, waste and pollution reduction, informing business partners, customers and the public about environmental issues.

The main areas of social responsibility, i.e.: organizational governance, human rights, labour practices, the environment, fair operating practices, consumer issues, and community involvement and development (Makuch, 2011) (Table 1.)

Table 1.
Areas of CSR according to ISO 26000

Key area	Definition	Good practices
Organizational Governance	Corporate governance is a set of rules and standards relating to a broadly defined management of a company	Improving the management efficiency of the organization, while taking into account the public interest, respect for stakeholders and ethical principles
Human rights	Respect for all human rights and dignity, in particular civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights	Anti-discrimination, strengthening the protection of labour rights
Labour practices	Relations concerning employees and cooperation with subcontractors, suppliers, competitors, etc.	Working conditions and social welfare, health and safety, social development (training), social dialogue, open and honest relationships with cooperating entities
Environment	Reduction and climate change adaptation and the protection and regeneration of the environment	Reducing emissions of pollutants, exploitation of natural resources, as a result of the operations
Fair operating practices	Ethical business behavior towards other organizations, including government organizations, partners, suppliers, contractors, competitors and associations to which it belongs	Preventing unfair competition, honest cooperation and respect for property rights, actively promoting the principles of social responsibility in area of influence (partners, suppliers, the environment)
Consumer issues	Fairness and transparency towards consumers	Application of fair practices in marketing products and services, fair contract terms, objective and reliable information, market education, commitment to protect the health and safety of consumers, the quality of service and support, and complaint handling
Community involvement and Development	Active support of local community aiming to resolve their problems, especially those that relate to its employees and other stakeholders	Social dialogue, recognition of stakeholders needs in engagement projects, including investments in areas such as education and culture, health, development and access to technology

Source: own work, based on http://www.pkn.pl/sites/default/files/discovering_iso_26000.pdf; <http://www.odpowiedzialnafi rma.pl/o-csr/iso-26000>, 27.04.2023; Szczanowicz, J., Saniuk, S. (2014). Implementation of CSR concept in manufacturing SMEs. *Management*, 18(1), 71-82.

The literature on the subject stresses the importance of stakeholder involvement in the implementation of CSR. In this context involvement implies a two-way dialogue with key stakeholders at all stages of implementation, starting with planning, by carefully studying stakeholders' needs, through the implementation and evaluation of effects, as well as transparent communication. Transparency means presentation of non-financial results in a way that is meaningful to stakeholders. The results should also be published in a complete and measurable way so that the progress can be objectively assessed.

In 2013, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development conducted a study aiming to verify the percentage of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) executives declaring inclusion of the CSR concept into their business. The study was conducted on a group of 1000 companies from MSME sector, excluding the self-employed. The study has shown that the main barriers for CSR in SMEs are lack of awareness and knowledge about the concept. More than 66 per cent of the respondents were not able to define the concept of CSR.

3. Impact of CSR activities on the competitiveness of companies

The concept of social responsibility is treated as a tool for gaining competitive advantage on a global market, where customers, employees and investors attach increasing importance to non-economic values. Enterprises, wishing to build the trust of the community towards their business activities, are developing a social responsibility strategy (Adamczyk, 2009, p. 39).

Corporate Social Responsibility, in order to become an effective tool for building a company's competitive advantage, must be carried out in the form of long-term, carefully thought-out and planned activities, in the form of a strategy. A CSR strategy is a comprehensive, formulated and programmed set of activities covering relations with both the enterprise's key partners (clients, owners, employees, suppliers, investors, competitors and other business partners) and with social organisations, media, authorities, local and global community, research institutions. Moreover, it is important to remember that the development of the CSR strategy is gradual, stage by stage (Adamczyk, 2009, p. 39).

Although corporate social responsibility is generally considered in the context of large enterprises, it is also a strategic tool for improving the competitiveness of small and medium-sized companies. In practice, CSR activities are present in the activities of both small and medium-sized companies as well as large enterprises, in the latter case sometimes on a larger scale, and information about such involvement is generally better communicated externally (Bieńkiewicz, 2008, pp. 5-13).

The benefits of implementing a corporate social responsibility strategy can be considered in two scopes: for the enterprise and for society. At the enterprise level, benefits can be divided into internal and external (Adamczyk, Nowak, Kuraszko, Panek-Owsiańska, Rok, Zadrożna, 2007, p. 120).

Internal benefits of the company include:

- increased employee involvement and motivation - CSR increases employee motivation and loyalty, which translates into their increased creativity, innovation and activity for the benefit of the company, as well as the recognition of their superiors; this aspect also translates into an increase in the appeal of the company on the labour market, resulting in the attraction of new, good employees,
- creating company culture,
- lower supervision costs,
- increased innovativeness,
- marketing benefits through donations.

The company's external benefits include:

- positive image among stakeholders, increased stakeholder loyalty and satisfaction with using the company's services and/or products - nowadays every consumer is aware of his/her choices and often, when choosing a product or service, is guided by trust in the company, its image, its perception by the environment; a contemporary contractor, apart from price and quality, also pays attention to the company's reputation and what is associated with it; at the same time better relations with external interest groups give the company easier access to information useful in its operations,
- conflict-free operation in the local community - CSR strengthens the company's position on the labour market (thanks to a good reputation, the company is perceived as a good employer, which may allow to reduce the problem of staff migration, and this is extremely important, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, which are often not perceived as attractive employers), facilitates cooperation with business partners and state administration, and this translates into improved relations with the community and local authorities; by applying CSR principles, the company perpetuates itself positively in the awareness of local residents, gains recognition of local authorities, which in turn may simplify access to public funds,
- increased number of loyal customers,
- increased competitiveness - resulting in increased sales, savings in costs and higher profits,
- increased interest from investors - companies pursuing socially responsible ideas can count on recognition from investors, which translates, among other things, into easier access to sources of funding; any lender will be more willing to grant it to a company that demonstrates both a positive financial result and a positive social image,
- prestige in the community due to sponsorship and charitable activities - by carrying out socially responsible activities, the company gains popularity, wins awards, which gives it greater publicity among clients, business partners and society, and thus increases its credibility in the eyes of these groups; the company thus becomes locally famous (also through word-of-mouth marketing); greater publicity is also important for the company in terms of entering new markets or reaching new groups of clients, as well as making wider use of the opportunities to operate in the existing market (e.g. through greater client loyalty).

Benefits to society include:

- active participation of enterprises in solving social problems,
- environment protection,
- activating the local community,
- educational and training programmes for residents,
- possibility of using employees' time (volunteering),
- financing of sports, cultural and charitable activities.

Aim, scope of research and research methods

The aim of the study was to assess the level of awareness and degree of implementation of the CSR concept, expressed in stakeholder relations, among small and medium-sized enterprises conducting business in the Małopolskie Voivodeship. The main research method used for the purpose of this study was primary research, which involved a quantitative method. The research was conducted in late 2022 and early 2023 using a survey questionnaire, which consisted of 30 open, closed questions. The survey was divided into four stages. The first stage verified the respondents' eligibility for the survey. The second stage verified the respondents' knowledge of corporate social responsibility, while in the third stage, the respondents answered questions about their experiences of corporate social responsibility. Finally, respondents were asked to fill in a metric to characterise the people surveyed. A total of 300 respondents took part in the survey.

4. Results of the research

The study focused on identifying the level of familiarity with the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility among employees of enterprises in the SME sector. Respondents were presented with a definition of Corporate Social Responsibility, and asked to refer to it and indicate one of the proposed answers. The largest number, 55% of respondents, admit that the very concept of corporate social responsibility is familiar to them, but they are not familiar with the details of the idea. Thirty per cent of respondents had never encountered the concept of CSR before, and 15% of respondents stated that it was well or even perfectly familiar to them. Those who stated that they knew the CSR concept "well" also declared that it is a concept that is often used in their companies. Respondents who were very familiar with the CSR concept stated that it was an integral part of their enterprises. It should be taken into account that mere familiarity with the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility does not necessarily imply full understanding of its assumptions (Figure 1).

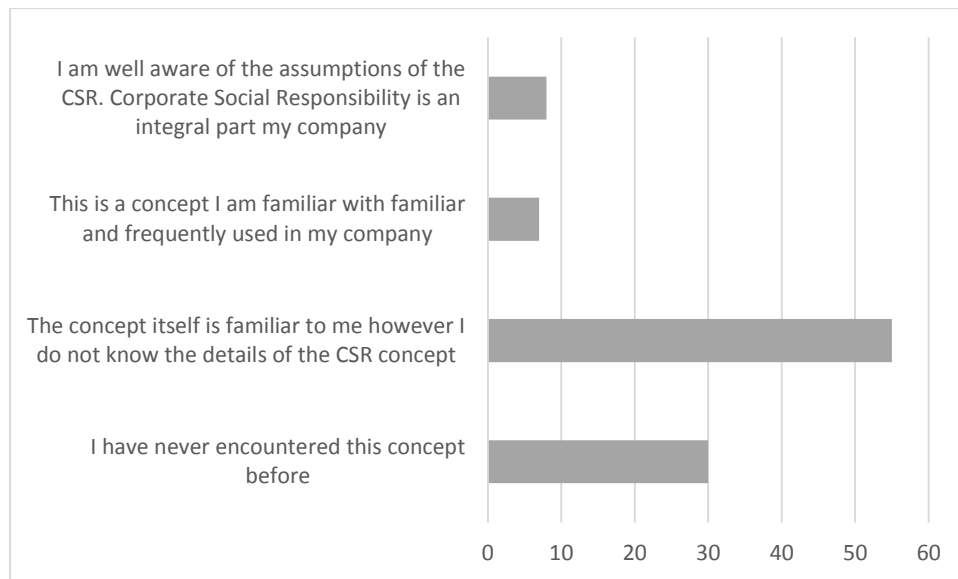


Figure 1. Awareness of the concept of corporate social responsibility among employees of small and medium-sized enterprises [in %].

Source: study based on own research.

According to the survey, knowledge of CSR largely depends on the position an employee holds in the company. Respondents who were owners of the company or held a managerial position were far more likely to respond that they were familiar with the idea to a good or excellent degree than lower-level employees (Figure 2).

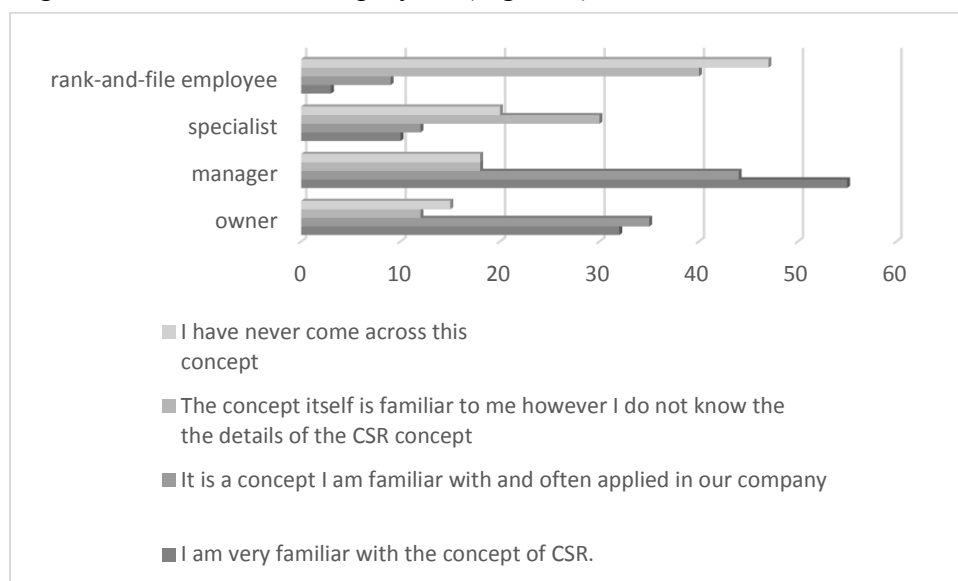


Figure 2. Awareness of the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility among employees of small and medium-sized enterprises by position held [in %].

Source: study based on own research.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the activities by which they understood corporate social responsibility. Most respondents indicated concern for the environment (68%) or support for the local community (57%). Good contact with customers and concern for their satisfaction

was indicated by only 48% of respondents. Similarly, almost half of the respondents stated that their company's CSR activities include concern for maintaining good relations with employees.

Despite the fact that activities related to the ethical behaviour of a company in the market are the basis for the operation of any company, only 41% of respondents indicated a link between this factor and the idea of CSR. Charitable activities were mentioned by 27% of respondents. The rest maintained their opinion that they had never encountered the concept of CSR before (Figure 3).

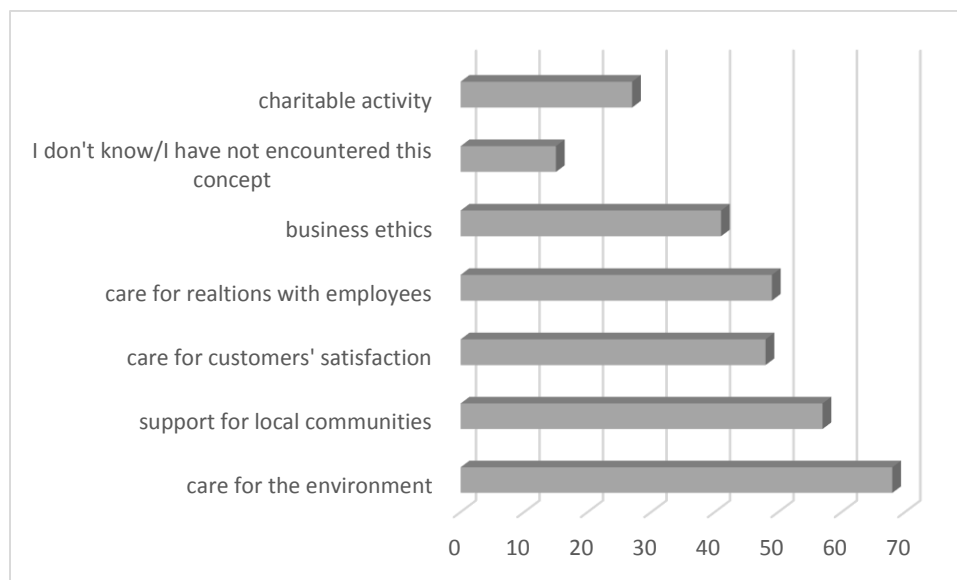


Figure 3. Activities understood by respondents under the term corporate social responsibility

Source: study based on own research

As the presented research shows, the knowledge of the very definition of CSR, as well as its assumptions, are not sufficiently known among the surveyed entrepreneurs. The reason for such a state can be seen in the accessibility to the degree of formalisation of Corporate Social Responsibility in these enterprises. The lack of information on the subject was indicated most frequently in small enterprises (65%), and in medium companies, where the share was almost 50%. Information was provided to employees in both small and medium-sized companies at a rate of 30% and 23% respectively.

Such low interest in activities related to the CSR concept may be due to a misconception among entrepreneurs about the high costs of its implementation. In addition, some entrepreneurs may not see a direct correlation between environmental or social commitment and their company's financial performance. Therefore, it was very important to establish the reasons why companies engage in CSR activities. The responses received show that the vast majority of respondents carry out their CSR activity in connection with increasing competitiveness (44%) or improving the company's image (48%). Among the respondents, about 13% indicated that the lack of appropriate tools used to promote the companies makes them undertake such activities. Only 11% of respondents stated that the reason for implementing CSR was socially motivated (Figure 4).

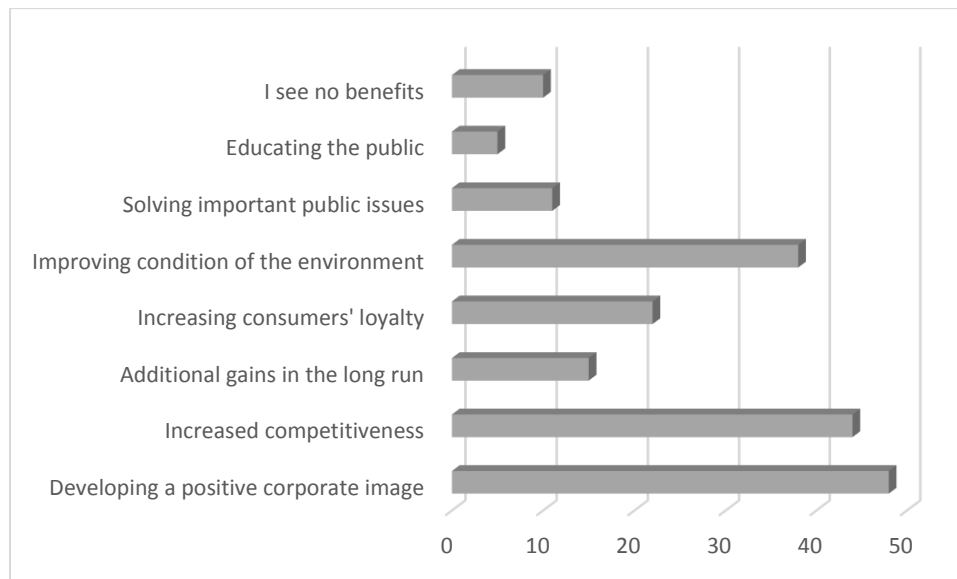


Figure 4. Benefits of applying CSR principles in the company as perceived by respondents.

Source: study based on own research.

The research carried out shows that a fuller understanding of the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility by entrepreneurs is needed in SMEs. Too little awareness on the part of the management about the benefits of applying this concept will effectively block the process of its implementation. However, where actions are taken in this direction, the vast majority of respondents agreed (85%) that Corporate Social Responsibility is needed.

Entrepreneurs were also asked to indicate the main problems they perceive in implementing CSR principles (Figure 5). More than 62% of respondents indicated a lack of time needed to implement CSR in their companies.

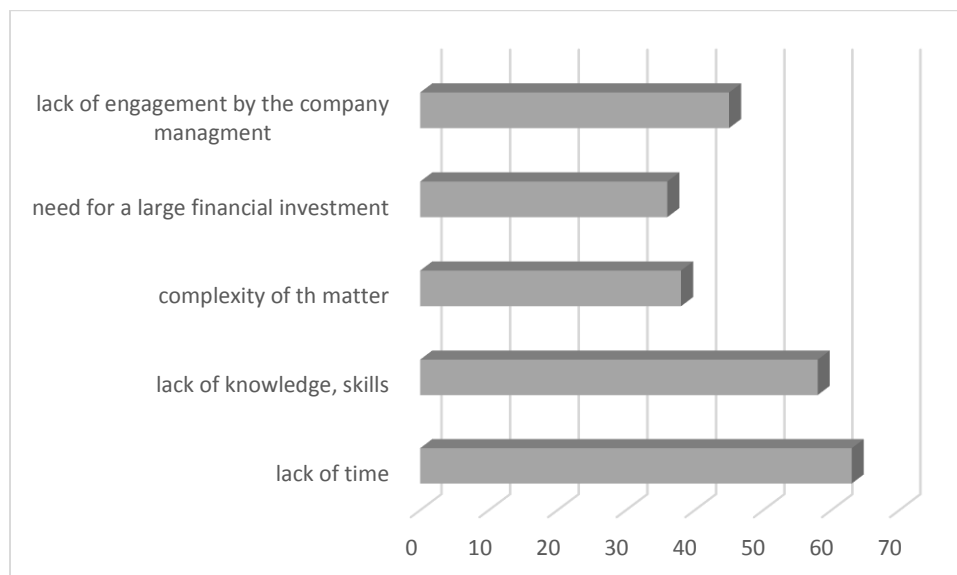


Figure 5. Problems in the implementation of CSR principles in the company in the opinion of the surveyed community.

Source: study based on own research.

Only slightly fewer (58%) see the problem as a lack of knowledge and skills. Implementation of the concept, for 36% of the surveyed, is associated with the need to incur high financial expenditures (this mainly concerned owners of companies). The above shows how low the awareness of entrepreneurs in the SME sector is, both in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility itself, as well as benefits resulting from its application in the long term. As shown earlier, the highest knowledge of CSR in the studied SMEs is held by persons employed in them on managerial positions. It can be assumed that the owners' low awareness of CSR may be a real barrier to attempts to implement the concept by employees in managerial position.

5. Conclusions

The need for corporate social responsibility (CSR) is imposed by globalization, which amplifies the business not only in a positive sense, but also results in predatory competition. Aiming at highest profitability, entities often use practices contrary to the law or those not legally forbidden but nevertheless having a detrimental or adverse impact on stakeholders or sustainable development. The need to rebuild social trust, not only through relevant legislation but also through an economy based on social responsibility, understood as transparency of decisions and actions, as well as stakeholder involvement.

The role of Corporate Social Responsibility is to drive all the players of economy towards ventures aimed at minimizing the negative impacts of their activities. By following this concept enterprises of all sizes not only contribute to social welfare, but also - through a strategic approach – build their value and competitive advantage. This is particularly important in the case of small and medium-sized enterprises, as it is increasingly difficult for them to compete with large international corporations. In this case, their small sizes and simple organizational structures give them a potential advantage in the local market.

On the basis of the above considerations, CSR can be defined as a concept through which enterprises, at the stage of building strategies, voluntarily take into account social interests and environmental protection, as well as relations with various stakeholder groups. Being responsible does not only mean meeting all formal and legal requirements, but also increased investment in human resources, environmental protection and stakeholder relations, i.e. voluntary commitment. Social responsibility is the process by which companies manage their relationships with a variety of stakeholders who can have a real impact on their business success.

It is worth noting that corporate social responsibility is a concept that affects both the environment and the enterprise itself. Some business entities apply this method of management disinterestedly, while other enterprises apply it guided mainly by economic benefits. Entities in

the SME sector are increasingly recognising that pro-social and pro-environmental activities are profitable in the long term and can contribute to the organisation's success on the market. These activities translate not only into an improvement of the company's image, but also into tangible financial effects.

Competition may tempt entrepreneurs with grey zone practices that are legal, but generally considered unethical. In the face of these problems, CSR becomes in a way a necessity of today. SME sector significantly affects development of domestic economy, therefore it is important to focus on the research that would promote and facilitate application of the social responsibility concept among companies operating within this sector. The challenge is to design a CSR model which can be used in an SME company with no need for expensive specialists or large-scale cost-intensive projects.

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