

FACTORS HINDERING DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IN POLAND

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Abstract: Being a strong yet growing economy, Poland is among the global leaders for doing business and an attractive destination for foreign companies expanding their reach abroad. However, entering such a complex and challenging market does not always go smoothly. Thence, this study aims to determine the critical factors hindering the development of international business in the country. To do so, the research employed an instrumental explanatory case study approach. The research subject is a subsidiary of a German electronics manufacturer in Poland, whose employee, who is also a researcher, is trying to identify the reasons for the company's poor results in attracting new customers. Further thematic analysis of qualitative data from field notes and individual interviews with customers identified the following five factors that might be responsible for that: novelty, staff, logistics, communications, and marketing. The findings suggest that to be successful in the Polish context, an international business should offer novelty in its products or services, employ some local personnel, rely on local logistics, and conduct as much communication as possible in the Polish language, especially in marketing. The study not only fills the gaps in the literature on international business development in the Polish context, but also offers practical recommendations for improving the efficacy of international companies, regardless of their geographical location.

Keywords: case study, critical success factors, international business management, Poland

JEL Classification: M1, M5, M16

Introduction

Numerous internal and external studies have shown that Poland, a country with a very positive commercial climate, is an excellent place for foreign direct investments and international business development. For instance, Poland was ranked third

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in terms of the best country in the world to invest in or do business in 2020 according to CEO world magazine (Papadopoulos, 2020). However, investing abroad is a highly difficult and complex process that requires dealing with “realia on the ground” and transferring money, which is why not all businesses thrive. Even established businesses might experience failures in international markets. This article aims to identify the causes of one such international company's poor performance in the Polish market.

In particular, the focus of the study was a limited liability company with Polish registration that was meant to represent a well-known German electronics manufacturer, hereafter referred to as MRSpolka. From its registration until recently, the company was run by foreign employees, who were transferred to the newly established office from a similar representative office abroad; the company has not had a single Pole on its staff since its establishment. As for marketing, new product development, technical support, and warranty-related issues, the representative office uses the resources of the relevant departments of the parent company in Germany. Such reliance on foreign employees as well as managerial and organizational resources confirms the international nature of MRSpolka as described in “The Traditional Internationalization Theory” by Johanson and Vahlne (1977). After the company started its operations, the then-existing Polish clients of the parent company were transferred to the newly formed jurisdiction, which provided the guaranteed and necessary profit for its operations. The main goal was set to develop the market, particularly expanding the client base. Nevertheless, as of September 2022, despite the relevance and market demand for the company’s products, the Polish representative office could not grow the client base and sign new contracts besides those passed on by the head office. Understandably, this raised pertinent inquiries from the management of the German office and motivated the carrying out of this investigation.

Therefore, this study attempts to address what objective and subjective factors prohibited an international company, – which, despite its Polish registration this representative office is, – from conducting business successfully. The study employs an instrumental explanatory case study approach, empirical data derived from field notes and longitudinal observations of the company's daily operations during October 2021 – September 2022 recorded by the researcher himself, as well as information gathered from casual interviews with the company's customers.

Literature Review: Success and Failure of International Business

The first aim of the literature review is to determine what could be considered a success or failure of international business and the major problems surrounding these notions in the literature. For example, in their most generic definition, Bourguignon and Goh (2004) identify business success as “the achievement of organizational goals, whatever the nature and variety of these objectives”. The same is observed by Cooke-Davies (2002), for whom the company's success is decided by a particular measurement that could argue justifiably for or against success. Therefore, in its strict sense, success can be understood as the ratio of output or outcome to input; regarding

MRSpolka, the ratio of acquiring new customers is zero or extremely close to zero, which unquestionably validates the fact that the company failed.

In the literature, some elements that affect whether an international business is successful or unsuccessful have been discussed, including works by Swoboda et al. (2014), Wigley and Chiang (2009), and Cliquet et al. (2014), among others. Nonetheless, the factors and theoretical models found in the literature are mostly concerned with analyzing the failures and successes of big, global businesses, which have nothing to do with the particular circumstance. Feldmann (2016) suggests that “the documentation of critical success factors has subjugated the field of international management from the 1980s until now”. However, because of different timing, locations, and stages of internationalization, it was not quite possible to identify the universal factors that would suit any situation. Only a small amount of study, in the opinion of the same academic, is pertinent to the context of the country in focus. Later, Evans et al. (2008) found that critical factors are not fixed in time, and they “tend to change with passing of time”.

Building on Feldmann’s (2016) premise that the success of international business “depends on what they do, how they do it and under which external and environmental conditions they operate”, it can be inferred that international business in a foreign country depends on both internal and external factors. On the other hand, considering the current study’s focus on the business itself and the fact that the business environment in the country (external factors) has not changed during the year of its existence, the primary concern of this research is only the internal factors. Thus, similarly to Feldmann (2016), the study sets itself the task of understanding what actions or inaction of the company affect its ability to acquire new customers, which is considered the immediate indicator of business success at this stage of its development. The proposition that various internal factors, especially the way a company does business, directly contribute to business success is not only logical but also confirmed in numerous studies, for example, Heslina et al. (2016), Kunday and Sengüler (2016), Mugiati (2015), Tariku et al. (2020), Ummah et al. (2021), and Xuan et al. (2020). Moreover, among those internal factors, the researchers distinguish not only what the company does or does not do but also how it does it, what it looks like, and various others.

Despite the vast amount of research on the subject of international business development currently available, Poland’s international business development issues have received relatively little attention, indicating a research gap. Thus, the purpose of this study is not only to help find the factors that hinder the development of a given business but also to at least in part fill the existing gaps in the practice and literature.

Research Method

The research employs an instrumental explanatory case study approach, which is useful “when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural, real-life context” (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 1984; Zainal, 2007). The subject of the research is a subsidiary of a German electronics manufacturer in Poland, whose employee, who is also a researcher, is trying

to identify the reasons for the company's poor results in attracting new customers. According to CopyPress (2021), "the case study is often used by researchers in the field of business to gather mainly the qualitative data that would be impossible or impractical to obtain". Stake (1995) defines an instrumental case study as one in which the researcher selects a minor group occurrence by the subject (which undoubtedly is the case) to "examine a certain pattern of behavior" and what it results in.

For qualitative analysis, the researcher used data from long-term longitudinal observations of day-to-day activities by the company, recorded by the researcher himself, and data from in-depth interviews with business partners and customers of MRSpolka, to whom the researcher had access. The information the researcher received during the cooperation with the company and fulfilling the company's tasks also proved helpful. Six respondents (direct and potential customers) were interviewed, which corresponds with "general agreement intrinsic for qualitative research to choose from 6 to 24 participants" (Shovkovyy, 2015). Further in the text, the information provided by these people is encoded as information by Respondent 1 to Respondent 6.

Data collection occurred in two stages, which inherently resemble what Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) called the sequential data collection procedure. First, the field notes, MRSpolka – related email correspondence, and all business-like documents and transcripts of negotiations, were put together and tentatively categorized. Then, these initial categories served as input to formulate questions for subsequent interviews. The researcher used a purposive-opportunistic sampling technique to select informants; non-probability sampling is "primarily used in qualitative studies" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2008). The interviewees were chosen from among those who worked with the brand even before establishing the Polish representative office. Interviews were conducted in the Polish language, the native language of the interviewees, and second for the researcher. Corps of 'thick' data generated from open-ended questions during the interviews were transcribed verbatim, sorted, and examined to identify primary patterns, which eventually resulted in progressively refined conceptualizations, or what Patton (2002) called conducting a content analysis.

After thoroughly analyzing the data, several factors were identified as possible reasons why the company did not reach its main business goal of attracting new customers. Every notable factor was highlighted and then classified into one of the five categories: novelty, staff, communication, logistics, and marketing, which will be discussed in more detail. Overall, the framework approach of the qualitative analysis can be presented as follows:

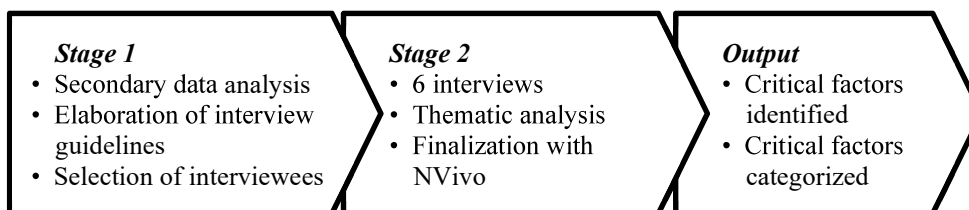


Figure 1. Framework approach for qualitative analysis

Source: Author's own design for this study

Findings and Discussion: Factors Hindering the Development of International Business

Novelty

According to the unanimous assertion of all the respondents, in the time that passed since the first acquaintance with MRSpolka (from 6 to 11 months), the initial admiration (excitement) and the accompanying hopes on the side of existing customers for improvements were replaced by calm indifference or even irritation. The fact is, as Respondent 1 explains.

Initially, there was an illusion that it would be much more convenient to conduct business, communication would be more pleasant, and everyone was expecting some kind of novelty ... But as practice has shown, nothing new has happened, and sometimes, the cooperation with the brand got even more intricate.

In particular, the respondents correlate these intricacies with some displeasing issues related to “innovations” in logistics and some particularity of communication. The word “innovation” is used here with a negative connotation. Therefore, the respondents are asking a logical question – “What is the point of this change? Where is the novelty we were expecting?”. As a result, some of its Polish buyers perceive the company as a forced necessity with which they have to cooperate whether they like it or not. The Traditional Internationalization Theory by Bilkey and Tesar (1977) indicates the importance of novelty for success, particularly with international business; it explicitly states that to be successful, an international company “has to adapt new ways of doing business innovatively”.

However, looking at the interviewees' comments more broadly, one can conclude that the company offers nothing radically new to its old customers or the market. Evidence of this may be at least the observations made by the author himself. For example, during a joint visit with the head of MRSpolka to a potential client, the company representatives could not convince the latter why he should abandon the competing product. Moreover, in an established (settled) market, to change a supplier, such insignificances as a better price, faster delivery, or the like do not serve as a breakeven point. Here, an integrated approach or something qualitatively newer than the market offers is needed, which is precisely what is missing in our case. Hence, novelty is essential for a business to succeed, which is not quite possible without acquiring new customers. The result is in line with studies by Krugman (1985), Verspagen, and Wakelin (1997), which found that novelty could lead to the success of an international business.

Staff

The initial anticipations of existing customers for better communications with a newly-established Polish business instead of “boring Germans” (this is how Respondent 4 refers to the staff of the parent company in Germany) did not come true.

One of the potential reasons for this, according to Respondent 3, “is that, even though the company is still Polish, the foreign staff makes it significantly different from local firms in its business culture”. At the same time, the absence of Polish-speaking employees in the company only exacerbates the existing discomfort. Almost all the respondents mentioned that they would welcome Polish native speakers at MRSpolka. As was put by Respondent 2, “benevolent Polish employees in the company’s staff would greatly improve its image”. The importance of focusing on this statement becomes clearer when it is viewed in many types of research on the attitudes of Poles toward other nations conducted annually by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS). The CBOS (2020) research suggests that only “one-third of respondents are favorable to Germans and Ukrainians” (the staff of MRSpolka), while Poles have the most positive attitude towards Czechs and Slovaks. For example, according to the same source, on a scale from -1 (strongest antipathy) to $+1$ (the strongest sympathy), Ukraine scored 0.08, Germany 0.19, whereas the highest score of 0.91 was given to Czechs. In addition, it is worth recalling the ‘nationalistic-oriented’ nature of Polish society by Zubrzycki (2006) and “Poland for Poles”, a utopian vision very often used by nationalist and right-wing organizations in Poland to describe situations in which there are no non-Poles in the country (Rogula, 2021). Buchowski and Chlewinska (2012) call this “constitutional nationalism”, or a situation where there is a “titular nation” of Poles and all “the other non-Poles are presented as a supplementary category” (p. 14). The following numbers exceptionally well support these statements: as of 1931, there were about 68.9% of Poles in the country, whereas as of 2020, there were 96.9% (Factbook, 2021). According to Pasięka and Müller (2021), “pronounced Polish nationalism is a matter of fact”, and thus should be well considered by international business. All of what has been previously mentioned may explain why Polish companies want to see native Poles as their business partners, and why “there is increased trust for a Pole in a Polish company or contractor” (Tsys, 2022). In fairness, it should be said that Poles not only dislike other nations but also “never liked each other very much” (Chmielewski, 2018).

Communication

The combined factor of communications incorporates the customers' concerns associated with the quality of communications (both verbal and written), their structure, and the hierarchy of communication messages. The problem stems from the fact that none of the firm's employees speaks Polish as their first language, which is exacerbated because English is not their first language either. On top of all this, there is the fact that the knowledge of English in the business environment of potential customers, as confirmed by the observations, could also be better. From the multiple contacts with potential clients in the course of business negotiations, phone calls, and visits to various international exhibitions, the researcher can count cases of fluent communication in English on his fingers. The observation agrees with Salford (2022a), who states that while many Poles speak English, only a few can fluently communicate in the language. Subsequently, the communication between the parties

usually happens either in a non-native language for everyone, namely English, or in Polish; nevertheless, MRSpolka staff's skills in Polish are at a considerably basic level. For example, Respondent 5 describes his first experience communicating with MRSpolka representatives in this way:

[...] and then, I receive a letter in Polish; I understand nothing, and I call the company for clarification. An employee of the company apologizes for the incoherent letter and, as if nothing had happened, reports that when writing letters, he uses Google Translate.

The practice of dispatching business correspondence written with the help of Google Translate and without further proofreading by native Polish speakers was noted throughout the entire observation period. Why this is not the best communication practice could be explained by the findings of numerous studies proving that Google Translate is not precise enough to handle important conversations; various errors occur at three primary levels: lexical, syntactical, and discursive. According to Vidhayasai, Keyuravong, and Bunsom (2015), it is not recommended as "using Google Translate does not lead to a perfect translation of the original texts, which could have created a major problem". In the authors' view, language communication errors might spoil the first impressions, which "are always very important in the business community" (Vidhayasai et al., 2015). This might suggest the destructive effect of such communication techniques, affecting the quality of the "cold" calls and marketing presentations to potential customers, which, according to Salford (2022b), "should be clear, accurate and detailed". The researcher's observations and experience at MRSpolka suggest that the hundreds of calls to potential customers were doomed to fail precisely because of the listed reasons. The company's day-to-day operations also suffer from this. For instance, the researcher could recall a few business events where the presenters from MRSpolka switched from Polish to English when it was necessary to delve into the product's technical description. Consequently, some of those to whom the presentation was intended and who did not speak English well were discouraged from further discussions.

Because of the company's lack of a clear hierarchical managerial structure on the one hand, and clear rules regarding who is responsible for what on the other, the company's communications are devoid of structure and hierarchy. Structurality here means how and through which channels communication is carried out by the hierarchy – who handles what, as well as who communicates with whom. As a result, the same customer could receive messages in different languages, from different employees, and even with a different content. Often, the cold and follow-up messages were not only conducted in different languages (the marketing messages from the German team were conducted only in English, whereas those from the Polish office were in Polish or English) but were also distributed thoughtlessly without considering the hierarchical structures of the potential partners, with their "slow decision-making processes held at the top of the company" (Salford, 2022b). Respondent 6 describes this situation in the following way:

In March, as usual, we sent parts under warranty to the address of the parent company in Germany. After a month, we wanted to know how things were going with the replacement ... we called Germany ... they referred us to their Polish office. Of course, in the Polish representative office, the staff knows nothing about this case, so we searched. We wrote to the chief of the Polish office, and at the same time, we received a letter from the technical director of the same office, and on top of it, a message from a German contact stating that the replacement parts had been sent to Poland a long time ago.

It should be added that out of habit and inertia, some of the existing MRSpolka customers continue to communicate with long-established contacts from the parent firm in Germany, thus ignoring the new formation in Poland.

Logistics

Problems related to logistics are likely more relevant to the existing customers than to potential ones. However, despite this they are still worthy of attention because ill-conceived practices can repel potential buyers. The idea of opening a Polish office was thought to improve not only the relationships and the business itself but also the logistics. Perhaps in the future, the logistics-related issues will be resolved, but today, according to customers things are quite far from perfect and even from what they were before.

Evidence of this could be a quarrel over logistics, observed by the researcher, with two of the company's long-established clients. In the first instance, Respondent 2 complained that "the time of delivery has increased, more mistakes with stock are happening, and the quality of packaging and accompanying documentation has deteriorated". In the second occurrence, Respondent 3 claims that "the system of returning goods under warranty became more complicated and unclear". "It used to be that the goods subject to warranty were sent directly to Germany, but now some of them were requested to be sent to the Polish office, while others need to be sent to Germany", explained Respondent 3. The responses of both customers and information from the field notes indicate that logistics issues may be brought on by the fact that the company's primary warehouse is situated in Germany. In addition, the field data suggests that the Polish office does not have direct access to the information about stock availability or a properly configured logistics management system. For example, if a client enquires about the availability of a particular product directly from the German office, the request is sent to the Polish office. Then, the Polish office forwards all customers' requests to Germany, awaits the answers, and replies to the customers only afterwards. As a result, all the ordered goods are sent from Germany to the Polish office, and they are distributed to the local customers only afterwards. Therefore, during shipment, the original load from the factory is repacked and sent out to the end recipients in smaller portions. This is where some mistakes occur; some goods get missed during reloading, and the new paperwork differs from what the customers are used to. In turn, the shortcomings in the company's logistics result in negative reactions from the customers.

Marketing

The most important factor that may affect the acquisition of new customers out of those identified by the research would be marketing. One of the popular marketing definitions says that it is all kinds of activities by which “an organization communicates to, connects with, and engages its target audience to convey the value of and ultimately sell its products and services” (Adesoji, 2017). The same author points out that marketing is all about attracting new customers. Adhering to these two interpretations, the company's failure to increase its customer base may be a mark of the absence of good communications and marketing. To test this proposition, the researcher asked the respondents whether they could recall any marketing effort or activities by MRSpolka; none could recall a single fact of acquaintance with the company's product anywhere in the media. From the very outset, all the marketing activities of the Polish subsidiary were handled by the marketing department of the head office in Germany, where they were reduced to sporadic posts on social networks. Those posts are in German or English and are mainly concerned with events in the German office. All marketing by the Polish office was reduced to simple email marketing to “cold” contacts. As was mentioned earlier, the language of such communication left much to be desired.

Considering all that has been mentioned, it is not surprising that even old customers did not know about the opening of MRSpolka for a long time. For example, Respondent 2 “learned about the existence of the Polish office only 4-5 months after its opening”. Moreover, it was only because his subsequent order, usually sent to Germany, was redirected to the Polish office. When discussing the company's presence in the Polish media space, Respondent 3 suggests that “the company simply does not exist in it”. As follows from observations, Poles are also skeptical about the marketing materials of MRSpolka available for distributors only in English. For instance, as of September 2022, a new B2C product that the company has tried to introduce to the Polish market since the beginning of the year, has not received any sign of consumer interest, despite the fact that the competitor's market for this product is growing. Based on the respondents' answers, one reason is the fact that the accompanying product booklets and information from the company's website are available only in English. The researcher can recall a meeting with a potential customer who literally laughed at the marketing booklets in English that MRSpolka offered to support the marketing effort of the distributor. All attempts by the company's enthusiasts to influence the situation concerning marketing, such as requests to do something in Polish, did not find any support from the company's German-oriented managers. The excuses most often heard by the researcher from managers were references to the fact that the German office knows better. Summing up, for the entire observation time, the company did nothing that could be called a step in improving marketing.

Conclusions

First, it is necessary to note that the data from the respondents only indirectly points out the factors that could prevent the attraction of new customers as they reflect the point of view of the existing customers. It would probably be more correct

to make a full-fledged analysis of the effectiveness of the company's marketing efforts dedicated to this goal and why they either did not work or had poor results. Nevertheless, this is where problems arise because if there is no marketing, there is nothing to evaluate. Thus, the conclusions of this study are based only on the information provided by the respondents, as well as on observational data by the researcher himself. This means that they may be biased by the latter and should be taken with caution.

The next thing to consider when analyzing the research results is that they concern a very particular business, a small company that operates mainly in the B2B segment, registered as a Polish company, but, at its core, it is an international company. Therefore, the findings may be especially useful for international businesses that want to improve their operations in Poland.

Among the problematic factors that the respondents indicate, there are both subjective and objective ones. Respectively, when considering the response options, varying degrees of attention should be paid to both. For example, while novelty and staff composition factors are quite subjective and very dependent on the characteristics of the business itself, therefore not generalizable, the factors of communications, logistics, and marketing are objective. Thus, it is worth the attention of any other business that wishes to be successful in a foreign country.

When seeking reasons for the company's underperformance, it may be worth mentioning that MRSpolka represents a well-established German manufacturer, but most of its employees are citizens of Ukraine. This detail is important because, according to Czarnecka (2020), "Polish people generally tend to show a more positive attitude towards nations with a high standard of living", and the staff of MRSpolka does not serve as a positive reference group for them; Poles often frame Ukrainians as labourers or visitors" (Rogula, 2021). This, together with what Morath (2017) called an "unwelcoming attitude towards foreigners", very well may be the reason of why the potential customers hold the business in disregard.

Undoubtedly, all five factors identified in the study, to a greater or lesser extent, affect the success of an international business, and working with these factors will undoubtedly improve the image of the company. Nonetheless, the reasons for the failure of a business to achieve the desired results may be quite different. One of the things that comes to mind is the business culture of Poles, in which "it is almost impossible to do business in Poland without being part of the 'open more doors' culture" (Salford, 2022b). As a result, any efforts to improve the business from the inside out without considering Polish corporate culture are unlikely to provide the desired outcomes. Moreover, this might be the focus of future research into what impedes the growth of international businesses in Poland.

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CZYNNIKI HAMUJĄCE ROZWÓJ BIZNESU MIĘDZYNARODOWEGO W POLSCE

Streszczenie: Będąc silną, a jednocześnie rozwijającą się gospodarką, Polska należy do światowych liderów w prowadzeniu biznesu i jest atrakcyjnym celem dla firm zagranicznych, które poszerzają swój zasięg za granicą. Jednak wejście na tak złożony i wymagający rynek nie zawsze przebiega gładko. Dlatego niniejsze badanie ma na celu określenie krytycznych czynników utrudniających rozwój międzynarodowego biznesu w kraju; w tym celu w badaniach wykorzystano instrumentalne podejście wyjaśniające studium przypadku. Przedmiotem badań jest filia niemieckiego producenta elektroniki w Polsce, którego pracownik będący jednocześnie badaczem próbuje zidentyfikować przyczyny słabych wyników firmy w pozyskiwaniu nowych klientów. Dalsza analiza tematyczna danych jakościowych z notatek terenowych i indywidualnych wywiadów z klientami wskazała pięć następujących czynników, które mogą być za to odpowiedzialne, a mianowicie: nowość, personel, logistyka, komunikacja i marketing. Wyniki sugerują, że aby odnieść sukces w polskim kontekście, międzynarodowa firma powinna oferować nowości w swoich produktach lub usługach, zatrudniać lokalny personel, polegać na zlokalizowanej logistyce i prowadzić jak najwięcej komunikacji w języku polskim; zwłaszcza reklama marketingowa. Opracowanie nie tylko wypełnia luki w literaturze dotyczącej rozwoju biznesu międzynarodowego w kontekście polskim, ale także oferuje praktyczne rekomendacje dotyczące poprawy efektywności międzynarodowych firm, niezależnie od ich położenia geograficznego.

Słowa kluczowe: studium przypadku, krytyczne czynniki sukcesu, międzynarodowe zarządzanie biznesem, Polska

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