

ADAPTATION IN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS: STUDY OF BONDS WITH KEY CUSTOMERS IN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Paper relates to the core process of business relationships. Matching customer's expectations is yet the marketing paradigm. However in reality it means ongoing decisions on the scope and level of matching because it relates to costs. The purpose of the paper is to identify the range of adaptive activities undertaken by suppliers in relationships with customers and to compare it with negative relationship outcomes – blocked resources and costs. Thus the paper links two constructs developed by IMP Group: adaptation and relationship outcomes. That led us to ask a question about the nature of activities-outcomes dependence. To find the answer we had to conduct the quantitative research among sales managers.

Our findings concern the complexity of adaptation process regarding financial, technical, administrative, logistic and knowledge-related issues. We show that in construction industry a size of a company and business profile do not affect the adaptation level. Configuration of adaptation affects the level of the negative relationship effects. Companies operate their specific structure of those issues what allows us to discuss types of adaptation-outcomes settings.

The paper develops the idea of adaptation within the IMP framework and enriches it by binding the process with perception of negative relationship outcomes. As the level and scope of adaptation is the managerial issue the paper shows the configurations that are more and less effective.

Keywords: adaptation, relationship effects, business-to-business relationships

Competitive paper

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INTRODUCTION

Business to business relationships are complex and require several conditions to develop and thrive: they may bear some additional cost compared to one-time transactions, typically communication channels must be designed and set, the firms must have a reciprocal agreement on level of risk taking, and, finally, they must plan actions and designate crisis procedures for crisis management (Nyaga et al., 2010). Maintaining relationships requires the firm to input resources and accept limitations. Thus, this can be regarded as a specific investment in a relationship. Specific investment is difficult or even impossible to implement with other partners, and therefore demonstrates the commitment of the participants. In this paper, we focus on adaptation as a process, which serves to realize the investment. We are especially interested in the negative effects of relationship. Hence, we deal with the correlation between the two constructs, which are already well-grounded in IMP Group's considerations: adaptation and relational outcome.

Relationship adaptation will be studied in the construction industry. In the construction industry, well-established relationship between the supplier and the customer can occur, but are typically not well-rounded. If the relationships indeed are limited, it raises the question of how the adaptation looks like, and, for that matter, even if it is present. This issue is important for at least three reasons: first, it allows us to focus on the core process of relationship adaptation and its outcomes. Second, few studies have investigated the link between these two important constructs. Third, we employ the construction industry for our context. This context plays an important role in the European economy.

In the literature, researchers mostly focused on the benefits of cooperation and coordination within the supply chain (Jain et al., 2006), supply networks (Danese et al., 2004) and project management (Jha and Iyer, 2006). Adaptation in relationships is usually examined in terms of motivation and characteristics (Schmidt et al., 2007). Its effects, especially those negative, have been neglected.

This paper is organized as follows; first, we review the literature on adaptation and relationship outcomes. Second, we present the construction industry conditions that influence relationship adaptation. Then, we describe the research we conducted on construction companies. Finally, we present our conclusions.

ADAPTATION AS A RELATIONSHIPS' PROCESS

Hakansson and Snehota (1995) classified adaptation as a major relationship process. On the basis of previously proposed definitions in the literature (Canning and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2001, Brennan et al., 2003) it might be assumed that adaptation in the relationship between companies means introducing changes at the individual, group or corporate level in order to meet the expectations of another company, taking into account new circumstances. This definition implies adaptation of the two types of factors - associated with the second participant in the relationship, or the relationship with the environment. The encounters within the relationship can force the adaptation, even by taking into account the expectations of both sides.

Conducted studies reveal a variety of internal reasons for making adaptations. Studies of the IMP group (Hakansson, 1982) and research conducted later by Hagberg-Andersson (2006) indicated that companies decide to adapt in order to increase sales and reduce costs. They have also identified adaptation resulting from the desire to meet the expectations of customers occurring at the end of the value chain, of an operational nature (Schmidt et al., 2007). Further studies revealed different motivating factors: strengthening relationships by investing in it (Johansson and Mattsson, 1988) or boosting up confidence through social exchange based on the fulfilment of the promises and engaging resources (Ford et al., 2003).

Affective factors can also provide motivation. Brennan and Turnbull (1999) linked the adaptive behaviour with the level of trust and antagonism in the relationship. It appears that opportunism and enforcement of dominant position (Brennan et al., 2003) become strong external motivators. If possible, companies tend to achieve their own goals by imposing their will on others in order to gain access to the necessary resources. This concept derives from the resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) and explains both motivating (forcing) factors to adapt, and the ones opposing it.

In the early studies, adaptation in the business-to-business relationship was recognized as one of the processes of relationships. Later, Brennan and Turnbull proposed extension of this approach by the factors motivating to adaptation and the effects of this process (Brennan and Turnbull, 1999). Our aim is to extend the discussed areas by demonstrating the relationship of adaptation' range with negative relationship outcomes.

There has been a wide range of approaches to the division of adaptation in the literature and it appears that at least for now, none of them has been widely acknowledged. The most obvious division is based on the direction of the adaptation (Hallén and Sandström, 1991), where it can be distinguished as one-sided (unilateral) adaptation in the relationships of asymmetrical dependence or reciprocal adaptation in the relationships based on trust. Schmidt and colleagues (2007) claimed that adaptation could be divided into hard ones which concern a product and production processes, and soft ones, which refer to human behaviour within the frames of organization. They noted that different motives lead to the adaptation of different elements within the frames of the relationship: hard adaptations result from of operating conditions, while soft adaptations emerge from a desire to develop relationships by strengthening trust and commitment. Thus Johanson and Mattsson (1987) distinguished between five different dimensions of adaptation:

1. technical, referring to modifying product features or services,
2. logistical, concerning adjusting or developing common delivery systems or services,
3. administrative, which means adapting formal aspects of cooperation,
4. knowledge-related, referring to adopting knowledge-sharing and communicating, ,
5. financial, referring to adapting for example payment requirements.

Configuration approach to the company suggested by Miller (1987) gives us the opportunity to treat a company as a collection of interdependent elements that interact with each other. Taking such a approach to the adaptation lets us assume that a different configuration of adaptation in the mentioned dimensions occur in companies.

THE INFLUENCE OF ADAPTATION ON RELATIONSHIP

Adaptation is a process, which changes the relationship. The process of introducing changes to meet customer's expectations is regarded as a value (Walter et al., 2003). Also, the state of adjustment achieved through adaptation has positive implications: knowledge transfer (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), communication effectiveness (Kim et al., 2006) and complexity reduction (Gosselin and Bauwen, 2006). However, these studies do not exhaust the issue of adaptation effect, because they do not refer to the full range of tasks performed within the supplier and customer relationships.

There is also the other side of the coin. The adaptation raises concerns about levels of dependence of the supplier and customer and a potential lack of flexibility. The resource-based view of company treats a company as a collection of resources and competencies that differentiate it from competitors. If unique resources are invested in one relationship, it cannot be used for another customer (Barney, 2001). On the basis of the resource-based view we can explain that adaptations become an investment in the relationship: they require time and increased certainty that the invested effort will bring the expected result. Therefore adaptations might generate more dependence among the relationship's entities. Therefore

adaptation is associated with negative consequences, which can be classified as blocked resources, lost possibilities and higher costs. Costs result from investing in activities necessary to make organizational or behavioural changes, in order to meet the expectations of another company or to consider new market conditions. Adaptations, especially the ones that go far, can be dangerous because they increase dependence from the particular subject. This relationship has an economic dimension, when the carried investments make a break in cooperation unprofitable. Additionally, the use of scarce resources to meet the expectations of a particular relationship makes the resources inaccessible to other areas. The costs of changing partners as a result of adaptation may be too high and may block this change, even if other factors justify such a decision (Schmidt et al., 2007).

DETERMINANTS OF ADAPTATION IN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Thompson and colleagues (1998) claim that market-based interactions in construction industry are standard, and little attention is paid to relationship development. Constructing companies are often accused of taking on a short-term perspective, refusing the introduction of innovations (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), and avoiding techniques, which successfully worked out in other endeavours (Shammas-Toma et al., 1998). On the whole, these companies are not convinced to develop long-term supplier-customer relationships and do not make use of their potential (Cox, 1996, Anvuur and Kumaraswamy, 2007). Even if the decision to strengthen the relationship is made, it is not clear how to move from this strategic decision to an operational level (Sundquist et al., 2012).

Dubois and Gadde (2002) explain the reasons for this avoidance through the following factors: the complexity of construction projects that are inter-connected, high levels of uncertainty, a focus on the realization of a target project, a need to implement actions to the local conditions of a maintained project, and the influence of tender procedures and a cost approach to the rate of effectiveness. These factors cause the construction industry to be perceived as focused on time limited projects and switching suppliers from one project to another. As a result, it is difficult to develop long-term relationships with customers. This picture of the construction industry emerges from research conducted in the countries of the European Union. Bresnen and Marshall (2000) state that the cooperation in this market in the UK is “a deviation from the standard”. Dubois and Gadde (2002) report that, in Sweden, opportunistic behaviour and a transaction-orientation prevail. Crespin-Mazet and Protier write about common adversarial arms-length relationships and infrequent partnerships in the French market (Crespin-Mazet and Portier, 2010).

Similarly, in Poland, the implementation of the concept of relationship marketing is very limited in the construction industry. Economic crisis, lost investments, and low commissions in the construction industry in 2008-2010 presented barriers to increasing the use of relationship marketing. During an economic downturn and drop in investments, the lack of trust with business partners was particularly strong because some investors made use of the economic crisis to avoid contractual financial obligations (Signetzki, 2012).

Construction companies avoid adapting to a single customer because they appreciate the benefits from avoiding dependence and not needing to adapt to a particular customer. The necessity of adaptation raises concerns about levels of dependence of the supplier and customer, and potential lack of flexibility. Construction companies avoid relying on one particular supplier, especially if it is a necessary requirement to doing business. Standardization is considered to be more effective than customization (Love et al., 1999).

Our considerations indicate that in construction industry the conditions for adaptation in the relationship with the customer might not be favourable. Such situation exists despite the complexity of the construction projects and their high value. Therefore, it is reasonable to test

empirically what is the scope of adaptation business relationships among companies in the construction industry

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Our considerations lead us to three research questions. The first one concerns the scope of adaptation, the second one the variation of that scope and the last one the consequences of adaptation.

The investigations on the construction industry might suggest a low level of adaptations. On the other hand, generally high adaptation is perceived as a way to develop relationship. Therefore, we assume that there are firms operating in construction industry that will vary their approach to adaptations. We suspect that it is possible to identify some companies that emphasize the role of adaptation and to distinguish them in terms of size and business profile. Therefore we ask the question:

Q1: What is the level of technical, financial, logistical, administrative and knowledge-related adaptation to customers in construction industry?

Size of the company or its business profile (company service, trade, production) as determinant of the relationship adaptation in these areas hasn't been investigated yet. Larger companies can use power in relationship so they might not be willing to adapt. According to the nature of adaptation, which implies change it can be assumed that in the case of manufacturing companies it is more demanding to make changes in the production process than modify service in service companies. Therefore we expect differences in the level of technical adaptation depending on the profile of the company. Moreover it is expected that the level of adaptation in logistics dimension would be lower in service companies because of the nature of services (intangibility and inseparability of the service process with a client). That leads us to ask:

Q2: What is the correlation between adaptation level and company variables (size and profile) in construction industry?

The third research question stems from the correlation between efforts invested in adapting to customer and supplier dependency. On the basis of the literature reviewed here, this correlation should be positive. In construction industry adaptations generate dependence among the relationship's entities, which is why construction companies avoid adapting to a single customer. They appreciate the benefits from avoiding dependence and not having to adapt to a particular customer (Love et al., 1999). Therefore construction companies consider standardisation to be more effective than customisation (Sundquist et al., 2012). Therefore we ask the question:

Q3: How do companies with a high and low level of adaptation to customers perceive negative outcomes of relationships in construction industry?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study focuses on the impact of adaptation on relationship outcomes. Adaptation in most business-to-business cases is unilateral – it is a supplier who adjusts to a buyer's needs and expects material or non-material results in return. Adaptations on the customer's side appear to be infrequent (Schmidt et al., 2007). That is why we adopt a sales manager perspective in our research.

In a survey method, we ask the sales manager to respond regarding a specific customer, in order to avoid too general of considerations. This approach was adopted from Ulaga and Eggert research on perceived relationship value (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). We asked sales managers to choose a key customer, assuming that such a relationship could be seen as

important enough to trigger adaptation by the supplier. Such an approach refers to studies which concern activities directed towards alignment with key customers, which can create competitive advantage (Gosselin and Bauwen, 2006). We chose sales managers as they act as boundary spanners and link supplier organization with a customer because of their joint work with customers and with other functional areas within the company (Beverland, 2001). We undertake to examine this issue utilizing quantitative data, given that there is limited empirical insight on the issue. To collect data, the questionnaire was prepared and it included questions concerning adaptation activities, relationship outcomes, and details of the examined companies.

VARIABLES AND MEASURES

Adaptation was operationalized basing on the division recognized by Johanson and Mattsson (1987): technical, administrative, logistical, referring to knowledge and financial (Table 1). Negative outcomes of adaptation were defined as customer service costs, reliance on key customers and limiting possibilities of developing new project by engaging to relationships with key customers (Table 2). It measured in relation to the closest competitor. Higher level means that respondent evaluates those outcomes as lower than competitors have (Fonfara, 2012). For all items, five point Likert scales were used to measure results. Company variables were measured by: size of company (number of employees) and company main operations profile (trade, service, manufactory, mixed).

Table 1. Operationalization of adaptations

financial	ADAPT_F	We adjust price level to customer expectations
		We adjust time and conditions of payment to customer expectations
		We adjust product/service parameters to customer expectations
technical	ADAPT_T	We adjust product/service parameters to customer expectations
		We adjust product/service quality to customer expectations
logistics	ADAPT_L	We adjust quantity of instalment/batch to customer expectations
		We adjust delivery date and conditions to customer expectations
knowledge	ADAPT_K	We adjust employees competences to customer expectations
		We adjust desire to knowledge sharing to customer expectations
		We adjust methods of communication to customer expectations
administrative	ADAPT_A	We adjust methods of placing orders to customer expectations
		We adjust level of work formalization to customer expectations
		We adjust working time to customer expectations
		We adjust business practice and processes to customer expectations

Table 2. Operationalization of relational outcomes (comparing to close competitors)

negative outcomes avoidance	REL_A	Key customer service doesn't prevent us from entering into new projects
		Key customers service doesn't affect negatively the efforts to find new customers
		Cost of key customers service and management are lower

RESEARCH PROCESS AND SAMPLE

734 trade fair exhibitors took part in the survey (except for governmental, branch institutions and media). Persons responsible for sales' tasks such as: preparing offers, contacting customers, planning sales, or developing products/services in the companies were invited to take part in the study. A drop and collect questionnaire was chosen as a research tool whose advantages are: high rate of filled in copies and, lower cost comparing to direct interviews (Brock and Ibeh, 2003). This method is recommended to use during research conducted in trade fair environments (Leszczyński and Zieliński, 2007). The final sample consisted of 286 returned questionnaires (including 66 companies from abroad), for a response rate 39.3%.

The test group consisted of key account managers, sales managers and trading directors. Respondents can be described as experienced, as half of them have been working for 8 or more years. Half of the companies dealt with commerce, while one third dealt with manufacturing. The majority of examined companies represented SME (Me=30 persons) (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents' characteristics

Respondent's position	Sales Directors 27% Sales Manager 30% Key Account Manager 43%
Previous job experience in sales (number of years)	quartile I 5 years median 8 years quartile III 13,75 years
Company profile	trade 51,9% services 28,0% manufacturing 35%
Enterprise by size class (number of employees)	quartile I 12 pers. median 30 pers. quartile III 100 pers.

DATA ANALYSIS

First, the reliability of the ADAPT (α -Cronbach: F=0,82, T=0,82, L=0,74, K=0,76, A=0,83) and REL_A (α -Cronbach: 0,72) indexes were assessed. Then the range of adaptation through the prism of size of the company and its profile was tested.

Basing on the ADAPT indexes, the community sample was divided into three clusters (cluster analysis, grouping, clustering by k-means). The division was confined to three clusters, as increasing the number led to further division of clusters consisting of few units.

The clusters were compared by the number of employees and business profile. We also examined whether clusters differed from each other in respect to adaptive activities. Such

defined clusters were also compared by the level of perceived relationship negative outcomes. For each cluster, a correlation matrix of the ADAPT-REL_A elements was formulated. As a result, the profile of each segment was identified.

RESULTS

Analysing the obtained results it should be noted that respondents declare efforts, which lead to adaptation to a key customer in all dimensions. The highest adaptation can be observed in the technical area (Me = 4.19) and the lowest one - in the financial (Me = 3.89) and administrative (3.92) dimensions. In the case of two other dimensions (logistical and knowledge sharing) adaptation results were on the same level (Table 4).

There is a weak correlation between the level of adaptation and type of company. Only in the case of one dimension of adaptation – knowledge-related dimension – did a significant difference between different types of companies occur. Adaptation in this dimension was lower among manufactory companies (Me = 3.73) than in service or trade ones (Table 4).

Table 4 . Level of adaptation and type of company

dimension of adaptation	sample	type of company			
		manufactory	mixed type	trade	service
financial	3.89	3.86	3.99	3.82	3.72
technical	4.19	4.07	4.15	4.22	4.29
logistical	4.07	4.00	4.07	4.05	4.13
administrative	3.92	3.75	3.98	3.84	3.98
knowledge	4.06	3.73	4.18*	4.09*	4.14*

* significant differences between contrary to manufactory companies, U-Mann Whitney test, at $p < 0,05$

Analysis of Pearson correlation showed no relationship between the size of the company and declared adaptation measures in all areas (Table 5).

Table 5..Correlations of level of adaptation and size of company (number of employees)

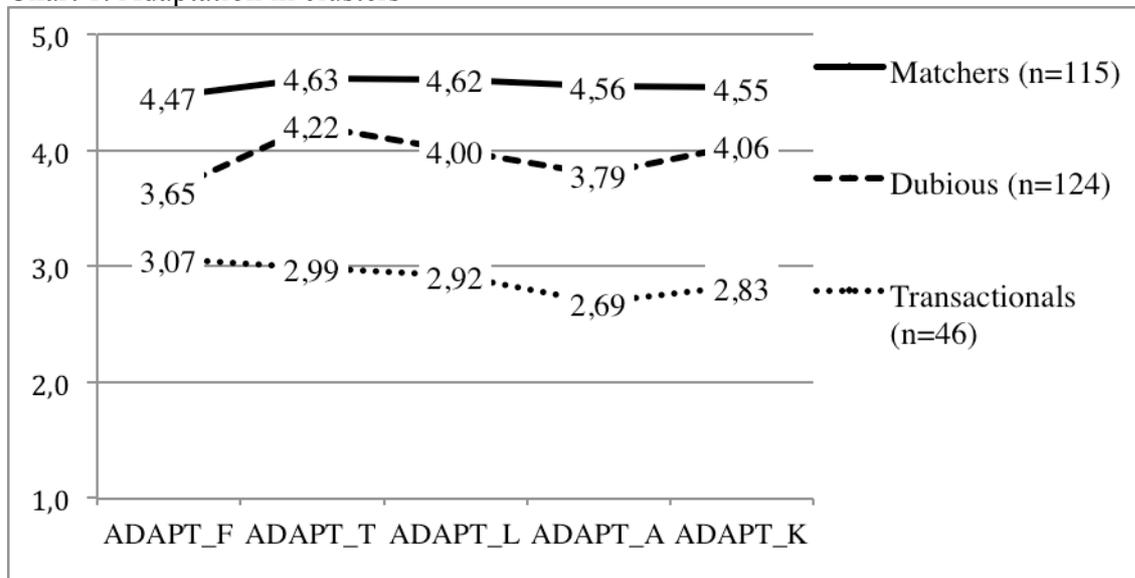
dimension of adaptation	size of company
financial	0,02
technical	0,02
logistical	-0,04
administrative	0,11
knowledge	-0,01

Cluster analysis recognised three segments (Chart 1). Our assumption was confirmed that there are entities that have different approaches to adaptation:

1. Cluster 1 “Transactionals” (16,1% sample): declares the smallest effort in adaptation, compared to the rest of the respondents. Respondents from this segment paid the least attention to adapting to the administrative field (statistically significant at $p > 0,05$), and shared similar levels in other dimensions.
2. Cluster 2 “Dubious” (43,5% sample): the most numerous segment which is characterized by an average and diversified effort to adapt to the key customer. The only similarity in adaptation was found between logistic and administrative dimensions, other were statistically different at $p > 0,05$.
3. Cluster 3 “Matchers” (40,4% sample): this group declares a high rate of adaptation in their attitude to key customers in each field. The only difference in adaptation was found

between financial and technical dimensions (statistically significant at $p > 0,05$), others were similar.

Chart 1. Adaptation in clusters



Recognized segments differed from each other with regard to adaptive activities ADAPT_F,C,K,A,L, but there was no record of differences between them regarding the features of entities which formed each cluster (entity's country of origin, field of activity, the number of employees) (U-Mann Whitney test, $p < 0,05$).

Relationship outcomes in the given clusters differed (Table 4.). In the case of the Matchers, outcomes were higher than in the two other clusters. Transactional were marginally lower (but statistically insignificant) than the Dubious (U-Mann Whitney test, $p < 0,05$).

Table 4. Relational negative outcomes in clusters

	Clusters compared (mean)	
	Dubious	Transactional
REL_A	3,67*	3,33*
	Matchers	Dubious
REL_A	4,26*	3,67*
	Matchers	Transactional
REL_A	4,26*	3,33*

* significant, U Mann-Whitney test t, $p < 0,05$

Our study results show that less than half of the examined companies from the construction industry conduct significant adaptation with their key customer. Most of companies report such activities to be limited what may indicate transactional approach to key customer. Concentration of the companies with a transactional approach partly confirms the assumptions that the adaptation in the construction industry may be limited, due to the advantage of the transactional one (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Partly, because our research showed that one could not confirm that adaptive activities in the construct industry are rare. Moreover, the study reveals that higher adaptation to the key customer resulted in better dealing with negative outcomes than their closest competitors. Matchers perceived negative outcomes from the relationship with their key customers (blocked resources or possibilities, costs) as lower than other two groups. We suppose that those companies can balance the level

of adaptation to achieve acceptable costs and investment of resources. We can speculate that those companies know how to combine flexibility with independency.

In the case of the Transactional group one can observe that among all the adaptive activities, the highest effort was put into the financial dimension. Opposite attitudes emerged in the Dubious group, where the field of the least level of adaptation was finance. The lack of adaptation in Dubious cluster in financial dimension, even if there is effort put in adaptation to the other areas, leads to a little bit better results when it comes to lower negative outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

Adaptation is a process that should lead to creating closer relationships between the supplier and the customer. Hence, the supplier should experience its positive effects, although the negative results of too close of a relationship or overinvestment in adaptation may also appear. The latest study results show that these relationships in the construction industry are too weak. More than half of the companies, which took part in the survey do not put a lot of effort into adaptation. In their cases relational negative outcomes were on the same or almost the same level as among competitors (at least they perceive it in this way). Given the Matchers group, which behaves differently from typical assumptions, the picture of relationships in the construction industry changes. In over one third of the companies, adaptation processes are strong and concern all areas of relationships with customers. These companies evaluate the level of negative relationship outcomes lower than competitors have. It somehow presents a brand new picture of the construction industry, where adaptation and solid relationships exist but are not obvious.

LIMITATIONS

The study results should be seen from the perspective of specific conditions of the construction industry. Specific features of that industry limit possibilities to compare the results/comments with other industries. Curtailing the research within the frame of construction industry itself is determined by the choice of the sample.

Conducting surveys during exhibition fairs allows us to receive data at the same time, reducing the impact of irrelevant factors on the respondents' opinions. On the other hand, companies taking part in the exhibition fairs as exhibitors may not be representative of the entire industry.

Respondents answered questions concerning only one relationship - with the key customer. We chose this method because it was difficult to collect data on relationships with various customers using a quantitative survey method. We are aware, however, that this can restrict the result received from the research. Results showing the relationship outcomes should also be carefully interpreted, since they are based on the respondents' subjective evaluation.

In the next relationship it seems worth examining whether the nature of the relationship with the key customer determines the adaptation and its results. This could be examined through the set of relationships' features proposed by Ritter and Geersbro (2012): value, quality, relationship structure, and activities whose subject-matter are relationships. Positive effects of adaptations could be also measured in the next research.

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