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**Relational competence of a firm as a determinant of inter-organizational relations' effectiveness and efficiency - a study from Polish market<sup>1</sup>**

Competitive paper

**Abstract**

**Purpose of the paper and literature addressed:** The main purpose of the paper is to show intra-organizational factors building relational capability of a firm and to indicate their importance in achieving success in business cooperation. Relational capability contains abilities and routines of different type necessary at subsequent stages of partnership. Factors building the complex nature of relational capability are broadly analysed in relations management literature. Predominantly attention is put on them individually, and still less attention is given to systemic analyses of relational capability and interactions among its components and their diverse influence on efficiency and effectiveness of cooperation. The paper is based on a thesis that RC quality correlates relation success, but particular RC components affect that success in different ways, so if organizations want to successfully manage sustainability and develop effectiveness of their relationships and networks, they should properly understand the impact of their relational capability components to overall cooperation success. RC is conceptualized according to ideas proposed by relational view in strategic management, resource-based view, dynamic capabilities approach and IMP Group.

**Research method:** The paper is founded on research conducted in 2014 among 253 Polish companies experienced in different forms of cooperation. Hypotheses were tested using Spearman correlation, hierarchical multiple regression and dominance analyses.

**Research findings:** The findings bring information about general quality and structure of Polish companies' relational capability. In depth analysis shows the role that different relational capability components play in partnership's performance: relation's goal reaching - effectiveness and economic advantage - efficiency.

**Main contribution:** The effect of the paper is conceptualisation of a multidimensional construct that comprises broad range of competences building company relational competence as a higher order measure and indicating critical areas of that competence at organizational level necessary for successful partnership, which gives assumption for building better structured relational competence and create relationship-based advantage.

**Keywords:** inter-organizational relations, inter-firm business cooperation, relational competence, relationship success factors.

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## RELATIONAL COMPETENCE - THEORETICAL ASPECTS

### RELATIONAL COMPETENCE CHARACTERISTICS

Inter-firm relation is a process which requires using various abilities at subsequent stages of partnership. According to general definition of competence as an ability to sustain the coordinated deployment of assets in order to achieve firm's goals (Sanchez et al. 1996), relational competence (RC) is an organizational feature necessary to successfully take part in inter-organizational relations (IORs). Organizational relational capabilities represent a set of critical success factors for advantageous partnership (Moss Kanter, 1994, Doz, 1996, Holtbrugge, 2004) and create the source of competitive power based on and embedded in IORs. Relational advantage comes from the ownership of knowledge and competences to build and manage IORs (Godfrey & Hill, 1995; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Casciaro & Piskorski, 2005; Lavie, 2006). Relational competence is a complex system of company's features that create its "capability to interact with other companies" (Lorenzoni & Lipparini, 1999, p. 317), ability of "being a good partner" (Moss Kanter, 1994, p. 96) or ability to "initiate, maintain and utilize relationships with various external partners" (Walter, Auer, & Ritter, 2006, p. 546), "capability to build and manage network relationships based on mutual trust, communication and commitment" (Blomqvist & Levy, 2006, p. 31). This feature - relational competence is a higher order resource - metacompetence combining more basic resources (Hunt et al. 2002), core competence underlying successful relations' management strategy (Hamel & Prahalad 1990).

Above definitions' juxtaposition shows relational competence as a subject of interest of scholars referring to different theoretical foundations. In this study RC is conceptualized according to ideas proposed by relational view in strategic management, resource-based view, dynamic capabilities approach and IMP Group.

Representatives of relational view in strategic management see RC as source of relational rents stemming from: internal ties of resources collections and bonds of actors using them; certain inter- and intra-organizational structures, routines and sequential learning processes creating path dependency advantage of firm's resources and their embeddedness in network of relations (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Lorenzoni & Lipparini, 1999; Kale, Dyer, & Singh, 2002; Lavie, 2006; Gulati, Lavie, & Singh, 2009).

According to RBV and competence-based approach, to gain competitive and developmental advantages from cooperative relations a firm shall possess some abilities necessary to work out a satisfactory cooperation process, to be able to design and shape relational context of a company and its presence in business networks (Barney, 1991; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Barney, 1995; Hunt & Morgan, 1996; Hunt, 1997; Hunt, 2000). Relational competence is seen as a core competence underpinning competitive advantage - in this case gained through participation in inter-organizational relations (Hamel & Prahalad 1994).

Relational capabilities theorizing uses also dynamic capabilities approach. RC is an ability to search for and exploit new opportunities connected with cooperation, to develop, reconfigure and protect knowledge and other assets necessary to build competitive advantage on the basis of firm's involvement in inter-organizational relations. Relational competence is then a dynamic competence - stable pattern of collective activities, learned over time and changing over time, developing, renewing itself aiming at congruence with the changing business environment, but also prone to deterioration over time (Teece & Pisano, 1994; Teece, 2007).

According to ideas proposed by the IMP scholars RC is not a firm's exclusive possession, but relationship actors build it in interaction processes. RC consists of procedures and resources created by a focal company but also co-created and shared with partners. The value of relational competence depends on types of processes it is used within the

relationship. In those processes RC components show their suitability and utility in creating effective and efficient relation in terms both of company's strategic goals, and common objectives. RC helps to leverage the interaction of partners and to build effective connections of processes realized together, and of activities that partners exclusively specialize in. RC and its components are resources changing their structure in partners interaction process, affected by relation's environment and atmosphere. (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2003; Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2009; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snehota, 2011). Relational competence gives a company ability to move effectively and efficiently through relation's life-cycle stages, supports relation's key success factors, enables company to understand and neutralize negative aspects of relation as a form of organizational interdependence. RC is an organizational phenomenon, set of activities necessary to initiate, develop, maintain and finish business relationship with mutually satisfactory results. It's an organizational predecessor of company's networking advantage (Ritter et al. 2002) Ritter & Gemünden, 2003; Walter et al., 2006; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, Snehota, & Waluszewski, 2008; Mitreğa, Ramos, Forkmann, & Henneberg, 2011).

According to the aforementioned ideas, in this article relational competence is defined as dynamic competence of systemic character, consisting of resources, organizational routines, procedures and behaviours affecting strategic choice according to cooperative behaviour and influencing organizational effectiveness and efficiency in IORs. Relational competence is a bundle of capabilities and resources of critical meaning to organization's ability to create the IOR's interaction process, both in short term episodes and long term relationships. RC helps to proactively or reactively affect the general atmosphere for interaction, especially partners' cooperation, closeness and expectations meeting aspects. RC components reside inside organization and come from interaction between organization and its partners, so are partially common. RC as a core competence enables organization to gain competitive advantage through participation in IORs. Relational competence quality influences relations' effectiveness and efficiency level.

*H1: The higher relational competence of a firm, the higher its effectiveness and efficiency in inter-organizational relations.*

#### RELATIONAL COMPETENCE COMPONENTS

RC should be analysed with a multilayered approach, both in aggregate as a complex competence, and according to its components and interdependencies among them. RC is a social capability, its value is created by individuals in a role of executors, processes managers and team members who create and use RC's and create inter- and intra-organizational social bonds that support common activities and mitigate problems. RC is also affected by supporting organizational culture (Ritter et al., 2002; Håkansson et al., 2009; Speakman, Isabella, & MacAvoy, 2000).

Relational competence components may be analyzed with reference to subjects / actors involved, on a network, inter-organizational, organizational, team and individuals' levels (Gulati, Zaheer, & Nohria, 2000; Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Another approach concentrates on specific organizational and managerial features necessary to meet relations' critical success factors and gain relational rent: relation specific assets, inter- and intra-organizational functions, processes, value chain links, knowledge sharing routines, complementarities in resources and effective alliance governance procedures (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Ritter et al., 2002; Blomqvist & Levy, 2006; Lavie, 2006). Firm's collaborative advantage is based on three groups of cooperative capabilities - RC components: (1) ability to

identify economically valuable set of complementary assets in the environment; (2) ability to assess real value of combined external and internal assets from the individual and mutual strategic perspective; (3) ability to manage the alliance appropriately in order to achieve a win-win result (Hansen, Hoskisson, & Barney, 2008). The sources of these capabilities lay in firm's specific features and their quality determine its bargaining position/power in the relationship (Barney, 2002). Its building blocks are: knowledge about relations and their managerial processes, organizational processes supporting relations' management, attitude towards relations, managerial competences, learning ability (Heimeriks & Duysters 2007).

Relational capability is time embedded, process approach which requires perceiving RC components as *ex ante* and *ex post* ones in a process of creating competitive advantage through relations (Anderson 1990; Holtbrugge 2004). *Ex ante* RC is influencing organization's ability and willingness to cooperate before partnership and contains its partner selection and cooperation framing competence. Crucial elements of *ex ante* RC are also: relational experience on organizational level and organization members engagement and motivation on individual level. *Ex post* RC components are those that affect effectiveness and efficiency of established partnership management.

Proposed here model of relational competence is based on both managerial tasks necessary to meet critical success factors (Ritter et al. 2002) and relationship process management approach (Ford et al. 2011). RC components are divided into sets of attitudes, resources and activities adequate to relation development stages. Set of RC components was created on the basis of literature preview. Their characteristics and roles in inter-organizational relations are presented hereunder.

*Pre-relation competences* set the foundations for firm's readiness to go into relations, create attitude towards cooperation necessary to find a proper partner and arrange partnership. Relational capital serves company's reputation and trustworthiness, affects its attitude towards relations and knowledge of their critical success factors, positively impacts pre-relational capability by guiding appropriate selection decisions and fostering mechanisms of mutual trust, reciprocity and loyalty that weaken negative effects of partner's opportunistic behavior (Gulati 1995b; Gulati et al. 2009). Pre-relational competences are affected by company's relational trust creating mechanisms: calculative - rational, based on strategic, economic analysis explaining partners' position and behaviors, and non-calculative, based on assumptions coming from knowledge about partner's real behaviors and shared values, incorporated by both partners, which creates and strengthens conviction of mutual trustworthiness (Dyer & Chu, 2000; Gulati, 1995a; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Pre-relational capabilities should enable company to make optimal decision about which partner to choose knowing that partnering experience - "the shadow of the past" has both positive and negative aspects (Gulati & Sych, 2008). The latter are: tendency to favor familiar firms in partner selecting process and to build less restrictive, more general contractual frames; repeating positive past experience by reconstructing context of former alliances into present ones; relying too much on familiar partners may weaken firm's alertness to new opportunities as well as opportunistic behavior and undermine learning capability due to inertia (Hoffmann et al. 2010). Pre-relation competences consist of: knowledge about possible legal and organizational forms of partnership, proper understanding of company's needs towards partnership and potential partners as well as analytical procedures and capabilities building *partner selection competence*. Mechanisms of proper partner selection, in search for appropriate resources, organizational similarity and cultural coherence of potential partners help to reduce potential transaction costs and enable partner-oriented "situation specific management" (Human & Naudé 2009), necessary to know the partner and to be prepared to all adaptations new partnership would require (Ford et al. 2011).

*Relation management competences* group managerial capabilities, business processes and organizational structures elaborated to satisfy the demands of partners' goals, common activities, cultural background convergence procedures and power relations (Boddy, Macbeth & Wagner 2000). That group includes competences necessary to maintain the relation: planning competences, common activities management competences, communication and integrating competences, knowledge management competences, problem solving competences, position in relation and relation efficiency management competences.

*Relation planning competences* include ability to choose preferable relation governance mode, goal setting ability including readiness to compromise on partners' mutual and own goals, relation planning routines (decisive for the ability to create effective contractual tools to frame partners' rights and duties interdependencies, inter-partner organizational and technical fit framing, relation scheduling). Relation planning competences are a function of pre-relational competence, contract building competence, social embeddedness, relation-specific bargaining power and ability to assess which governance mode is the best in particular situation's gain maximizing – opportunity minimizing paradox (Hansen, Hoskinsson & Barney 2008). Appropriate governance mode understood as a set of general governing rules defining: power and duty sharing, resources exchange, profit distribution, control variables and problem solving. may influence the effectiveness of the alliance as a tool to minimize opportunism risk. As a managerial capability component, alliance governance routines may be also seen as a competence to foresee which governance approach would be the most efficient in a certain situation: discrete contracting or relational contracting (Ring, Ven, van de 1992). Proper governance mode choice and execution leads to creation of institutional conditions for reciprocity norms necessary to build social networks based on.

*Common activities management competences* include: relationship structurizing, HRM management, team building; cross-cultural training, relational motivation, leadership. Getting access to partner's resources, inter-partner learning and common goals reaching needs stability and appropriate organizational structure. Relationship structurizing ability is a competence of gaining the balance between governance mechanisms and operations management, ability to structure optimal resource interdependence using contractual and trust-based governance, shared management structures, symmetric power relations and conflict management. It is an ability to make strategic decisions about the most proper economic integration level together with concurrent social and cultural integration. Increased economic integration of partners may improve relation's performance by stronger structural and resource coupling, activated interparty sharing that improve persistence, effectiveness and increase interparty trust. Joint governance and procedural justice leads to optimization of coordination costs, curtails internal uncertainty and intensifies inter-firm ties where necessary, thus enabling the alliance to reach common goals (Gulati & Singh 1998; Gulati 1999; Lorenzoni & Lipparini 1999; Luo 2008). Economic integration also opens door to partners' opportunism and competition for individual profits. Common activities management competence requires also awareness of opportunism and negative effects of experience - inertia, being stuck in once successful scheme of actions, neglecting changing contexts between and inside organizations (Boddy, Macbeth & Wagner 2000). Successful joint actions management requires also relational leadership and effective use of “cultural cross-border commuters” or boundary spanners' tie-building capabilities, building reward system on the success of cooperation not only on individual achievements, effective team building, relational culture creation and intercultural training procedures (Holtbrügge 2004; Child et al. 2005) Common activities management together with communication and integrating competences are factors building relational advantage through creation of trust-based environment for partnership that makes partnership management less costly due to trust-

based, non-contractual safeguards against opportunism (Barney & Hansen 1994; Rooks et al. 2000).

*Communication competences* consisting of individual communicative abilities; usage of communication technology and infrastructure and inter-organizational communication enhancing procedures are crucial to create inter-partner liaisons, minimize information diversity of partners and to guarantee partners' commitment to the relationship (Child & Faulkner 1998; Wahyuni et al. 2007). Partnership development and effectiveness requires that: 1) communication among partners helps to reduce uncertainty, due to raise of trust and switch of partners' efforts towards potential development; 2) communication routines get standardized to increase information exchange, help coordinate partners activities, and to enable partners to enhance the partnership scope due to growing compatibility and trust; 3) partners share decision making procedures (Sulimowska-Formowicz & Stępień 2011).

*Integrating competences* consist of partnership strengthening capabilities; flexibility, adjustment competences; trust building and boundary spanning activities and inter-organizational integrating, organizing and controlling practices necessary for partnership effectiveness and stability. Inter-organizational integration needs successful acculturation process that affects effectiveness and stability of cooperation encouraging mutual understanding and learning processes, reducing conflict ability and thus the need for technocratic coordination mechanisms (Holtbrugge 2004). The source of acculturation capability is the ability to create climate to cultural convergence (Hofstede 2000). Ability to create bonds between partners and with the environment, makes context for the stability of relationship and creates reciprocity effects and loyalty in partners. It is also crucial to effective and efficient processes of partners' resources combining and development (Ford et al. 2011). Inter-partner bonding is a result of the work of individuals in the role of boundary spanners who create communication channels, develop open communication routines, shape mutual perceptions and expectations of partners, help in maintenance of inter-organizational ties at individual and group level and enhance communication effectiveness and inter-partner learning (Gulati & Sytch 2008). They base their actions on personal, also informal ties with their counterparts. Personal relations may provide both formal and informal base for procedures used at different stages of relationship and for conflicts resolution (Ring & Van De 1994). This institutionalization is possible because boundary spanners are seen as representing the organization they come from, and so speaking its voice.

*Knowledge management competences* are individual and organizational learning ability, and knowledge management processes (Cohen & Levinthal 1990; Hamel 1991) decisive to reach sufficient absorptive capacity; internal knowledge management procedures, opportunistic problems avoiding procedures. They are established in order to optimize knowledge exchange and mutual learning in partnership and simultaneously protect company's knowledge potential and to limit opportunism of partner. Learning capability may mean: being able to access and exploit partner's knowledge or being able to internalize partner's assets or even outlearn him. Although learning race is often seen as partnership aberration (Barney 2002), in competitive alliances it is often a common practice aiming at raising bargaining power and competitiveness more than at getting satisfaction from stable and prolonged cooperation (Hamel 1991). According to opportunistic behavior, proper solution may be combining knowledge management with contractual governance, legal tools and trust building by social and institutional embeddedness, but even in fair, durable relationship partners should be alert to actions aimed at interception of assets that were not intended to share. Cooperative learning may be enhanced by inter-organizational factors as: trust, communication and mutual commitment (Morgan & Hunt 1994b). Knowledge exchange mechanisms build inter-firm learning competence, but absorptive capacity must be

created individually, as its quality affects firm's ability to gain from cooperation. Individual knowledge management competences of firms in a network affect their mutual adaptation capabilities and the quality of absorptive capabilities of the whole network participants (Lorenzoni & Lipparini 1999). Interorganizational learning maximization depends on: desire to learn originating from firm's competitive strategy (Hamel 1991); intensity of knowledge transfer (Nonaka I., Takeuchi 1995); openness towards outsiders; knowledge receptivity; affinities of alliance knowledge with partners' knowledge, cultural congruence at individual and group level (Inkpen 1998) and, managerial procedures and activities helping to overcome learning barriers (Child et al. 2005).

*Problem solving competences* stem from problem prevention mode and preferred usage of relational versus contractual approach tools and are build of problem solving mechanisms and resources of partners. Conflicts in business relations come from partners' misfit, power imbalance, opportunistic behavior, own goals prevailing partnership goals which leads to competition with partnership, unequal division of resources, asymmetric engagement and/or asymmetric and unfair profit share, partners' egocentrism (Speakman et al. 2000). Problems may be prevented thanks to risk management mechanisms including: proper partner selection, relations structurizing and appropriate governance mode choice, strong inter-partner trust and embeddedness, as well as strong communicating and integrating skills. Clearly stated rules, transparent actions and information exchange may be crucial not to jeopardize the partnership stability (Vangen & Huxham 2003; Holtbrugge 2004). Efficient conflict resolution mechanisms require organizational capabilities to communicate and negotiate, as well as inter-organizational mechanisms managing partners' behavior and joint actions in conflict situations including procedures coming from partners' organizational culture, framing contract, former experience and customary in partners' network (Mohr & Speakman 1994).

*Position in relation management competence.* Position in relation depends on type of power held in relation, its sources and possibility to exert power both for the relation and for self interest. In inter-organizational relations power may serve for own gain of partner, for mutual gain or to empower the partner in certain activity or role to play in relation (Vangen & Huxham 2005). Position in relation building competence consists of relational and contractual governance mechanisms, procedures, capabilities and managerial competences influencing: self interest protection by exerting firm's bargaining power, ability to protect itself when in weaker position, to create balance of partners' power and to avoid power abuse. Ability to assess and evaluate sources of partner's power, ways of his using it, negotiating competences and framing competences decide of possibility to effectively use trust-based reciprocity mechanism in relation.

*Relation efficiency management.* Complete managerial process should include activities and procedures controlling its course and goals achievement. As relations serve both partnership and self interest, all of them should be monitored in order to: preserve and eliminate opportunism, control adaptations and adjustment of partners and their reciprocity in meeting relation related obligations, track and measure goals' reaching processes and finally assess synergic effects of different relations' intercourse. More formalized processes of control, sufficient monitoring supplements trust based control and helps to prevent and counteract negligence based on excessive trust (Child et al. 2005; Molina-Morales & Martínez-Fernández 2009). Output control mechanisms specify intended results in order to monitor and reward their achievements, and reduce performance risk by timely and oriented strategy adjustments (Das & Teng 2001).

To sum up relational competence consist of special processes dedicated to relation preparation and execution; tasks and approaches specific to relation and shared with partner; special organizational qualifications combined with social capabilities empowering

organizational processes leading to relations' effectiveness and efficiency (Ritter et al. 2002; Ritter & Gemünden 2003; Human 2009).

Although the above juxtaposition of relational competence components may suggest that all of them are equally important and potentially play the same role in relation success, it is important to determine the real role of individual RC components inter-organizational relations' goals reaching and efficiency. This knowledge is crucial to understand and properly manage RC as company core competence and to invest selectively in resources that play a role of relations' critical success factors. Relational competence building strategic options are subject to strategic choice criteria (Grant 1991; Barney 1991; Johnson et al. 2005;). Proper adjustment of RC components to relation-specific goals should contribute to greater relational rent. Thus three following hypotheses were tested to determine the role of particular RC components in relations' success.

*H2: Relational competence components in different manner affect relations success (general effectiveness and efficiency).*

*H3: Relational competence components differently affect particular relation goals reaching (particular effectiveness).*

*H4: Relational competence components differently affect specific cooperation efficiency aspects (particular efficiency).*

## METHOD

### SAMPLE AND DATA

The research was held in 2014 on a sample of 253 Polish companies involved in inter-organizational non-capital cooperative activities with local and foreign partners, and their managers responsible for cooperative relations management. The research sample of organizations of different industries was narrowed down to medium and big production companies (assuming that this group of firms would more probably have diversified cooperative experience and more stable organizational routines). Questioned companies declared involvement in: distribution network, supply chain, outsourcing, joint marketing, joint R&D, co-production and cluster. None of the companies had experience in all types of relations mentioned. They differ in experience according to type of relations, role played in relation, number of partners, partner's origin and length of involvement in partnerships. Data was obtained by PAPI method with the use of own questionnaire.

### VARIABLES

*Relational competence RC* global measure and RC components measures were created as multi-item composite measures. RC global measure was constructed on a basis of a set of components referring to the abovementioned competences critical on subsequent stages of collaboration process management: *partner selection competence, relation planning competence, common activities management competence, communication competence, integrating competence, problem solving competence, knowledge management competence, position in relation management competence, efficiency management competence*. Each of these components measure was built using the same procedure: respondents were asked to declare - tick on a list of activities and procedures building the component, those behaviours and routines that were used on a regular basis in their firms and together with partnering firms. That way every component could have been graded according to the maximum rank (all procedures mentioned), this rank was then weighted with respondent's self estimation of general quality of the possessed component competence level

- separate list of relational competence components was created and respondents were asked to use a five-point Likert scale to estimate their company expertise in each area. This approach was adopted in order to objectivise the measure and to avoid side effect of left-skewness of the data. The concept of RC measure and questionnaire items were inspired by ideas presented in broad literature presented above and some already tested (Lambe et al. 2002; Ritter et al. 2002; Walter et al. 2006; Kale & Singh 2007; Human 2009; Human & Naudé 2009; Schreiner et al. 2009; Mitreğa et al. 2011;)<sup>2</sup>.

*Relation performance* was measured by two dependent variables - *effectiveness* and *efficiency*. Both of them were estimated by a set of perceptual indicators. *Relations' effectiveness* was treated as an extent of goals - motives for relation reached (M. Zollo et al. 2002; Holtbrugge 2004). Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale the degree of their satisfaction with reaching the following objectives: 1. *to maximize sales and clients loyalty*; 2. *to improve offer quality*; 3. *to learn new ways to act*; 4. *to implement new technologies*; 5. *to gain access to capabilities and information we didn't have*; 6. *to lower costs of activities*; 7. *to gain better access to new markets*; 8. *to interact more effectively with competitors thanks to joining forces in the alliance*; 9. *to strengthen firm's position in the environment*; 10. *to increase chances for access to public orders*; 11. *to create lasting interpersonal relations*. These eleven indicators were standardized and summed to construct global measure of relation's effectiveness, which had satisfactory Cronbach alpha of 0,89. To estimate *relations' efficiency*, respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their satisfaction with meeting economic efficiency criteria: 1. *positive financial input to financial output ratio*; 2. *gaining the same or better results but in a shorter time due to cooperation*; 3. *learning things that cannot be bought on the market*; 4. *sum of gains from cooperation exceeding firm workers' effort*. These four indicators were also standardized and summed to construct global measure of relation's efficiency, which had satisfactory Cronbach alpha of 0,83.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

To verify hypotheses a set of nonparametric analyses was used due to moderate and extreme left-side skewness of variables, which were measured with the use of ordinal scales.

*H1: The higher relational competence of a firm, the higher its effectiveness and efficiency in cooperation.*

Table 1 shows that there is a significant positive Spearman correlation between the level of relational competence and both cooperation effectiveness and efficiency, but the impact of RC on relation's effectiveness is slightly stronger than on efficiency.

**Table 1. Relational competence and cooperation effectiveness and efficiency correlations**

	R
general relational competence & cooperation effectiveness	0,50***
general relational competence & cooperation efficiency	0,44***

\*\*\* p<0,001; \*\* p<0,01; \* p<0,05

Successful inter-organizational relation execution is a process demanding capabilities of different types at subsequent stages, not all of relational competence components are equally important in their influence on final results of cooperation. Following hypotheses concern relations among RC components and relations' results.

<sup>2</sup> Complete list of items used available from the author.

*H2: Relational competence components in different manner affect relations success (general effectiveness and efficiency).*

General observation from correlation analysis is that consequently all relational competence components show stronger correlation to cooperation effectiveness than to its efficiency. The role of components in relationship results is slightly different. As it is seen in Table 2, in questioned sample, three groups of relational components may be analysed together:

1. group of strongest impact consists of: knowledge management, position in relation management and efficiency management capabilities
2. group of medium impact consists of: partner selection, problem solving and integrating capabilities
3. group of weakest impact consists of: communication, relation planning and common activities management.

What is interesting is that in second group the order is different for effectiveness and efficiency - if the relation is to be effective - reaching planned goals - partner selection and problem solving competences are of greater importance than integrating partners, but if it comes to partnership efficiency - profit making aspects - partners' integrating competences are more important, before problem solving and partner selection abilities.

**Table 2. Relational competence components, cooperation effectiveness and efficiency correlations.**

RELATIONAL COMPETENCE COMPONENTS	COOPERATION EFFECTIVENESS	RELATIONAL COMPETENCE COMPONENTS	COOPERATION EFFICIENCY
	R		R
Knowledge management	0,46***	Knowledge management	0,41***
Position in relation management	0,46**	Position in relation management	0,39***
Efficiency management	0,44**	Efficiency management	0,38***
Partner selection	0,43***	Integrating	0,34***
Problem solving	0,40***	Problem solving	0,34***
Integrating	0,36***	Partner selection	0,29***
Communication	0,35***	Communication	0,29***
Relation planning	0,26***	Relation planning	0,24***
Common activities management	0,26***	Common activities management	0,23***

\*\*\* p<0,001; \*\* p<0,01; \* p<0,05

After correlating relational competence components and relations' effectiveness and efficiency, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to determine not only the fact of correlation/liaison between variables but also the strength of RC components influence on relations' outcomes (Table 3). Relations' effectiveness and efficiency are dependent variables here and RC components build 9 models of independent variables: successively one after one of nine RC components were added as follows: partner selection, relation planning, common activities management, communication, integrating, problem solving, knowledge management, position in relation management and efficiency management competence. Additionally, considering the side effect of right-skewness of the data, bootstrap analysis was used (MacKinnon et al. 2002). The analyses show that significant predictors of effectiveness, and visibly dominant independent variables are: problem solving competence and knowledge management competence, as shown in Table 3, in model 9 those variables dominate over other variables, when added to the regression model (models 6 and 7)  $\Delta R^2$  raises significantly, entering them into multiple regression equation causes significance loss of remaining variables, which explain respectively about 18% of effectiveness. Identically held analyses show that significant predictors of efficiency are also: problem solving and knowledge management competences, in model 9<sup>a</sup>.

**Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis - RC components influence on relations' outcomes - effectiveness and efficiency**

EFFECTIVENESS						EFFICIENCY					
Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Δ R <sup>2</sup>	F Δ R <sup>2</sup>	Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Δ R <sup>2</sup>	F Δ R <sup>2</sup>
1	0,36	0,13	0,12	0,13	36,09	1 <sup>a</sup>	0,30	0,09	0,09	0,09	25,64
2	0,38	0,14	0,14	0,02	5,42	2 <sup>a</sup>	0,33	0,11	0,10	0,01	4,13
3	0,38	0,15	0,14	0,00	1,01	3 <sup>a</sup>	0,34	0,11	0,10	0,01	1,59
4	0,40	0,16	0,15	0,01	3,59	4 <sup>a</sup>	0,36	0,13	0,12	0,02	4,59
5	0,41	0,17	0,15	0,01	1,98	5 <sup>a</sup>	0,40	0,16	0,14	0,03	8,16
6	0,46	0,21	0,19	0,04	13,15	6 <sup>a</sup>	0,45	0,20	0,18	0,04	13,07
7	0,49	0,24	0,22	0,03	10,04	7 <sup>a</sup>	0,48	0,23	0,21	0,03	9,85
8	0,49	0,24	0,22	0,00	0,67	8 <sup>a</sup>	0,48	0,23	0,21	0,00	1,07
9	0,50	0,25	0,22	0,00	0,96	9 <sup>a</sup>	0,49	0,24	0,21	0,00	1,19

Models	Independent variables	Standardized β	Lower limit	Upper limit	Models	Independent variables	Standardized β	Lower limit	Upper limit
1	partner selection	<b>0,355***</b>	<b>0,225</b>	<b>0,414</b>	1 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection	<b>0,304***</b>	<b>0,151</b>	<b>0,342</b>
2	partner selection relation planning	<b>0,284***</b> <b>0,153*</b>	<b>0,150</b> <b>0,020</b>	<b>0,362</b> <b>0,174</b>	2 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning	<b>0,242***</b> <b>0,137*</b>	<b>0,092</b> <b>0,004</b>	<b>0,298</b> <b>0,149</b>
3	partner selection relation planning common activities m.	<b>0,250**</b> <b>0,138*</b> 0,073	<b>0,106</b> <b>0,006</b> -0,054	<b>0,344</b> <b>0,163</b> 0,208	3 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m.	0,198** 0,117* 0,093	0,043 -0,011 -0,041	0,277 0,140 0,209
4	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication	<b>0,205**</b> 0,099 0,020 <b>0,157*</b>	<b>0,066</b> -0,021 -0,102 <b>0,008</b>	<b>0,305</b> 0,144 0,158 <b>0,211</b>	4 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication	0,146* 0,072 0,032 0,181	-0,001 -0,041 -0,101 -0,001	0,241 0,118 0,162 0,222
5	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating	<b>0,183*</b> 0,117 -0,041 0,069 0,163	<b>0,048</b> -0,014 -0,186 -0,081 -0,035	<b>0,281</b> 0,155 0,133 0,172 0,295	5 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating	0,100 0,109 -0,092 0,000 <b>0,332**</b>	-0,040 -0,023 -0,233 -0,145 <b>0,089</b>	0,206 0,144 0,079 0,133 <b>0,416</b>
6	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving	0,119 0,061 -0,121 -0,004 <b>0,209*</b> <b>0,276***</b>	-0,018 -0,046 -0,258 -0,131 <b>0,010</b> <b>0,090</b>	0,233 0,115 0,048 0,116 <b>0,333</b> <b>0,250</b>	6 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving	0,036 0,053 -0,172* -0,072 <b>0,379**</b> <b>0,276***</b>	-0,096 -0,051 -0,303 -0,199 <b>0,119</b> <b>0,076</b>	0,152 0,109 0,018 0,088 <b>0,454</b> <b>0,234</b>
7	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving knowledge management	0,104 0,059 -0,113 -0,013 0,081 <b>0,218**</b> <b>0,250**</b>	-0,030 -0,046 -0,258 -0,140 -0,098 <b>0,051</b> <b>0,050</b>	0,214 0,112 0,060 0,113 0,233 <b>0,218</b> <b>0,279</b>	7 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving knowledge management	0,021 0,051 -0,164* -0,081 <b>0,251*</b> <b>0,219**</b> <b>0,249**</b>	-0,112 -0,053 -0,302 -0,203 <b>0,028</b> <b>0,040</b> <b>0,048</b>	0,140 0,106 0,029 0,084 <b>0,348</b> <b>0,204</b> <b>0,251</b>
8	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving knowledge management position in relation management	0,085 0,033 -0,103 -0,009 0,064 <b>0,212</b> <b>0,227**</b> 0,077	-0,049 -0,071 -0,246 -0,138 -0,109 <b>0,043</b> <b>0,034</b> -0,080	0,200 0,101 0,063 0,115 0,216 <b>0,217</b> <b>0,263</b> 0,181	8 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving knowledge management position in relation management	-0,002 0,018 -0,151* -0,077 <b>0,229*</b> <b>0,211**</b> <b>0,220*</b> 0,097	-0,138 -0,079 -0,292 -0,203 <b>0,011</b> <b>0,033</b> <b>0,027</b> -0,047	0,127 0,089 0,044 0,087 <b>0,331</b> <b>0,201</b> <b>0,238</b> 0,173
9	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving knowledge management position in relation management efficiency management	0,078 0,022 -0,112 -0,013 0,049 <b>0,186*</b> <b>0,204*</b> 0,074 0,094	-0,058 -0,078 -0,263 -0,142 -0,123 <b>0,018</b> <b>0,025</b> -0,082 -0,062	0,194 0,095 0,059 0,112 0,206 <b>0,214</b> <b>0,244</b> 0,181 0,173	9 <sup>a</sup>	partner selection relation planning common activities m. communication integrating problem solving knowledge management position in relation management efficiency management	-0,011 0,006 -0,161 -0,082 0,213 <b>0,182*</b> <b>0,194*</b> 0,094 0,105	-0,147 -0,087 -0,308 -0,210 0,000 <b>0,018</b> <b>0,006</b> -0,050 -0,045	0,121 0,084 0,041 0,084 0,317 <b>0,182</b> <b>0,226</b> 0,171 0,175

\*\*\* p<0,001; \*\* p<0,01; \* p<0,05; bootstrap analysis for 5000 samples, 95% confidence interval; <sup>a</sup> models for efficiency analysis

Having in mind relatively high correlations between particulate RC components (> 0,4) leading to difficulties in interpretation of regression analysis results, in order to avoid concluding on a basis of false results, the next step was dominance analysis (Table 4), to find the most important independent variable or cooperation effectiveness and efficiency predictor (Budescu 1993). The most important variables affecting effectiveness in regression model are: knowledge management, efficiency management, position in relation management (for those mean R<sup>2</sup> is higher than 0,08); also important are partner selection, integrating and communication competences, the least meaningful is common activities management

competence. Efficiency was explained best by: knowledge management - which has the same impact as in case of effectiveness, a little bit weaker are efficiency management, position in relation management and problem solving (for those mean  $R^2$  is about 0,08); also important are partner selection, and communication competences, the least meaningful is relation planning competence.

**Table 4. Results of dominance analysis on relational competence components affecting relations' effectiveness and efficiency\***

effectiveness vs	$R^2$	Additional $R^2$	Mean $R^2$	efficiency vs	$R^2$	Additional $R^2$	Mean $R^2$
knowledge management	0,18	0,02	<b>0,10</b>	knowledge management	0,18	0,02	<b>0,10</b>
problem solving	0,16	0,02	<b>0,09</b>	efficiency management	0,16	0,00	<b>0,08</b>
efficiency management	0,17	0,00	<b>0,09</b>	position in relation management	0,15	0,00	<b>0,08</b>
position in relation management	0,16	0,00	<b>0,08</b>	integrating	0,14	0,01	<b>0,07</b>
partner selection	0,13	0,00	<b>0,06</b>	problem solving	0,14	0,02	<b>0,08</b>
integrating	0,12	0,00	<b>0,06</b>	communication	0,11	0,00	<b>0,06</b>
communication	0,12	0,00	<b>0,06</b>	partner selection	0,09	0,00	<b>0,05</b>
relation planning	0,08	0,00	<b>0,04</b>	common activities management	0,07	0,01	<b>0,04</b>
common activities management	0,07	0,01	<b>0,04</b>	relation planning	0,06	0,00	<b>0,03</b>

\* Analysis was held by building the regression model with single variable and then next eight variables entered, additional  $R^2$  and mean  $R^2$  was estimated to confirm relevance of independent variable in explaining dependent variable.

Development of particular components of RC requires understanding which of them are of specific meaning when aiming at particular business goal for relation.

*H3: Relational competence components differently affect particular relation goals reaching (particular effectiveness).*

In order to verify that, 12 efficiency measures were correlated with general RC and its components (Table 5) to find out if there are relations between particular goals reaching and quality of necessary relational resources.

**Table 5. Correlations between effectiveness - cooperation goals reaching level and general relational competence and RC components<sup>1,2</sup>**

gained access to capabilities and information we didn't have		implemented new technologies		lowered costs of activities		more effectively interacted with competitors		created lasting interpersonal relations		gained better access to new markets		strengthened firm's position in the environment		learned new ways to act		increased chances for access to public orders		improved offer quality		maximized sales and clients loyalty	
N = 242	R	N = 245	R	N = 243	R	N = 248	R	N = 242	R	N = 240	R	N = 25	R	N = 242	R	N = 238	R	N = 25	R	N = 248	R
general RC	0,46***	general RC	0,39***	general RC	0,37***	general RC	0,37***	general RC	0,37***	general RC	0,36***	general RC	0,36***	general RC	0,35***	general RC	0,33***	general RC	0,24***	general RC	0,13*
position in relation management	0,44**	knowledge management	0,44**	position in relation management	0,39**	position in relation management	0,41**	knowledge management	0,37**	position in relation management	0,34**	knowledge management	0,39**	partner selection	0,37**	knowledge management	0,35**	knowledge management	0,31**	knowledge management	0,21**
knowledge management	0,42**	partner selection	0,35**	knowledge management	0,35**	knowledge management	0,40**	position in relation management	0,33**	problem solving	0,33**	position in relation management	0,37**	efficiency management	0,34**	position in relation management	0,31**	position in relation management	0,29**	position in relation management	0,17*
communication	0,40**	efficiency management	0,35**	efficiency management	0,31**	efficiency management	0,33**	efficiency management	0,33**	knowledge management	0,33**	integrating	0,33**	knowledge management	0,31**	partner selection	0,30**	partner selection	0,28**	integrating	0,13*
efficiency management	0,38**	position in relation management	0,34**	problem solving	0,30**	partner selection	0,31**	partner selection	0,30**	efficiency management	0,33**	partner selection	0,29**	position in relation management	0,28**	problem solving	0,28**	integrating	0,24**	common activities management	0,09
partner selection	0,35**	integrating	0,31**	partner selection	0,25**	integrating	0,27**	problem solving	0,30**	integrating	0,29**	efficiency management	0,27**	integrating	0,27**	efficiency management	0,28**	efficiency management	0,17*	partner selection	0,08
integrating	0,35**	communication	0,28**	communication	0,25**	problem solving	0,26**	integrating	0,26**	partner selection	0,27**	problem solving	0,25**	problem solving	0,26**	common activities management	0,24**	common activities management	0,15*	efficiency management	0,08
problem solving	0,31**	problem solving	0,28**	relation planning	0,23**	communication	0,25**	communication	0,23**	communication	0,27**	communication	0,23**	communication	0,24**	communication	0,21**	communication	0,13*	problem solving	0,07
common activities management	0,28**	common activities management	0,22**	integrating	0,23**	relation planning	0,21**	relation planning	0,19**	relation planning	0,19**	common activities management	0,21**	common activities management	0,17*	integrating	0,21**	problem solving	0,12	communication	0,06
relation planning	0,24**	relation planning	0,12*	common activities management	0,19**	common activities management	0,18**	common activities management	0,19**	common activities management	0,14**	relation planning	0,16*	relation planning	0,15*	relation planning	0,14*	relation planning	0,06	relation planning	0,02

<sup>1</sup>Not all companies shared every motive, <sup>2</sup> goals from left to right according to lowering correlation with general RC; \*\*\* p<0,001; \*\* p<0,01; \* p<0,05.

The strongest and relevant correlations are observable for the goal of getting access to scarce resources and the weakest, and only in case of three RC components, relevant correlations are visible for the goal of sales and client's loyalty maximization.

Set of 12 possible goals for inter-firm relations may be divided into five groups: 1. resource access; 2. learning; 3. market position strengthening, 4. relational capital building, 5 efficiency improvement. General observation confirms the above findings, that in a group of most important RC components in relation to goals reaching are: position in relation and knowledge management components. Analysis of hierarchy of RC components specifically important for certain goals brings interesting observations about other goal supporting competences. Effective access to scarce resources necessitates also communication and efficiency management competences; when it comes to learning goals, partner selection and efficiency management are valuable; market position strengthening requires also problem solving and integrating competences; relational capital building requires first efficiency management, then partner selection and problem solving mechanisms and in firm's efficiency improvement important may be integrating competence apart from other mentioned here.

Looking at those results we may have impression that Polish companies pay more attention to power using in relations and tend to prefer contractual and power based approach to goals reaching. Relational mechanisms involving communication, integration and problem solving are less influential in goals reaching, not to mention relation planning and common activities management which were weakly correlated to all of the goals. The latter may also indicate low competence of strategic and operational management. Weak position of relational mechanisms is visible also in an in-depth analysis of the level of common activities and attitude towards sharing visions, opinions, processes and control mechanisms together with partners which is generally quite low in this group of respondents.

Investing in particular RC components needs also knowledge about their relation to economic results of relations.

*H4: Relational competence components differently affect specific cooperation efficiency aspects (particular efficiency).*

**Table 6 Correlations between cooperation efficiency measures level and relational competence components level**

we have learned things that cannot be bought on the market	R	sum of gains from cooperation is much bigger than our workers' effort	R	positive financial input to financial output ratio	R	we gained the same or better results but in a shorter time due to cooperation	R
general RC	<b>0,39***</b>	general RC	<b>0,36***</b>	general RC	<b>0,34***</b>	general RC	<b>0,33***</b>
knowledge management	<b>0,33**</b>	knowledge management	<b>0,34**</b>	knowledge management	<b>0,38**</b>	knowledge management	<b>0,33**</b>
position in relation management	<b>0,33**</b>	position in relation management	<b>0,33**</b>	efficiency management	<b>0,36**</b>	integrating	<b>0,30**</b>
efficiency management	<b>0,33**</b>	problem solving	<b>0,31**</b>	position in relation management	<b>0,30**</b>	position in relation management	<b>0,29**</b>
integrating	<b>0,31**</b>	efficiency management	<b>0,30**</b>	problem solving	<b>0,26**</b>	efficiency management	<b>0,27**</b>
problem solving	<b>0,30**</b>	partner selection	<b>0,27**</b>	integrating	<b>0,25**</b>	communication	<b>0,26**</b>
relation planning	<b>0,28**</b>	integrating	<b>0,27**</b>	partner selection	<b>0,24**</b>	common activities management	<b>0,24**</b>
communication	<b>0,26**</b>	communication	<b>0,24**</b>	communication	<b>0,21**</b>	problem solving	<b>0,21**</b>
partner selection	<b>0,25**</b>	relation planning	<b>0,19**</b>	common activities management	<b>0,18**</b>	partner selection	<b>0,18**</b>
common activities management	<b>0,19**</b>	common activities management	<b>0,18**</b>	relation planning	<b>0,16*</b>	relation planning	<b>0,16*</b>

N = 253; \*\*\* p<0,001; \*\* p<0,01; \* p<0,05; efficiency measures order from left to right according to lowering correlation with general RC

Knowledge management competence is also seen as of closest relation to relationships efficiency in all its measures, but as we see from Table 6, position in relation management competence is more important when it comes to labour effective learning, but financial

efficiency requires first efficiency management, then power exerting competence; time efficiency demands higher level of integrating competences which are of importance in learning efficiency.

Also in case of efficiency, common activities management, relation planning competences and communication are not so important for Polish companies. Weak, but relevant correlation is shown for tacit knowledge learning, which is a surprise because if knowledge is not available on the market it should be of great importance to find proper partner as a learning source. Time efficiency correlations also show evidence for tendency not to use relational mechanism as a dominant governance mode - time advantage requires well integrated processes going without disturbances of any kind. Polish companies prefer to concentrate on knowledge gaining and protecting mechanisms together with power management and operations integration to reach that effect instead of relational mechanism based on shared activities, common problem solving and ongoing communication. Polish companies lack of strategic planning and neglect that fact, which is visible in weak correlations between efficiency measures and partner selection and relation planning competences. Surveyed companies tend to prefer solving arising problems than preventing them with well planned actions (stronger relations between efficiency and problem solving than planning competences are also seen in tables 2-4).

## DISCUSSION

The paper's aim was twofold: to present the relation between firm's relational competence quality and relations' success and to show how structure of relational competence relates to different aspects of that success: relation goals' reaching and efficiency. Polish companies example was used to indicate which particular RC components build their performance in business cooperation.

Research results presented here confirm above theoretical assumptions that company's RC and its components positively impact results of inter-organizational relations the company gets involved in (H1 was supported). RC as a whole and its particular components should be a subject of strong managerial interest because of its visible positive effects on firms efficient goal reaching in IORs. This supports other research in the subject (Kale et al. 2000; Lambe et al. 2002; Zollo et al. 2002; Walter et al. 2006; Human & Naudé 2009; Schreiner et al. 2009). Relational competence components affect IOR results by adequate procedures, behaviours and attitudes used at all stages of relation's life cycle (Schreiner et al. 2009), but those components play different roles in relations' general success (H2 was supported) and because various goals need adequate sets of competences (H3 was supported), they should not be treated as equally important. Relations' efficiency is also affected differently by particular RC components (H4 was supported). These observations lead to general conclusion that companies should be aware of the needed compatibility of their goals and relational assets necessary to reach them. This should lead to a deliberate RC components development process, according to established hierarchy of meaning, but reflecting also to possible negligence in so far actions.

Polish companies example shows that in relation management process the most important are 'hard' competences of knowledge management, relation governance by responsibilities division and power exerting and also relation efficiency control. They slightly prevail over bonding and problem solving. Still those two latter groups seem to be given role to overcome possible mistakes or negligence in partner selection and relation planning. Of weakest importance is common activities management, which shows that interpersonal integration of partners (communication and integrating competences) is for Polish companies more important than operational integration on organizational level.

The highest impact on relations' success observed for knowledge management competence supports findings of research held in knowledge-based view perspective (Kale & Singh 2007;). Polish companies case shows that knowledge management is the most important factor affecting goals reaching and efficiency of relations. In depth analyses show that not all aspects of this competence are of similar meaning, but mostly those which lead to the full learning cycle (Nonaka, Takeuchi 1995) with knowledge codification procedures in the centre (Heimeriks et al. 2009; Sluyts et al. 2011). Here knowledge management defining items also refer to knowledge articulation, codification, sharing, internalization and also protection which gives complete learning cycle, but the article size limits further analyses of their impact on relations goals reaching.

Knowledge management competences serve as a basis for organizational learning based on variable relational experience and helps to reduce negative results of inertia coming from long-lasting, stable relations. Fixing attention on knowledge management in its all aspects of internal learning should be conducive to innovations, so it is vital to develop those processes as they translate into possibilities to reach other developmental goals, irrespective of relations.

Questioned Polish companies seem to underestimate the role of activities and resources interaction in relations. Regardless the role in and relation type, common activities fostering competences affect partnership success less than other competences. If, as IMP scholars assume, interaction of actors, activities and resources is one of crucial aspects to networking success (Ford et al. 2011, 18-20), so competences reinforcing the three should be developed, together with building proactive, integrative attitude towards partners. Common activities and organizational integration result in creation of relation's idiosyncratic resources shared by partners which may also positively affect relation's success in a role of mediating variable (Lambe et al. 2002).

Although common activities competence positively affects relation's efficiency it not necessarily mean long term assets development in a company. Inter-partner integration may also be seen as danger, cause it may lead to less elasticity due to relation dedicated assets, which rises the costs of change and lowers firm's chance for new relations. Lower impact of common activities on relation success together with higher impact of communication, bonding and problem solving may be an effect of striving for greater elasticity. Higher positive impact of position in relation competence may lead to conclusion that competences of relation adequate governance mode choice and opportunism preventing mechanisms usage help to create trust enhancing relation framing. These observations are in agreement with propositions of Hakansson & Ford (2002) - Polish companies seem to be aware of network paradoxes and undertake adequate managerial actions.

In this context important is also recognition of extra-organizational causes of caution towards close ties in relations, distrust, which was beyond the research presented here. Apart from other factors, Polish companies are socially and culturally affected. According to Polish research, the Poles as a nation are rather distrustful in social life (CBOS 2012) which may at least partially explain their cautiousness in operational integration and tendency to manage relations relying on position management competences (and prevailing contractual mechanism). Operational integration is seen both as a source of benefits stemming from effective resource division and usage, but also risk of abuse by partner (Barney 2002; Luo 2008; Hansen, Hoskisson, et al. 2008). Together with that Poland is seen to be a low context country, with strong attention given to interpersonal relations which in fact means that communication and bonding at individual and group level to some extent substitute lacking or underdeveloped organizational level integration mechanisms.

Different RC components effects on various goals meeting show that it is of some importance to know how to prepare RC components mixture most adequate to certain relation

goals. RC components composition reflects firm's attitude towards various aspects of partnering. E.g. Polish companies which tend to prefer hard governance mechanisms - more contractual and based on power exertion show only medium correlations between social and relational RC components and learning goals reaching through IORs, but as other research shows the best possible combination of RC components may be that of building balanced governance mechanisms using contractual, price, hierarchical and social elements together (Kohtamäki 2009).

RCs are heterogeneously distributed among firms and thus result in their different outcomes from IORs (Rothaermel & Deeds 2006). RC components differently affect reaching variable goals of IORs of different types, this implies for managers the need for closer analysis of individual situation of their companies in order to develop and protect those RCs which may be of significant meaning to their particular present and future business goals. RC development needs remembering about competence's path dependence connected with firm's dominant previous relational experience which may affect its future adaptability for new IORs. The question of possible dependencies and causal connections of firms' relational experience, RC quality and relations' effectiveness and efficiency needs separate analysis, which may put more light to the subject.

## LIMITATIONS

First of notable restrictions of this research is sample size and structure which does not fully represent Polish companies in the entirety. Due to cost and time limitations in research programme unilateral approach was used - companies' individual relational competence and relation performance was measured, without comparison to their regular partners' features, although survey questions included common resources and activities. Inter-organizational, e.g. bilateral approach could give broader view on shared resources and potential symmetry or asymmetry of potential dedicated to joint actions as well as trust-building integrating practices. Although interaction is seen as influencing relational capability building, the process itself wasn't subject to analysis. This is a limitation of this study and should be inspiration to research continuation to see mirror reflection of company's RC in its partner. Also construct of RC components measures, which idea shows more their structure: tools, procedures, behaviours than their specific quality may be seen as a limitation - further research using specific partial measures of each RC component quality when used in interaction would contribute more to understanding of RC influence on firm's performance in IORs. Analysis would be richer when including relations' context, e.g. within-country ethnic bias - home country culture influence on organization level attitudes and RC components. Additional research on individual and group level in organization should also put some more light on relational capabilities building and exploitation.

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