

## THE ROLE OF CHANGE IN ENTERPRISES DURING THE CRISIS

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**Purpose:** Drawing attention to some positive aspects caused by the pandemic in the area of business management and presenting skilful change management, the application of new technologies and the use of flexibility as a way to survive and emerge from the crisis.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The study was developed on the basis of a critical analysis of the literature, and due to the topicality of the subject matter, on the basis of numerous press publications and internet sources.

**Findings:** The considerations presented in this paper have shown that adaptive change, the implementation of new technologies and flexibility are the factors that will allow the enterprise to survive the crisis.

**Practical implications:** Although the presented considerations are theoretical in nature, they are supported by the results of research that was conducted on the Polish market. They can be useful in practice for managers of various enterprises. They show what behaviours can help enterprises to survive in a crisis situation.

**Social implications:** Presenting the ways of dealing with the crisis can have multi-faceted beneficial socio-economic consequences. The survival of enterprises in the conditions of the crisis is important both for the state and for the society.

**Originality/value:** The study shows that despite the entire scale of problems and negative effects caused by the pandemic, there are also some situations that can be assessed positively. Flexibility and effective implementation of changes that were not planned before in some enterprises and the use of new technologies that helped companies to survive this difficult time are an example here.

**Keywords:** crisis, change, flexibility, new technologies.

**Category of the paper:** Viewpoint, General review.

### 1. Introduction

The declaration of the coronavirus pandemic and the introduction of sanitary restrictions by most developed countries caused the global economy to stand still. Uncertainty occurred. Governments' decisions related to the pandemic have triggered an avalanche of economic consequences. Many industries were closed or had to significantly reduce their activities.

Investors suspended the planned transactions and withdrew from the ongoing negotiations. Maintaining liquidity and, in some cases, the struggle to maintain business has become the priority (Gałązka, 2020).

In this situation, in many cases, the thought about enterprise development gave way to thoughts about survival and search for an answer to the question of how to do it?

The crisis caused the rise of many doubts and uncertainties for entire economies and individual companies in all areas of their activity.

However, despite the crisis and many negative effects of the pandemic, there are also some positive phenomena in terms of functioning and management of enterprises, caused by the pandemic. Companies undertook many changes that had been postponed or not planned at all. There was an exceptional mobilization of managers and employees (JK, Zarządzanie, 2021).

The aim of the paper is to draw attention to some positive aspects caused by the pandemic in the area of enterprise management and to present the skilful management of change and the use of flexibility as a way to survive and emerge from the crisis.

The study was developed on the basis of a critical analysis of the literature, and due to the topicality of the presented subject matter, on the basis of numerous press publications and internet sources.

## **2. Negative effects of the pandemic in Poland**

The coronavirus has caused an economic crisis around the world. A slowdown or even collapse of the economy can be observed practically everywhere.

Theoretically, management sciences are familiar with the concept of crisis and we have tools to deal with it. There is anti-crisis management. It is a process in which the danger of a crisis is predicted, its symptoms and activities limiting the negative consequences of the crisis are analysed, and its factors are used to continue the development process (Krzakiewicz, 2008). Therefore, we can state that the anti-crisis management system should enable the prevention and effective overcoming of the crisis (Strzemecki, 2015). Unfortunately, not this time. Until recently, the crisis caused by the epidemic was an almost forgotten category, because pandemics did not happen frequently, and the concept of crisis was perceived differently. Many companies and entire economies were not preparing themselves in this regard, because they were not aware of the possible scale of the pandemic and the scale of the economic effects it might cause. That is why the coronavirus pandemic had a noticeable impact on the Polish economy, which can be clearly observed and demonstrated on the basis of several basic indicators.

GDP dynamics is one of the basic measures of the country's economy. The loss in Polish GDP in 2020 related to the coronavirus pandemic reached PLN 130.8 billion, according to the estimates of the economists of Credit Agricole Bank (Business Insider, 2021). The level of investment has decreased as much as 10.9%. In the second quarter of 2020, our economy's GDP fell by 8.2%, which is the worst result in history. In the fourth quarter, it was only by 2.8%. However, the decline in GDP in Poland is still much lower than that of the world's decreases. In the same period, the average decline in GDP among EU member states was 11.9%, and in the United Kingdom alone, as much as 20.4% (Koper, 2020).

The level of unemployment is another important measure that can be referred to here. From the end of February until the end of July 2020, there were 110,000 the new registered unemployed in Poland. There were 1 million 30 thousand people officially unemployed, and this gave an unemployment rate of 6.1%. The registered unemployment rate in March 2021 was – 6.4%. On the other hand, according to the Eurostat methodology, in February 2021 the unemployment rate in Poland was 3.1%, which was the same as in January. This was the lowest level of unemployment among EU countries. (JK, Unemployment, 2021). However, there is a concern that this result does not fully reflect the existing situation, as many people do not register with offices and try to look for a job on their own.

The deficit in the state treasury is also an indicator of the impact of crisis situations. The state budget had to endure negative effects from two sides. On the one hand, there was a huge increase in unplanned expenses related to the coronavirus that amounted to PLN 72.7 billion, and on the other hand, there was a decrease in revenues, from Polish businesses that were under numerous restrictions, which was estimated at around PLN 36.7 billion (Koper, 2020). The budget deficit in 2020 was supposed to reach PLN 109.3 billion, but the Prime Minister reports that it is about PLN 25 billion lower (Morawiecki, 2021).

The current economic situation is difficult, but it is assumed that the decreasing restrictions related to the pandemic, the return to normality of many industries in the economy, government aid programs, as well as a slow recovery in the main trading partners will allow Poland to return to the path of a moderate growth in 2021.

According to World Bank economists, in 2021 gross domestic product (GDP) growth may reach 3.5%. Due to the dynamism of the pandemic situation and the multitude of uncertainties, one cannot be sure of the future. Therefore, the current forecasts bear a considerable risk of error, differ from analyst to analysts, and may prove to be too optimistic.

The scale of negative changes is significant, but many companies have managed to survive it, therefore, attention should be paid to the positive phenomena thanks to which they achieved it.

### **3. Implementation of changes as an effective management tool in times of crisis**

"Change or die" said Jack Welch (Włodarczyk, 2020). "You don't have to change, survival is not obligatory" – these are W.E. Deming's words (Popieluch, 2020). These words have now become prophetic. If an organization's environment changes faster than its inside, the company may not survive it.

Companies that fail to adapt in time will not only lower their competitive advantage, but they will simply collapse. The ability to develop and create new quality should always be a part of the processes and standards of the organization (Popieluch, 2020).

2020 could be called "the year of change management" because it is difficult to look for ready-made models of any crises from the past that could prepare us for what happened together with the pandemic, i.e. not only the health and economic crisis, but also rapid changes in consumer behaviour.

During the pandemic, many companies had to modify more or less drastically their way of functioning, i.e., introduce changes. It is worth emphasizing that the change in the face of the crisis is a change of the largest format, because it forces multifaceted changes, and the dynamics of negative changes in the environment is extremely severe.

Organizational change includes all transformations that occur in various sectors of an organization. These transformations occur under the influence of both internal and external factors. Changes are introduced in order to increase the effectiveness of the functioning of a given organization (Auster, Wylie, Valente, 2005).

Therefore, the ability to manage change is one of the fundamental business competences that more and more often determines an enterprise survival.

This study does not describe change and change management in detail, because these concepts are already described in many literature references (Auster, Wylie, & Valente, 2005; Osbert-Pociecha, 2011; Czop, 2016). Here, the main focus is on identifying the usefulness and role of change management for the effective functioning of enterprises during a pandemic.

Improving change management skills (leading change) has now become a very important competence of a professional manager (Green Cameron, 2004). Introducing changes in such a way that the organization maintains organizational efficiency in the short term and development opportunities in the long term is the challenge for the organization. According to G. Osbert-Pociecha (2011), it is one of the management paradoxes that an organization, in order to achieve its natural goal of duration, must undertake changes which, in a way, become a price that the company pays for the possibility of continuing its operations and difficult to predict environment.

All contemporary organizations operate in conditions of dynamic and unpredictable changes, but the crisis caused by the pandemic has made this situation even worse. If a company wants to function efficiently and effectively, it must adapt to the requirements of the environment and implement appropriate changes. As a result, uncertainty is becoming a hallmark of modern economies. Companies endeavour to implement changes. Unfortunately, as the 2021 Report on the National Research on Change Management (OBZZ) shows, only less than 30% of changes are implemented effectively (Rubin, Naumiuk, Grabowski, 2021) and this is a typical situation all over the world, not only in Poland (importantly, the pandemic did not cause the decrease in this value). The relatively low effectiveness rate of changes introduced by organizations means that the problem of implementing changes, factors influencing their course, and determinants of changes is still valid and important for theoreticians and practitioners, so it is worth talking about it. The low effectiveness of implemented projects suggests that there is no framework for implementing and managing change, and the traditional balance-based approach may be one of the reasons (Beer, Nohira 2000; Pellettiere 2006). This is because Lewin's three-stage process of change assumes that organizations exist in some form of equilibrium before disruption or change occurs. The organization then goes through a period of rapid changes and then reaches a period of stability if the implementation of the change is successful. This approach shows that change is a rare situation in the life of an organization. The change is associated with a violation of the status quo, the need to develop new habits and reorientate the image of the world; it requires effort and causes protests. That is why the company's ability to effectively implement changes in the period marked by the pandemic proved to be one of the key competences that offer the ability to survive, but also the ability to use the opportunities. Organizational change should therefore be perceived as an integral function of the system, which is a consequence of transformations in the environment, the aim of which is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of organization management. It is a very complex concept that requires comprehensive consideration from various points of view (Walczak, 2009).

Each change aims to improve the situation in the more or less distant future. Therefore, implementing them with a view of long-term goals is often contrary to the requirements determined by the current functioning of the organization. The process of reorganization is usually associated with the occurrence of many disruptions and difficulties in everyday activities, which results in the fact that the tendency to delay the introduction of the desired change is quite common in practice (Kaczmarek, Sikorski, 1999). Therefore, the rapidly introduced, favourable changes caused by the negative crisis can be treated as a positive aspect of the current situation. Companies have undertaken many changes that were postponed or not planned at all. There was an exceptional mobilization of managers and employees.

The transition to remote work, organizational changes and cost reduction were the priorities of changes during the pandemic (40% of projects), (Rubin, Naumiuk, Grabowski, OBZZ Report, 2021). Most of the changes were spontaneous and action-oriented (in 27% of cases

there was no schedule, budget or knowledge about them), which unfortunately proves the low level of business and organizational maturity of our organizations. Although this situation is typical for the Polish market, its justification can be found in the current situation caused by the pandemic. 60% of the respondents positively assessed the results of the introduced changes.

As the OBZZ 2021 research from this year shows, this skill was "framed" with the ability to change at the appropriate pace and supported by the adequate mobilization of both managerial staff and employees (Rubin, Naumiuk, Grabowski, OBZZ Report, 2021).

Since the beginning of the research on change management, i.e., from 2016, the number of changes successfully completed has not exceeded 30% and still does not show a growing trend.

Banking and financial services are the best at implementing changes (full success in 38% of the described changes). Trade and service-providing companies poorly deal with the changes. The full success of the completed changes was indicated by 10% of respondents from the Trade sector and 21% from the Services sector. This result is not surprising. Banks and other financial institutions have been providing many services remotely for a long time, and this was the condition for success in the pandemic era. The truth is that the service and hotel industries have been seriously affected by lockdown restrictions, and unfortunately, in their case, remote service delivery is in many cases impossible.

As the overall level of successful implementation of changes is constantly low, practices that were associated with success are worth highlighting. Iterative planning and piloted implementation were the two most effective techniques supporting the implementation of changes that worked during the pandemic. Iterative planning consists in setting the goal of change, and then planning for shorter periods, and collecting information about the effects of activities. Following the analysis of the results of activities and collected feedback, it is possible to correct the plan and prepare a set of activities for the next stage. On the other hand, the pilot study shows that when the situation is uncertain, you should not stake everything on one card. It is worth trying whether the adopted solution could work in a selected part of the organization. Preceding the change with a pilot study is an experiment that shows whether a given solution brings the expected results. At the same time, the pilot program increases the security of the organization (Rubin, Naumiuk, Grabowski, Report OBZZ, 2021).

This result is a suggestion on how to act in the world of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), and how to act when a crisis occurs.

When the situation is fluid and changing rapidly, when serious problems arise and the picture of the future is uncertain, a long-term, detailed change plan is no longer useful. Rapid adaptability and flexibility are gaining importance.

Many Polish companies have come to this conclusion. Companies from the SME sector abandoned long-term planning during the pandemic - only 5% of them plan activities for the next year. The group of entrepreneurs who do not plan anything and instead prefer to make decisions overnight has doubled. However, failing to think about development can be

dangerous. It is an activity on the border of existence that does not fully reflect the idea of flexibility (Ratajczak, 2020).

Before the pandemic almost 1/4 of entrepreneurs (24.8%) were preparing a schedule of activities for the next month. Over 31% of companies were planning their activities quarterly in advance. Every fifth (19.8%) was planning for the next six months, and only 17% were boldly planning the entire next year. 7% of the respondents were making ad hoc decisions.

During the pandemic, there was a clear increase in the number of companies that make decisions overnight (+ 8%) and one month in advance (+ 7.2%). On the other hand, there was a significant decrease in the rate of entrepreneurs planning activities for the coming year (-11.2%) and those planning for the next six months (-6.6%).

The implementation of changes in the sphere of new technologies in Polish enterprises is a specific example of positive changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Modern technologies undoubtedly support enterprises in various areas of activity. The benefits of using them were even more visible in the difficult period of their functioning, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions and limitations introduced to combat the pandemic have prevented many businesses from operating normally. The companies began to compensate for the lack of direct interpersonal contacts with methods using modern technologies. Remote work was used, electronic circulation of documents and IT systems for enterprise management were introduced to a greater extent. Research in this area was conducted by the Polish Economic Institute (Dębowska, et al., 2020). The most important conclusions from the study show that the range of new technologies introduced to companies during the pandemic is relatively wide, but technologies for contacting customers and building relationships with business partners and providing employees of the company with remote work opportunities are predominant. The participants in the study emphasized that the crisis accelerated the implementation of new technologies, the possession of which proved to be crucial for the functioning of the company in the new reality.

Desk research analysis of documents identified during the monitoring of the functioning of the Polish economy in the period of fight against the pandemic showed the multidimensional development of e-commerce, as well as wider use of tools for electronic identity verification or changes in communication with customers and contractors.

The results of quantitative research indicated that most companies use at least one, and more than a half at least three new technologies. The situation of constraints resulting from the need to counteract the pandemic increased the use of these technologies. Assessing the perspective after the pandemic, companies declare that they will continue to use modern technologies. The summary of the results is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Indicators of the use of modern technologies*

Values as %	Enterprises before the pandemic: (November 2019)
47	highly rated its state of use of modern technologies in production or services
54	highly rated the use of modern technologies in communicating with their clients
48	highly rated the use of multi-channel sales of its products or services
73	did not invest in modern technologies
	Enterprises during the pandemic: (April 2020)
91	use at least one new technology
70	use modern forms of communicating with clients
10	large companies have implemented remote work management systems during a pandemic (not using them earlier)
	Enterprises after the pandemic: plans
69	intend to use modern forms of communicating with the client
45	intend to use online sales channels and customer service
27	intend to use systems for managing and monitoring remote work

Adapted from: Dębkowska K., Kłosiewicz-Górecka U., Leśniewicz F., Szymańska A., Święcicki I., Ważniewski P., Zybertowicz K. (2020). Raport: Nowoczesne technologie w przedsiębiorstwach przed, w trakcie i po pandemii COVID - 19, Warszawa: Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny. Retrieved from [https://pie.net.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PIE-Raport\\_Nowoczesne\\_technologie.pdf](https://pie.net.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PIE-Raport_Nowoczesne_technologie.pdf)

The introduced changes will permanently transform the functioning of enterprises. Almost all respondents, regardless of the size of the represented enterprise and sector, indicated that they would permanently introduce the use of modern remote communication systems in their companies. During the crisis, thanks to online communication and the possibility of providing various types of e-services, companies can function relatively efficiently. As the respondents indicated – these solutions will also be beneficial in the future, although at this stage it is still difficult to specify plans and visions. Representatives of micro and small enterprises were mainly those who declared that they would be more focused on Internet activities in the future. It mostly concerned reaching customers, the way of working and handling matters (remote work and electronic document flow), as well as providing services and online sales.

Prof. Nassim Nicholas Taleb stated that we were very lucky that the pandemic broke out in the age of the Internet, because technologies saved us from many negative economic effects of this crisis (Mońka, 2020). They made it possible to introduce many changes and thus enabled many entities to survive.

The change of working style was a sign of the resourcefulness and flexibility of these companies. It is this feature of enterprises that can be perceived as one of the most important determinants of effective change implementation.



#### 4. Flexibility as a condition for effective implementation of changes

It was said that a strategy, management method, systems, processes and people are necessary for the development of a company. Once, when a crisis came, the strategy was changed. Today, the quantity, frequency and scale of changes mean that quick decisions based on an increasingly smaller amount of data have to be made. Changing strategy is not enough anymore, and there is even no time for it. The solution may be flexibility, which should be included in the strategy and ought to facilitate the implementation of changes that adapt the company to the new crisis situation.

A flexible approach can be applied to every aspect and area of the organization's functioning. Flexibility is in structures, processes, systems and people, as well as in how they think, why they think so, and what experiences they have. It is one of the approaches to strategy, which is very useful nowadays (Niewińska, 2021).

It represents the ability to change quickly, i.e., the ability of the system to adapt and react to the external impulses that disturb its current stability.

Flexible and inflexible enterprises are different in such a way that a change, i.e., a reaction to the influence of external or internal factors, can take place during the performance of operational activities, without the need to suspend them (Czerska, Szpitter, 2010), i.e., it does not disturb efficiency. And this is what many companies that make changes during a pandemic want.

Flexibility means a broadly understood ability to adapt an organization to changing environmental conditions. The high popularity of this issue is currently brought by the huge scale of changes caused by the pandemic. However, it should be emphasized that the dynamics of environmental changes has been increasing for a long time, which forces adaptive changes in the organization.

Flexibility can be perceived as a determinant of the company's operation in an extremely turbulent environment (Osbert-Pociecha, 2008). The concept of flexibility was most fully developed by A.C.J. De Leeuw and H.W. Volberd (1996). They assumed that flexible organizations, being open systems, do not have to be "puppets" in the hands of their environment, they can maintain a certain scope of independence (resistance) from their environment and, as part of fulfilling their control function, strive to control their environment (dual nature of flexibility) (Czerska, Szpitter, eds., 2010).

As with the change, this paper only provides a synthetic approach to the perception and definition of flexibility. This is because the concept is widely interpreted in numerous studies (e.g., Krupski, 2005, 2008; Czerska, and Szpitter, 2010; Bridges, 2008; Kwiecień, 2018). The author's intention was only to draw attention to the role of flexibility in the context of introducing changes necessary for the organization to survive in conditions of crisis.

In the past, it was thought that the success of an organization was determined by the level of its resistance to the external influences. However, with the evolution of views, it has been recognised that the organization is an open system, which should not be separated from the influences of the environment. In the event of a general market crisis, it is almost impossible to isolate the company from these influences. The faster and more accurately an enterprise reacts to changes occurring in the environment, the higher its efficiency is, as it means making activities more flexible.

That is why flexibility is one of the most important features a company needs in times of crisis. The ability to quickly adapt to changing conditions in the economic environment may even be a necessary condition for the survival of an organization (Blichiewicz, 2020).

Entrepreneurs agree that in order to survive the period of restrictions related to the next wave of the pandemic, it will be necessary to react very quickly, and accurately recognise the current needs of consumers, i.e., to act with flexibility. The expert emphasizes that many companies do not have very specific solutions for the coming months, because the most important thing is to respond quickly to the changing needs, new restrictions and unstable situation caused by the pandemic (Flexibility, 2020).

Flexibility should always be a part of a company management. This is because it is an attribute of an organization that reflects the position of a given entity on the stability-chaos continuum. However, nowadays, in the conditions of progressing globalization, deregulation of markets, the growing intensity of competitive struggle (according to the pattern of hyper-competition) and the crisis caused by the pandemic, the importance of flexibility as such is increasing.

To emphasize the role of flexibility in the current situation, it can be asked whether the strategies of enterprises are crisis-proof? There is no single correct answer to this. It largely depends on the correctness of the strategy preparation, including its flexibility in specific situations. Crisis situations and a comprehensive, flexible way of dealing with such situations should be planned in the strategies, because although the pandemic is a new and specific phenomenon for us and some situations related to it, such as lockdown, have not appeared before, the very crisis it caused has not occurred before.

This should encourage enterprises to constantly search for new ways and tools of improving their strategies, as it will allow for preparing companies for the crisis. Flexibility can be such a key to success.

A high level of flexibility is a prerequisite for achieving the assumed organizational susceptibility to adaptive changes. Change is not caused by the simple need for change, but in order to achieve a level of effectiveness in action that will ensure a high level of adaptation of the company to the circumstances and enable it to survive or even develop.

A modern, flexible enterprise, operating on the market, has a chance to (Wieniarczyk, 2018):

- adapt more easily to changes, and thus ensure fast information flow, easier communication within the enterprise and lifting information barriers,
- respond quickly to stimuli from inside and outside the company, to use opportunities and own potential, and overcome weaknesses,
- stimulate the creativity of all employees, integrate them and decentralize decisions.

All these effects should enable the organization to survive and develop in a crisis situation.

In addition to the role of flexibility for modern enterprises described in this study, the literatures shows that flexibility in its various aspects can complement, and often even replace, financial capital as the basic source of value creation (Urbanek, 2011). This is reflected in the higher market valuation of companies whose operation is based on intangible resources as compared to those which exploit mainly tangible assets. It is also an extremely important issue in the time of crisis when many entities are struggling with financial problems.

## 5. Summary

Summarizing the considerations about changes during the crisis and the related situation of enterprises, an attempt can be made to answer the question of What should enterprises do when they find themselves in a crisis situation and are trying to survive?

The analysis of the presented materials shows that they should change, use new technologies and flexibly adapt to the new situation.

As Peter F. Drucker used to say, "The best method of predicting the future is to create it" (Cytatyinfo, 2012). Therefore, there is nothing for companies to do but to undertake such an attempt and introduce effective changes (Popieluch, 2020).

The past year (2020) was a year of great changes, forced by functioning in pandemic conditions. It verified the approach of entrepreneurs to change. The year showed us very clearly how important it is to be aware of the need for adaptive changes. It also proved that those who are open to them have real resistance to external changes.

Entrepreneurs should analyse the assumptions and goals they defined earlier, before the pandemic, and look for solutions that are adequate to the new situation and provide flexibility of operation. Introducing changes and skilful management of them has now become an extremely important competence. The crisis has become a driving force for transformation that – if it were not for it – probably would not have happened. Companies undertook many changes that had been postponed or not planned at all.

As research shows, many companies have succeeded and successfully implemented changes. They have also applied new technologies that allowed them to survive. Many companies are still fighting for it, so it should be indicated to them that iterative planning

and pilot projects support effective implementation of changes. New technologies will often enable to maintain business continuity, whereas flexibility will make it easier to adapt to a new, demanding situation.

Due to the pandemic, Polish business had to reorganize and introduce changes to continue its functioning. Fortunately, the flexibility of our entrepreneurs, natural competitive advantages and implemented changes have saved many companies from collapsing (Fedoruk, 2020).

However, it is worth following the effectiveness of the changes implemented in the pandemic after its completion. To control whether what allowed to survive will now allow it to develop and continue to function effectively. Further research should include companies that declared that they had implemented effective changes during the pandemic. The analysis of the effectiveness of operations in the long run should show the real effectiveness of the implemented changes

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