

A NEW APPROACH TO PURCHASE IN DOMESTIC SMES

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Purpose: The main objective of the paper is to determine the way purchases are carried out in small and medium-sized domestic enterprises. In particular, the following research questions are asked: (1) in which activities do they use the Internet? (2) How willing are they to use electronic tools in purchases? (3) Have supply chain problems arising primarily from the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine changed the buying habits of companies?

Design/methodology/approach: SMEs were selected as the subject of the research. The questionnaire study was quantitative in nature.

Findings: The specificity of purchasing in SMEs results mainly from a different way of managing organisations and often from a different approach to cooperation with suppliers. Research results show that small and medium companies are using the Internet increasingly in particular phases of the purchase process. They are becoming convinced (albeit slowly) of the electronic solutions available in the area of purchasing and appreciate their advantages. Supply chains and consumerization of B2B purchasing contribute to changing the approach of SMEs and popularising electronic tools.

Research limitations/implications: The article contains a preliminary study. In the future, additional research is planned on a comparison of the use of electronic solutions in the procurement of SMEs in individual industries and in different countries.

Originality/value: The article presents a detailed analysis of the reasons for the specificity of SMEs' purchase. In addition, the results of research on the use of electronic tools on the Internet in the purchasing process are discussed. The conclusions of the research are important for domestic SMEs and organisations that support the development of this sector.

Keywords: purchasing, electronic tools, supply chains, SME sector.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Purchasing is defined as a function responsible for the acquisition of materials, components (semi-finished products), parts, and services by purchasing, leasing, or otherwise legally in order to use them for production or resale (Lysons, Farrington, 2020). The effective functioning

of the supply sphere in the company not only affects the level of customer service, product quality, and costs of the entire logistics system, but also gives rise to a competitive advantage (Kowalska, 2005). Procurement is a strategic function that impacts operations, supply chain, quality, cost, and profits of manufacturing companies. Depending on the industry, companies can spend between 45% and 70% of sales revenue on the procurement of raw materials and professional services (Nitychoruk-Brzeska, 2018).

In recent years, much attention has been paid in the literature to the topic of purchasing in the B2B market. There are many publications on how companies buy and what new solutions they introduce in this area. However, descriptions of changes in sourcing tend to concern large enterprises. In this context, the topic of medium- and small-sized enterprises is relatively rarely discussed in the literature. As a result, little is known about the state of purchasing activities and supply management within SMEs, and it happens despite that SMEs play a very important role in a nation's economy.

Many different reasons for this situation are mentioned. First, the assumption that companies in the SME sector buy in the same way as large companies. Second, the conjecture is that most of them do not feel the need for changes in the area of supply and also do not have sufficient resources to carry out such activities. Third, due to many constraints in companies of this size, they are often described as 'normative' or 'conservative' buyers. This also concerns adoption of the solutions related to using the information and communication technology (ICT) in purchases – some publications indicate that SMEs are lagging in implementing modern solutions in their businesses.

This article aims to fill the gaps mentioned above; its main objective is to determine how small and medium-sized domestic enterprises use ICT in purchasing and what changes have recently taken place in their purchasing. In particular, answers to the following research questions are sought: (1) In what activities do they use the Internet? (2) How willing are they to use electronic tools in purchases? (3) Have the supply chain problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine changed the buying habits of companies?

These answers were obtained through analysis of domestic and foreign literature and the author's own research conducted in domestic companies in the SME sector. The author conducted a survey among 126 small and medium enterprises in the Lower Silesia Region. It aimed to learn their preferences on how to use particular tools in the purchasing process and the rate of usage of individual solutions.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the theory concerning the purchases in small and medium enterprises, including the specificity of SMEs (Section 2.1), the reasons for the changes, and the effects of those changes (Section 2.2). Section 3 concerns issues related to the use of electronic tools in SMEs purchasing (the description of tools, the benefits of use, and the level of use). The methodology and results of the research are presented in Section 4, and Section 5 summarises the discussion and final implications of the study.

2. Purchasing in small and medium enterprises

2.1. Specificity of purchases in SMEs

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs) significantly affect the economies of many countries (Sila, Dobni, 2012). They represent approximately 99% of all companies in the European Union and make a key contribution to the economy in terms of employment innovation and growth. In 2022 99.8% of 2.26 million companies in Poland belong to SMEs – 97% of them are micro, 2.2% are small, and 0.6% are medium (PARP, 2022).

Purchases in SMEs, contrary to appearances, are not conducted in the same way as in large enterprises and differ only in scale. Differences in approach are related to both different needs, a different way of managing smaller organisations, and limited possibilities of investments in this area (Ramsay, 2001).

Management in small and medium enterprises differs from activities carried out in this area in larger organisations. The main difference is the independence of the entrepreneur (owner), who not only manages and supervises, but also usually contributes capital to it. It establishes the principles on which the company is to operate and the goals it is to pursue. Who is responsible for making decisions and, consequently, is the sole risk associated with them, which often has a strong impact on the operation of the company (Gabryszak, 2008). The advantages of such one-person decision-making are the speed and ease of their implementation, but excessive centralisation and the lack of the ability to delegate tasks can become a significant obstacle in the development of the company when there is an increase in employment.

The management staff in SME companies is generally small. In small businesses, most activities, including those related to purchasing, are carried out by the owner. With the development of the organisation, a certain specialisation takes place, and some tasks are transferred to new employees; however, most of them are also responsible for several functions (Janczewski, 2016; Wagner et al., 2003). Managers focus on the most important tasks, so operational decisions are an important part of their daily management routine. Their time available for strategic thinking is limited, and they usually do not have enough time to analyse opportunities to improve the way they operate in particular areas (Paik et al., 2015).

SME sector companies operate most often on the local or regional market. The condition for success is good (often personal) contacts with contractors, which create a climate of mutual trust and allow for a better exchange of information. The consequence is a chance to react quickly to changes taking place on the market, especially since the simple organisational structure allows for a quick flow of information and appropriate response to signals coming from the environment (Safin, 2002; Smolarek, 2015).

Another issue is the approach to suppliers, who often have been cooperating with a given enterprise for a long time, and it is not a common practise to undertake activities related to the assessment of suppliers or seeking and obtaining new sources of supply. However, having long-term relationships with customers and suppliers, shaped over the years of activity, can constitute a competitive advantage in a situation where it is an asset that distinguishes the company from the competition. Often organisations do not even try to cooperate with foreign suppliers because they lack the necessary resources to search for purchasing solutions on a global basis (Quintens et al., 2005).

Small and medium-sized enterprises also often have a conservative approach to purchasing and are reluctant to introduce any changes in this area. This was visible, among others, in the low level of use of IT solutions that could speed up and simplify some activities. Often the reason is also the lack of knowledge about such tools. Statistics Poland's 2018 research on success factors in SMEs showed that information solutions and systems were perceived as important or very important by only less than 40% of entrepreneurs. There is a visible difference in the opinions of small and medium-sized entities: the larger ones are almost twice as likely to consider software as an important or key determinant of success (Statistics Poland, 2018).

However, research conducted in 2015 showed that of 120 entrepreneurs, only 12 mentioned the lack of specialised programmes and applications that facilitate online shopping as a barrier to the development of online commerce. At the same time, only three organisations used the possibilities to make electronic purchases. (Bartczak, 2016).

The biggest problems in supplying SMEs include (Jukowski, 2021; Mushanyuri, 2014):

- 1) Lack of awareness that the effective implementation of purchases can affect the profitability of the company. The consequence may be the low importance attributed to the purchasing function in the organisation.
- 2) There are no procedures specifying how the purchasing process should be conducted and the people responsible for it – everything is decided by the owner or, on the contrary, there are many people making purchases, and each of them is guided by their own rules.
- 3) Delegating responsibility for managing the purchasing process to random employees without education or experience in this area.
- 4) Lack of proper cost control, resulting in a dilution of financial responsibility.
- 5) Reluctance to use external help (training, consultants) – the reason is the belief in the uniqueness of the problems occurring in the organisation, the ability to solve them on their own, and the fear of intercepting the company's know-how by the competition.
- 6) No use of IT tools that could support the implementation of the purchasing process. The problem is usually caused not by the availability of such solutions but by the lack of willingness to organise the purchasing process, which is necessary when implementing such a tool.

2.2. Reasons for changes in SME purchasing

In the last few years, there have been significant changes in the situation of enterprises. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have disrupted global supply chains. Supply problems in 2020 were experienced by 36% of companies in Poland, and on a global scale, this situation was declared by up to 58% of companies (PARP, 2020).

Small and medium enterprises were particularly affected - according to the SME Scanner report from the third quarter of 2022, up to 47% of the 500 companies surveyed from the SME sector felt the negative consequences of interrupting supply chains. The most burdensome effects included reduced sales (34%), as well as a decrease in profits and the need to look for substitutes and new suppliers (32% each). In response to these problems, companies began paying more attention to the location of suppliers and avoid single-sourcing solutions. A new trend, which occurs in almost every third company, is the creation of inventories. This action is primarily caused by the need to guarantee materials for future production (73%) and the fear of further increases in raw material prices (56%) (eGospodarka, 2022). However, a high level of stock, in turn, generates maintenance costs and requires adequate storage space and a team of employees who will handle them.

The latest problem is inflation. The results of the 'Company purchases' survey conducted in August 2022 among Polish micro and small enterprises show that up to 95% of them stated that the costs of their business activities have increased dramatically. The average increase in the prices of products and services needed to run a business was 37.4%, and according to entrepreneurs, the prices of raw materials (48%) and fuel (43%) increased the most (NFG, 2022). The increase in current operations costs was the reason for the change in the method of carrying out corporate purchases. Entrepreneurs indicated that they looked for promotions and price deals more often (35%), purchased cheaper substitutes (31%), or limited purchases (30%).

A positive change that has taken place in recent years has been the dissemination and reduction of the cost of using the Internet and computer hardware. According to the annual report 'Information Society in Poland', up to 98.2% of Polish small companies and 99.7% of medium companies had broadband Internet access in 2021. At the same time, up to 28.4% of small and 66.4% of medium enterprises indicated that in 2020 there was an increase in the level of use of information and communication technologies. To a large extent, this change was forced by the pandemic, the need to work remotely, and the lack of direct contact with contractors (Statistics Poland, 2022).

The trend observed in Poland is confirmed throughout the world. The results of the Techscale worldwide survey of more than 3,600 SMEs show that in 2020 51% of SMEs increased their digital transformation investments and 22% reported such plans. SMEs with organisation-wide digital transformation experience 2.1 bigger cost reduction, have 1.9 better levels of customer intimacy, and 1.4 higher levels of productivity than the rest of the firms (Agrawal, 2020).

An additional element causing changes in the way shopping is done are new habits: younger employees (and also owners) more and more often notice how many things can be done via the Internet. Habits transferred from the B2C market and consumerization of B2B behaviour are also important here. A study by Salesforce Research on a group of almost 7,000 business customers showed that for 81% of them the customer experience (user experience related to the purchase process), especially the adaptation to buyer preferences in terms of communication, is as important as the products and services offered by the vendor. Respondents believed that the quality of services should be comparable to that they know from B2C platforms (Santander, 2021).

3. Electronic purchasing in domestic SMEs

3.1. IT tools in purchase

The greatest advantages of using electronic tools in supply market activities are access to comprehensive data resources not restricted by spatial and temporal barriers, saving time, low cost of data acquisition and convenience. There are two main types of electronic tools used to buy on the B2B market: the B2B online store and the B2B e-Marketplace (platform) (Prałat, 2017).

The B2B e-commerce website presents the offers of one supplier and is an online store acting only on the B2B market. It offers the product solely to registered customers. Not only a configuration of a product can be personalised, the amount of the discount or the deferment of the payment date can also depend on the previous cooperation quality or individual arrangements. There are various methods of product search: the standard way (by their names), by bar codes, manufacturer names, or their attributes (for example, by numerous technical parameters that characterised the product). B2B orders are usually repeatable, so a function of creating a new order on the basis of the previous ones is common. The choice of the product that best fits the buyer's needs is possible due to a comparison tool that considers numerous criteria (Prałat, 2018).

The B2B e-commerce website is usually integrated with company computer system (an Enterprise Resource Planning System, a Customer Relationship Management System, a warehouse or an accounting system). The full automation of the orders placement speeds up their realisation, reduces the possibility of mistake, and eliminates the need of a direct communication with suppliers.

The B2B e-marketplace presents the offers of numerous suppliers and is created to automate the purchase and sale process. This type of solution is usually created by an external operator, who makes it available to verified suppliers presenting their offers and buyers looking for

suppliers of goods or services. It is possible to find the required products, complete the transaction and settle it. Buyers search for products by browsing catalogues (they may be linked with the suppliers' sales platforms) or issue requests addressed to suppliers (for information, for a proposal, for a price). The B2B e-marketplace also provides advanced search and communication tools (Radzikowska, 2014).

An additional element available on the platform are electronic auctions conducted in real time, which causes stronger competition among bidders and, as a consequence, allows for significant savings (price reduction is on average 15%) (Wyld, 2011). Another advantage is the increased credibility and transparency of the auction results. Purchase auctions can be used in various situations: from one-off purchases of products, through the selection of suppliers of goods of a specific type (framework contracts) and ending with the finding suppliers of various types of services (cleaning, maintenance) (Prałat, 2017).

Communication is simplified and accelerated both between all employees involved in purchasing processes and between companies that are parties to the transaction. An important issue is also the ability to optimise procurement processes and supervision over the budget of each cost centre. In turn, the main benefit offered by platforms to suppliers is that it is easier to reach customers with their offer and thus increase the number of concluded transactions. Purchasing platforms are sometimes very extensive and have many different functionalities; however, their modular structure causes the customer to pay only for those elements that he actually uses.

The use of IT tools in the company that support the purchase process gives the company the opportunity to achieve many benefits. They are related to the areas discussed below (Ścisło, 2015; Deloitte & Aleo, 2017; Prałat, 2017; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2020):

- a) Reduction of purchase prices. Purchasing platforms allow the use of quantitative leverage: suppliers can offer products with a lower unit margin thanks to the aggregation and unification of orders on procurement platforms.
- b) Savings resulting from expanding the supplier market. Purchasing platforms aggregate information about offers, but also constitute a database of potential suppliers, also geographically distant. They also enforce the standardisation of products and services and facilitate their comparison. These conditions are conducive to free competition, which, in turn, translates into more favourable (compared to traditional markets) offers to customers. An additional benefit is also that it reduces the time to search for suppliers, analyse offers, and negotiate transaction terms.
- c) Process and organisational benefits. B2B e-commerce websites provide buyers with tools to support the purchase planning process, supplier credibility analysis, billing, and document circulation. For large enterprises, they also facilitate the consolidation of orders from different departments.

- d) Management benefits. Through specialised purchasing platforms, buyers have easier access to historical data, which is conducive to their analysis and making decisions on this basis, reducing the company's supply costs (e.g., negotiating more favourable terms with the supplier based on information on the total transaction volume from the last few years).
- e) Business performance. Performance gains are related to increased productivity, return on assets, and return on investment. e-procurement is regarded as a capability that can lead to a sustained competitive advantage.

3.2. The level of use of information technology in purchases in domestic SMEs

The introduction of IT solutions is proof of the innovativeness of the organisation, i.e., the ability of both owners and employees to search for, implement, and disseminate innovations. It is often considered a measure of the level of modernity and company progress (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2011). Various types of innovation are being implemented in small and medium-sized domestic enterprises. When it comes to innovative methods of data processing or communication, in 2018-2020 11.2% of companies in the industrial sector and 15.6% of those providing services used them. It should be noted that compared to the previous research period (2017-2019), the results of industrial companies doubled and, in the case of the enterprises providing services, increased at least three times (PARP, 2022). In 2021, almost 60% of medium-sized enterprises used ERP systems, i.e. software that enables the management of enterprise resources through the exchange of information between various departments of the company. This result means an increase of almost 6% compared to 2019. Among small enterprises, systems of this type were used by 24.4%, and the increase was slightly greater than 3% (Statistics Poland, 2022).

According to the Deloitte & Aleo report (Deloitte & Aleo, 2017), small and medium enterprises use B2B e-commerce tools not only to buy, but also to support purchasing planning, supplier credibility analysis, and negotiation. Executing these tasks in a short time is particularly important for SMEs, where, as mentioned in Section 2, purchasing is often handled by managers who also have many other responsibilities.

A study conducted in the first quarter of 2022 by Marketplanet shows that small companies (up to 50 employees) are very active in using B2B e-commerce tools. The percentage of companies that indicated the use of a purchasing platform (marketplace), B2B online stores provided by suppliers, and their own catalogues corresponding to the warehouse's material indexes was almost the same. It amounted to about 25% in case of a purchasing platforms and to about 20% for their own catalogues. The highest result (30%) concerned the use of B2B online stores and is also related to the widespread use of e-catalogues to reduce potential errors in purchase specifications and to cut customer service costs (Marketplanet, 2022).

The results obtained also show that the Internet is the basic tool for searching for sources of supply and suppliers. Regardless of the size of the company, Google is the most popular search engine, and price comparison websites are also highly rated.

Respondents were also asked about the elements that discourage them from buying on the electronic market. However, up to 27% of them pointed to the 'lack of precise description of the products', however, there were many more opinions pointing to the low quality of the data contained in the e-catalogues and the difficulty of searching for them. The respondents also mentioned the long time needed to search for an item of purchase (23%), low efficiency in searching for products in catalogues (20%) and low quality of product descriptions (10%) (Marketplanet, 2022).

4. Research methodology and results

4.1. Research methodology

To evaluate the use of electronic tools in the purchase process, a study was conducted among small and medium companies in the Lower Silesia Region. This research was part of a more extensive research carried out by the author related to purchases in small and medium sized Polish enterprises (Prażat, 2020). The research tool was the questionnaire form, and the CAWI survey technique was used. Only the part of the questionnaire whose results are used in this paper will be discussed. The main objectives were the following.

- to determine whether SME companies use the Internet in the purchasing process,
- to determine the level of usage of electronic tools at individual stages of the purchasing process,
- to determine the advantages of electronic tools in the purchasing process,
- examine possible differences in actions between small and medium enterprises.

The mentioned part of a questionnaire consisted of four questions, most of them closed-ended, with nominal or ordinal scale. Moreover, the respondent's particulars part included questions concerning the enterprise size (the only division criterion was number of employees: small enterprises employed 10 to 49 persons and medium-sized ones employed 50 to 249 persons), industry, business line, etc. After introducing the necessary changes resulting from a pilot survey, the main survey was conducted. 126 questionnaires really concerned small and medium companies and were correctly completed (Prażat, 2020).

4.2. Discussion and results

In 90 small and 36 medium-sized enterprises participated in the research. They operate mainly in the trading, service, and manufacturing industries. Small enterprises operated first of all in local and regional markets and medium ones in regional and national markets. Almost three-fourths of medium-sized enterprises (72.3%) and more than half of small enterprises (52.3%) operated on the market for more than five years (Prałat, 2020).

An average score was calculated that shows the frequency of using the Internet for each individual action related to buying (0 points were assigned to the answer ‘never’ and 4 points were assigned to the answer ‘very often’). Depending on the sizes of the companies examined, there are differences between levels of use of the Internet in purchasing. The results shown in Figure 1 indicate that small companies use the Internet in 11 of 12 analysed actions. The largest difference appeared in the case of ‘call for tenders’ and was equal to 0.92 points. An advantage for medium-sized enterprises was also great in the case of setting contract terms (0.79) and searching for the product and establishing contacts with the supplier (in both cases, the difference was equal to 0.75 points).

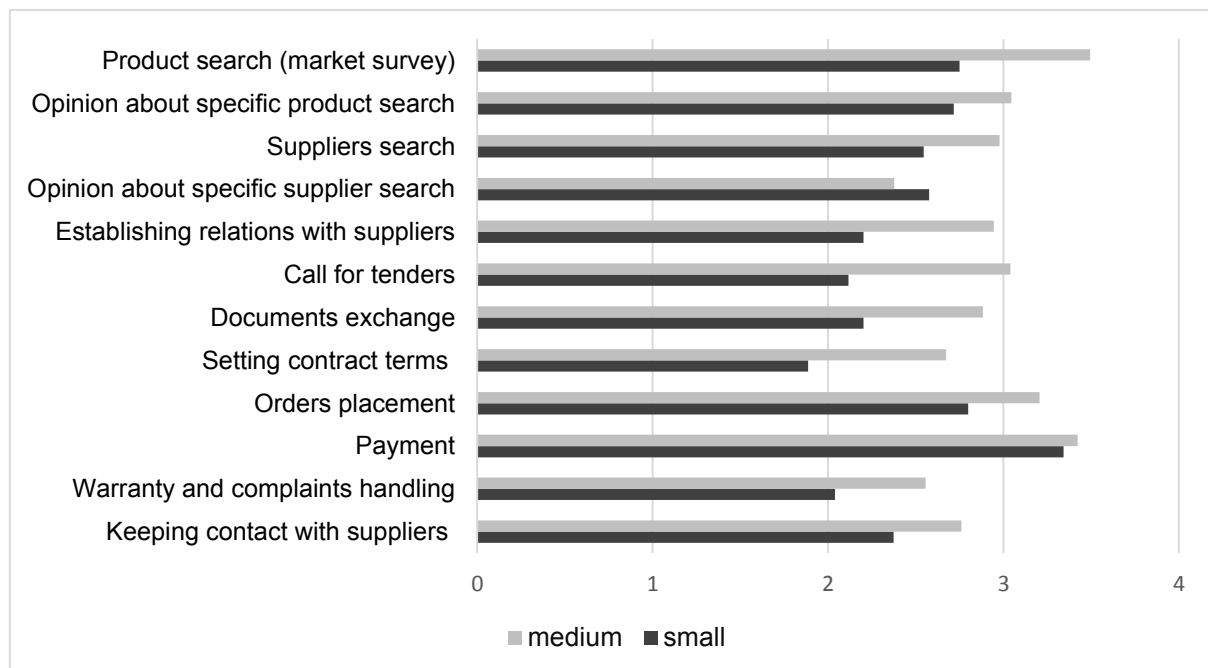


Figure 1. Use of the Internet at individual stages of the purchasing process: differences between small and medium-sized enterprises.

Source: Prałat, 2020.

In the case of online shopping, B2B online stores are used the most, where 47.4% of medium-sized businesses and 21.1% of small businesses make their purchases (Figure 2). B2B e-marketplaces are used much less frequently, only by 26.3% of medium-sized and 10.5% of small enterprises. The use of these platforms is often payable, so it may be the reason, moreover companies can be afraid of their insufficient skills or have no awareness of the benefits that can be reached by use of such a solution.

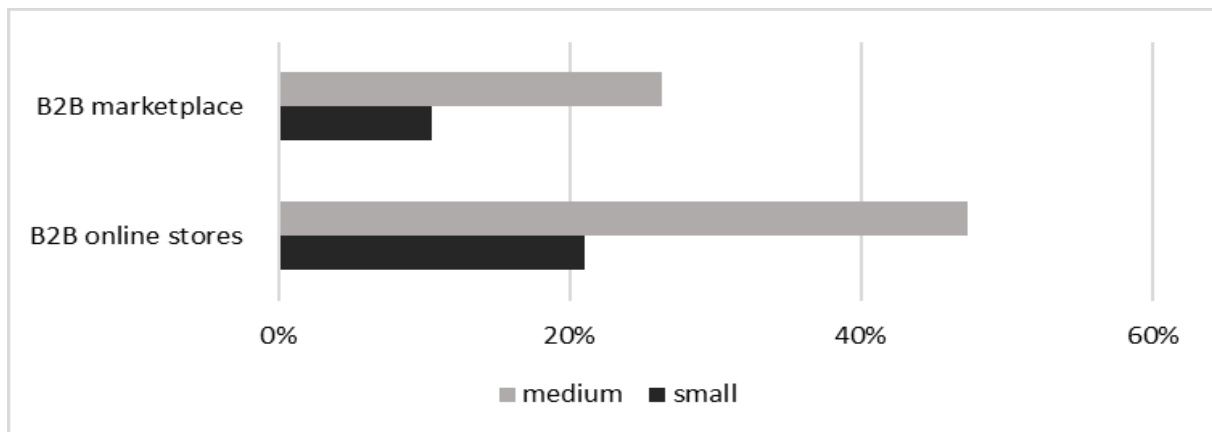


Figure 2. Use of electronic tools in purchasing: differences between small and medium enterprises.

Source: own.

Respondents were asked to indicate the greatest benefits of using electronic tools in the purchase process. They could choose up to three of the seven proposed answers. Medium-sized companies indicated 'convenience' (72%), 'possibility of reaching out to many suppliers' (67%) and 'lower prices' (61%). In the case of small companies, the three main advantages were the same. The benefit of 'quick and easy communication with suppliers' was also highly rated by respondents regardless of the size of the company. The results are shown in Figure 3. The only benefit rated higher by the respondents from small companies was 'unlimited access to information', which can mean that obtaining information is easier in medium companies.

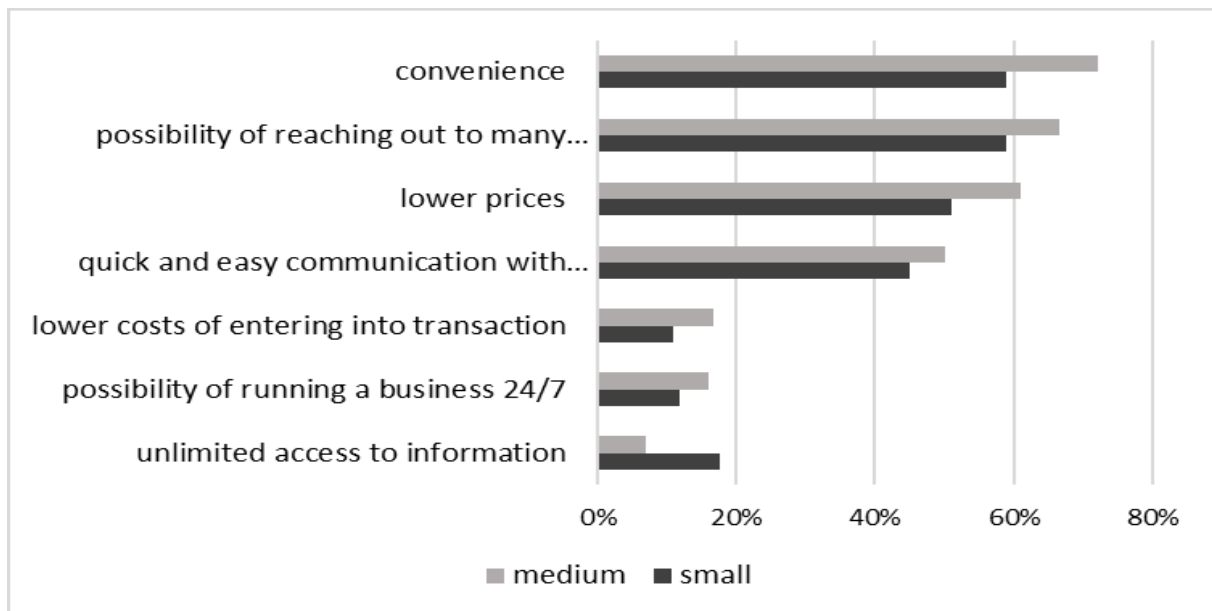


Figure 3. Perception of the benefits of electronic tools in the purchasing process – differences between small and medium-sized enterprises.

Source: own.

5. Conclusions

The main objective of the paper is to determine the way SMEs use the Internet and electronic tools in purchasing, and how the problems with the durability of supply chains influence the way of application of new solutions. The author's own research and a review of the latest literature allowed the search for answers to the research questions posed at the beginning of the article.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine made it necessary to analyse existing sources of supply and identify new ones. Inflation, on the other hand, influenced the search for savings. Therefore, often even those enterprises in which supply chains are still functioning correctly, analyse them in terms of profitability and consider new opportunities, also in terms of supplying enterprises.

The long-term effect may be not only deglobalization, but even regionalisation of supply chains and a change in the way of thinking about suppliers. Weak links in supply chains should be identified in advance, key suppliers should be qualified in detail, and relations with them properly managed (strengthening cooperation).

In small and medium-sized enterprises, after a long period of cooperation with regular suppliers, often without regular market analysis, managers decided to perform a market analysis and verify the competitiveness of the received offers. The results of the author's research show that the Internet is now a common source of information for Polish enterprises from the SME sector, which is used both to search for information about products and opinions about companies that offer them. The Internet then facilitates obtaining information from potential suppliers (for example, RFI, RFP, RFQ or even simple e-mail exchange).

Polish enterprises from the SME sector, despite the fact that they are considered more traditional compared to larger organisations, are also more and more willing to use electronic purchases, appreciating the convenience, possibility of reaching out to many suppliers and lower prices. The issue of facilitating communication with suppliers is also highly appreciated. According to forecasts (EFL, 2021), over the next five years there will be an increase of at least 1/3 in the number of enterprises from the SME sector that will make purchases in this way.

The biggest enthusiasts are primarily younger managers, but older buyers are also convincing them. This is related to the already mentioned consumerization of purchases on the B2B market. It should be emphasised that in addition to B2B online stores, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs are increasingly willing to shop on B2B trading platforms, including the Allegro Biznes platform launched in 2020, where they can find more than 200 million offers from various industries.

The paper focusses on the analysis of the Internet and the use of electronic tools in the purchase of Polish SMEs. It is a preliminary study with some limitations. The first limitation results from the fact that the surveys were conducted at the beginning of the pandemic.

It is worth repeating them and comparing the obtained results. The study was also limited by the sample, which covered only a single country. Therefore, extending them to other countries should also be considered.

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