

## THE SERVITIZATION BUSINESS MODEL AS A KEY TO SUCCESS FOR MODERN COMPANIES

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to identify the premises and organizational predispositions for the implementation of servitization in a manufacturing enterprise. The study seeks to explore how servitization, as an evolutionary change in business models, contributes to long-term competitiveness and value creation in the context of digital transformation and shifting customer expectations.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research follows a qualitative case study approach using a semi-structured individual interview with a decision-maker in a medium-sized furniture manufacturing company located in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship in Poland. The company was purposefully selected due to its interest in extending its offering with service components. The interview tool was developed based on a literature review on servitization and business models, and organized in six thematic blocks. The study allows for a detailed analysis of organizational context, motivations, resources and technological readiness.

**Findings:** The study shows that the company exhibits both internal readiness (basic service infrastructure, openness to innovation, partial service implementation) and external drivers (market expectations, competitive pressure) for adopting a servitization model. Nevertheless, significant barriers such as skill shortages, limited IT integration and cultural resistance persist. The findings highlight the necessity of a gradual, pilot-based implementation strategy and underscore the potential of digital servitization in combining digitalization and service orientation.

**Research limitations/implications:** Due to the exploratory and single-case nature of the study, the results cannot be generalized to all manufacturing enterprises. The analysis reflects the subjective view of one respondent and represents a pre-implementation phase. Future research should include multiple case studies, longitudinal data and customer perspectives to deepen understanding of servitization dynamics across industries.

**Practical implications:** The study offers insights for manufacturing companies considering servitization by outlining the key organizational capabilities required for successful implementation. It provides a roadmap for aligning resources, modifying organizational culture and integrating digital tools to build service-based competitive advantage. The results suggest that service bundling and long-term customer relationships can enhance financial stability and operational efficiency.

**Social implications:** Servitization supports broader sustainability and circular economy goals by shifting the focus from product sales to lifecycle management and value co-creation. This approach aligns with environmental policies and promotes responsible consumption.

It also redefines the customer's role as a co-creator, fostering deeper engagement and personalized experiences.

**Originality/value:** The paper contributes to the growing body of research on servitization by providing an in-depth, contextualized understanding of its prerequisites and challenges from an organizational perspective. It emphasizes the complementary relationship between servitization and digitalization and offers practical and theoretical insights into business model innovation in manufacturing.

**Keywords:** servitization, business model, manufacturing firms.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Classically understood production activity is no longer sufficient for some sectors. Consumption and the all-pervasive trend of consumerism are the subject of research by representatives of many scientific disciplines - economics, management, sociology, etc. This trend left a particularly significant mark about enterprises at the beginning of the 21st century with the increase in access to information and the ease of its assimilation (Rydzak, 2023). A second factor related to the issue at hand is also globalization. This is a phenomenon that is understood differently in different areas of economic life. From an economic point of view, it is defined as processes of integration of world markets for goods and services, labor and capital (Tomkiewicz, 2023). Consequently, they can lead to a situation of market saturation, significantly affecting the specifics of the operation of manufacturing (Kim, 2011) and service companies (Bleischwitz et al., 2018).

Today's business environment is characterized by the growing importance of digital technologies and the need to adapt operating modes, strategies and business models to changing customer needs and expectations. Within the processes taking place, the trends of digitalization and servitization can be distinguished. Although the two concepts are often co-occurring, their nature differs significantly, and they present different approaches to business development. Digitalization is the process of using digital technologies to transform operations, products, services and business models (Brennen, Kreiss, 2016). Its warp is, in addition to the automation of existing processes, primarily the creation of new value through data analysis, the development of digital platforms and the use of artificial intelligence. A team of researchers led by Verhoef (2021) noted that digitalization has enabled the emergence of new business models such as subscription, sharing economy or platform models.

In turn, the essence of servitization can be described as the transformation of the traditional product sales model into a model based on offering end-to-end solutions that combine products and services (Baines et al., 2009). A manifestation of this can be, for example, the implementation of technical consulting, maintenance, fleet management or training services aimed at increasing customer loyalty and ensuring a stable revenue flow (Raddats et al., 2016).

Companies that apply servitization acquire several benefits, such as differentiating themselves from their competitors, building long-term customer relationships or increasing margins through more value-added services. The issue of servitization will be discussed comprehensively later in this article.

## 2. Literature review

These business models are an important area of research, the precise explanation of which promotes sound organizational decision-making and long-term performance. The essence of a business model is to explain how an organization creates, delivers and captures value. A business model constructs a set of logical relationships between key components such as the value proposition, customer segments, distribution channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key resources and activities, and key partners and cost structure (Osterwalder, Pigneur, 2010). It can also be understood as 'the design or architecture of how a business delivers value to customers, attracts customers and converts payments into profit (Teece, 2010). What may be a key point from the point of view of the topic at hand, the concept of the business model has become increasingly important from an innovation perspective, as it enables the creation of competitive advantage not only at the product level but also in the way it is delivered (Chesbrough, 2007). Business model innovations can anticipate changes in the orphan, acting as a tool for adaptation and differentiation of the company (Gassmann, Frankenberger, Csik, 2014). In a systems perspective, the business model can be understood as a mechanism that integrates different areas of an organization's activities, enabling it to market itself coherently and effectively (Morris, Schindelhutte, Allen, 2005). One of the most popular approaches to visualizing a business model is the business model canvas (Osterwalder, Pigneur, 2010), which has gained importance especially in the practical aspects of companies.

A characteristic feature of the business model is also its dynamic nature. It is not fixed 'forever' but is subject to change under the influence of both internal (e.g. digital transformation, changes in company policy) and external (for example, regulatory or technological) factors. An effective business model should be flexible and able to evolve in response to a changing environment (Wirtz, 2011). Increasingly, the business model is also seen as an element that determines the sustainable development of an organization. Hence the frequent emphasis on the terms 'sustainable business model' or 'circular business model', which emphasize the need to consider social and environmental goals alongside economic objectives (Geissdoerfer, Vladimirova, Evans, 2018).

The literature emphasizes that digitalization and servitization are not identical or exclusive phenomena. However, they can be mutually supportive. This can be the case, for example, in so-called digital servitization, the premise of which is the use of digital tools to design,

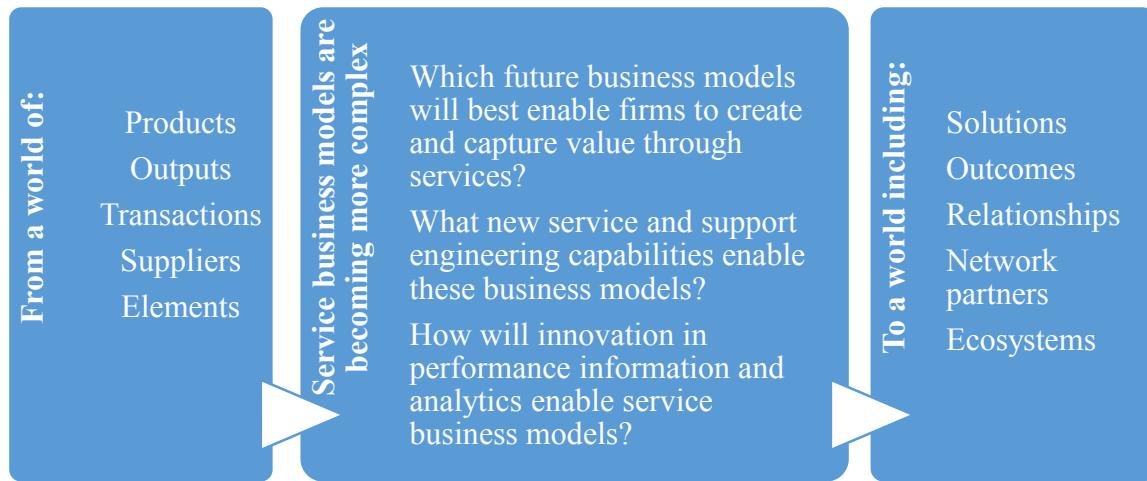
implement and monitor services accompanying physical products (Kohtamäki et al., 2019). In practice, this means, for example, using IoT technologies to remotely monitor the condition of equipment and predictive analytics to plan maintenance before failure occurs.

Despite their complementarity, the two phenomena are fundamentally different in terms of their strategic objectives. Digitization focuses on streamlining internal operational events, reducing costs and using data as a key resource. Servitization, on the other hand, focuses on creating external value. This can take place by increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gebauer et al., 2005). These perspectives imply the need for a different approach to management, employee competence and relations with the business environment. Differences can also be seen in the organizational sphere. Digitization most often requires investment in IT infrastructure, the development of digital competences and the implementation of new IT systems. Servitization, on the other hand, requires organizational change - for example, the creation of new departments responsible for the service sphere, the development of soft competences and interdisciplinary cooperation (Lenka et al., 2018). Consistently, the implementation of digitization and servitization also poses various challenges. Companies implementing digitalization face technological barriers, integration of data from different sources and digital data security issues. In contrast, organizations implementing servitization face difficulties in reformulating their offerings, training staff and winning customers over to new models of operation and value delivery (Kindström, 2010).

It may be scientifically interesting to effectively combine digitization and servitization strategies. Digitization can support servitization by creating the conditions for offering data-driven services (for example, product usage analysis, personalization of offers, remote technical support). On the other hand, servitization can provide digitalization with a business context, orienting its use towards customer needs and strictly market-based applications (Coreynen et al., 2017). The combination of these threads can also foster increased competitiveness. Companies using both solutions tend to achieve higher levels of innovation and adaptability. As has been shown, companies successfully implementing digital servitization report higher customer satisfaction, improved operational efficiency and greater financial stability (Kohtamäki et al., 2019). From a scientific perspective, the need for further research into the integration of digitalization and servitization is increasingly being advocated. The complexity and multidimensionality of these processes calls for a systems approach, cross-cutting technological, organizational, social and market factors.

When discussing the theoretical framework of the servitization model approach, the aspect of creating or shifting towards the service aspect of the business is crucial. M. Jablonski even emphasizes that servitization ‘may serve, through its ideological premise, to revolutionary and evolutionary changes in the configurations of business models, which may fit into the notion of restructuring’ (Jabłoński, 2019). What is widely considered to be the first theoretical description of the phenomenon of servitization dates to 1988, when Vandermerwe and Rada (1988) defined it as ‘the innovation of an organization’s capabilities and processes to better create mutual value

through a shift from selling product to selling product-service systems. The crucial question then is at what point does service become the dominant aspect and when is it still understood as a supporting element of production? As M. Ulbrych points out, servitization occurs when services determine the course of production processes, create added value and create a competitive advantage for the industry or company (Ulbrych 2016). An extreme symptom may be a shift from a 'pure' product to a 'pure' service (Smith et al., 2014). The phenomenon of the shift to the service aspect of business is discussed by many authors. A few emerging trends can be discerned (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Describing the shift to services.

Source: Neely et al., 2011.

Moving from the 'world' of: (1) products to solutions; (2) outputs to outcomes; (3) transactions to relationships; (4) suppliers to network partners and (5) elements to ecosystems. As the authors point out, this transition does not mean the elimination of the original elements, but the addition of elements to the business that extend the functioning of the enterprises (Neely et al., 2011).

The success of servitization depends on how the advantage in resources is exploited, which influences the achievement of competitive advantage (Madhavaram, Hunt, 2008). At the same time, M. Matusek (2016) citing a study by D. Kindström and C. Kowalkowski notes that since companies may not actually be the rightful owners of all necessary resources, an approach from the resource theory side of the business 'is not entirely appropriate for understanding the servitization process of goods producers (Kindström, Kowalkowski, 2014). It therefore seems interesting to identify the determinants of the transition to a servitization business model. M. Jablonski indicated globalization, mobility of production factors, decrease in transaction costs and diffusion of technological progress (Jabłoński, 2019). The author also identified social factors as an important aspect of servitization, whose role is to build relational capital (a community of supporters of the proposed solution) and to simultaneously act with integrity and respect for the environment.

Another element determining the application of servitization is the existence of competitive pressures and the need to seek market advantage. Increased globalization contributes to product homogeneity, making competitive advantages based only on functional characteristics unsustainable (Porter, 1996). To differentiate themselves, companies seek new sources of value, including services, which are often more difficult to copy than physical products. Increasing competitiveness through servitization manifests itself in the construction of bundles of end-to-end solutions (so-called bundling), integrating product and service into a single package (Matthyssens, Vandembemt, 2008).

The rationale for servitization is also changing customer expectations. The better-informed buyer is more demanding and expects 'tailor-made' solutions (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004). The role of the user is also changing - from a passive consumer to an active co-creator of value. Buyers expect services tailored to their unique needs rather than standardized offerings (Gebauer et al., 2010). These expectations increase the importance of personalization, tailored services and advanced after-sales service.

From the company's point of view, an important issue is that the average life cycle of products is lengthening. Models based on rapid renewal of purchases therefore become ineffective (Neely, 2008). Service revenues can be more profitable than revenues from the sale of physical products while being less susceptible to the cyclical fluctuations of the economy (Baines, Lightfoot, 2013).

Another determinant of the application of the servitization model is regulation and public policy. Pro-environmental measures such as the European Green Deal or laws that are geared towards producer responsibility motivate producers to implement circular economy models (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). In these types of models, companies take responsibility for the recovery and recycling of their products. Servitization is a way to enable companies to meet these requirements, minimizing environmental impact and creating a reputation as a company committed to sustainability (Tukker, 2015).

The classical approach to manufacturing companies focuses its attention on the creation of the product and its buyer. In the servitization model, companies remain in a partnership relationship throughout the life of the product. What occurs is the creation of ecosystems in which different entities (producers, service providers, customers) co-create value (Adrodegari, Saccani, 2017). The creation of ecosystems enables better management of the product lifecycle, faster emergence and implementation of innovations and more efficient use of resources. Servitization is also a model that increases barriers to entry for new competitors. In its nature, an extended service offering increases relationships based on multi-year contracts, which effectively raises barriers to entry for new bidders (Visnijc et al., 2014). The emergence of an offering that complements physical products with services requires specific competences, infrastructure and a wide range of product usage data, which effectively limits the ability of new providers to enter the market quickly.

In the servitization model, some of the risk is transferred from the customer to the supplier (Ng, Nudurupati, 2010). This happens, for example, in specific types of contracts based on the supplier's actual performance rather than pre-planned activities. Indirectly, this also has the effect of changing the product life cycle. By making use of advanced diagnostics, the use of predictive methods or monitoring tools, companies can reduce product lifecycle costs and increase customer satisfaction which affects long-term profitability (Baines, Lightfoot, 2013).

A final aspect of implementing servitization is the need to modify the organizational culture. Employees need to learn the perspective of the buyer, changing their mindset from a typically transactional one to one of delivering continuous value (Kindström, Kowalkowski, 2014). This change determines the acquisition of new competences: service design, relationship management, data analysis and innovation (Ulaga, Reinartz, 2011).

### **3. The servitization business model – research results**

The purpose of the research described in this article was to identify the rationale and organizational predisposition for implementing servitization in a manufacturing company. The study was exploratory in nature and is part of the trend of qualitative case studies, which provide an in-depth analysis of complex organizational phenomena in their practical context (Yin, 2017). The method used was an individual semi-structured interview with a decision-maker in the company under study. The selection of the subject was purposive. The selected company met the criteria of a medium-sized manufacturing entity, operating in the furniture industry in the Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship in Poland and showing interest in expanding its offer with service components. The interview was conducted in the form of a face-to-face meeting and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The research tool in the form of an interview questionnaire was constructed based on a review of the literature on servitization and business models. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions grouped into six thematic blocks: market and strategic context, motivations and impulses for service development, resources and competences, organizational culture and structure, technological and process readiness, respondent's subjective assessment.

The study was conducted with the organization's chief operating officer as the decision-maker and with a cross-sectional knowledge of the topics discussed in the article. Due to lack of permission, the subject's data cannot be shared, and his/her description is limited to parameters ensuring anonymity. The survey consisted of 6 panels containing 3 questions each, the answers to which will be described below.

## **Market and strategic context**

The respondent pointed to significant changes in the market environment, highlighting the increase in customer expectations in terms of seeking specific and individual offers and comprehensiveness of service. As he noted: 'customers expect not just a product, but a complete buying experience - advice, trying on a piece of furniture, transport with delivery, installation at the indicated location and even interior design (visualization)'. Changing customer preferences are forcing modifications in the approach to the offer and customer relations. The company has already partly adapted to these requirements by introducing, for example, an online product configurator and developing electronic sales channels.

## **Motivations and impulses for service development**

At a strategic level, the organization recognizes the need to expand its offering with a service element. 'There have been discussions about introducing services - both in terms of building customer relationships and increasing margins'. The company is already introducing solutions such as extended warranty and on-site product assembly (folding) services, which have been positively received.

## **Resources and competences**

In the area of available organizational resources, the company has the basic elements to support service activities (customer service department, logistics). There are noticeable gaps that would need to be filled to implement a wider range of service activities. As pointed out by the respondent, 'We lack specialized personnel and IT tools for comprehensive after-sales services. The competences of the staff are at a high level in terms of handling traditional commercial activities, but there is a need to strengthen the so-called soft competences and those related to the service area in the zone of technical teams, which would be responsible for the correct course of service processes.

## **Organizational culture and structure**

The company shows a moderate openness to innovation and new operating models. Strategic decisions are driven by market needs and based on data and interdepartmental consultation. 'We are not afraid of experiments but approach them in stages - first a pilot then possible scaling up to the target scope'. The current organizational structure is optimal for current production activities, but there is a noticeable need to better integrate marketing activities with the technical department and to implement a unit dedicated to possible strictly service activities. Attitudes to change among employees are identified as mixed - managers are open-minded, while operational employees show some resistance to digitalization and a different customer role.

### **Technological and process readiness**

Service-related processes are already partially present - the company offers on-site assembly, standard complaints handling and support for order configuration. However, 'the current CRM and ERP systems are not fully integrated into the after-sales service channels. The collection of customer data is in place, but their analysis is not implemented in a systematic way. Their use in decision-making requires redesign and further development. Communication with customers after the sale is carried out through multiple channels (telephone, email, website), but is not systematized in the form of an integrated system.

### **Subjective assessment of the respondent**

The respondent presented the view that the company has the potential to implement wider service activities as an integral part of the business model. 'We are aware of what we have and what we lack. We need resources and a plan to apply the process'. He also identified what he considered to be the key barriers: staff constraints, lack of experience in service delivery, insufficient belief in the need for change and cultural resistance. Furthermore, he assessed the overall readiness positively, emphasizing the need for an informed decision and gradual implementation. 'A gradual transition in the form of an evolution with clear goals and some solutions'.

## **4. Summary and conclusions**

The study conducted aimed to identify the rationale and organizational predisposition for implementing the servitization business model in manufacturing companies. The proceedings adopted the case study as a starting point for the development of further, more in-depth research in this area. Based on an individual semi-structured interview with a decision-maker - the operations director at the studied entity - it was possible to grasp the complexity of the conditions accompanying the potential transformation of the business model from product-centric to servitization.

According to the literature, servitization is a manifestation of an evolutionary change in the business model, in which the value proposition goes beyond traditional product delivery and includes personalization, service integration and the creation of lasting customer relationships, among others (Raddats et al., 2016, Baines et al., 2009). The results confirm the relevance of both external factors (market pressures, customer expectations, competitive actions) and internal factors (resources, organizational structure and culture) that influence the organization's readiness and to implement service priority. The study found that the organization recognizes the benefits of implementing service-prioritized solutions - including

the opportunity to differentiate itself from competitors, increase margins and enhance customer satisfaction. This practice fits in with the service-dominant logic approach (Vargo, Lusch, 2008), in which value is created in interaction with the user and is jointly created.

The interview results also indicated that the company has a partial infrastructure and elementary competences as well as the openness of the management to model changes. At the same time, a few barriers were identified - including a shortage of specialized service personnel, limited integration of IT systems and the need to transform organizational culture. From a practical perspective, the implementation of a servitization approach should be phased, considering testing activities, the development of staff competencies and building awareness of the value offered both within the organization and in its environment. The results indicate that a key determinant may be the ability to combine elements of digitalization with a service-oriented extension of the offer, so-called digital servitization (Kohtamäki et al., 2019). Such a solution makes it possible to respond faster and more effectively to market needs, but also to build more stable revenue streams.

In the conducted research procedure, several limitations important for the final reception of this description can be noticed. Due to the nature of the conducted study and its setting in the qualitative trend of case studies, the results cannot be generalized to the population of manufacturing enterprises in Poland. The analysis was performed on one entity, selected in a purposeful manner, which limits the possibilities of comparing and assessing other entities operating in different market or organizational conditions. Despite the use of a methodology enabling in-depth analysis, the study was based on the subjective perspective of a decision-maker in the enterprise, which may carry the risk of selectivity of the presented content and its interpretation. A certain specificity of the studied enterprise is its "raw" state, the pre-implementation stage of servitization. A challenge for further research may therefore be to examine the full cycle of implementation of this solution. Customer perspectives in relation to different stages of servitization implementation may also be valuable. In the context of further research, it is postulated to extend it to a larger number of cases, which would enable the identification of common patterns or differentiating features.

In the theoretical dimension, the study confirms the validity of further exploration of the issue of servitization model solutions integrating organizational, technological and business aspects. Servitization should not be perceived only as a one-time implementation of a service element, but as a complex process of value formation that requires the integration of many aspects of the company's functioning.

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