

THE PRACTICE OF STRATEGIC ALLIANCES: PROCESSES, PEOPLE, AND PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

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Purpose: This paper analyses strategic alliance management practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Poland, focusing on organisational roles, monitoring tools, stages of cooperation development, and mechanisms used to align partners' goals and strategies in resource-constrained environments.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with representatives of ten Polish SMEs involved in strategic alliances within an international Erasmus+ project. This approach enables an in-depth examination of alliance management processes, organisational arrangements, and competence development practices, grounded in the literature on alliance management and inter-organisational cooperation.

Findings: The results show that 90% of the surveyed SMEs do not employ a dedicated Alliance Manager, with alliance coordination handled on an ad hoc basis by owners or senior managers. Competence development related to alliance management is largely reactive, while monitoring relies mainly on informal assessments rather than structured tools. Most alliances remain at the stage of formalising cooperation frameworks and do not progress to joint investments. Goal alignment between partners is partial and usually limited to selected initiatives rather than fully integrated strategic alignment. Based on these findings, the paper proposes recommendations including the professionalisation of alliance management roles, more systematic competence development, standardisation of monitoring practices, deeper formalisation of cooperation, and the introduction of structured knowledge management mechanisms.

Research limitations/implications: The qualitative nature of the study and the small sample size limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research could expand the analysis to larger and more diverse samples of SMEs.

Practical implications: The findings highlight key organisational gaps in alliance management and suggest that even in resource-constrained SMEs, introducing formal coordination roles, monitoring mechanisms, and knowledge management practices may enhance alliance effectiveness.

Originality/value: The paper provides original empirical evidence on alliance management practices in Polish SMEs, revealing the gap between theoretical models and everyday managerial practice.

Keywords: strategic alliances; small and medium-sized enterprises; Alliance Manager; cooperation monitoring; knowledge management; Poland.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

In today's network economy, strategic alliances play a key role as a flexible and effective mechanism for achieving synergies between organisations (Gulati, 1998). In fact, Michael Porter and Fuller (1986) already recognised their potential in strengthening competitive advantage through cooperation rather than competition. Emanuela Todeva and David Knoke (2005) define strategic alliances as formalised, inter-organisational structures based on cooperation that enable goals to be achieved more effectively than through independent action (Todeva, Knoke, 2005). In this context, the article analyses the key components of effective alliance management, focusing on three areas:

1. People and roles – who are the creators and implementers of alliances, what organisational structures support their activities, and whether there are specialised resources (Alliance Managers).
2. Processes and phases of cooperation – how the stages of creating and maintaining alliances proceed, what tools and technologies support the monitoring of their effectiveness, and how information and feedback are exchanged after the cooperation ends.
3. Results and communication – what internal communication and knowledge management mechanisms contribute to the sustainability and effectiveness of partnerships, and how companies adapt their activities in a dynamic business environment.

The analysis of these processes and practices provides a basis for formulating recommendations for practitioners, showing that effective communication, monitoring of cooperation results and an adaptive approach to alliance management play a key role in building long-lasting, trust-based and effective business relationships.

To deepen the knowledge on how strategic alliances are managed in Polish small and medium-sized enterprises, an analysis of key aspects related to strategic alliance management was conducted. The study focuses on defining the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the alliance management process, identifying the tools used to monitor the effectiveness of cooperation, and learning about methods for aligning goals and strategies between partners. This objective is achieved by seeking answers to the following research questions:

1. Who in the organisation is responsible for initiating and implementing strategic alliances?
2. Does the organisation provide training and activities to improve the qualifications of alliance managers?
3. At what stage of the process is the strategic alliance created by the organisation?
4. How do companies approach the alignment of goals and strategies within the alliance?
5. What tools and technologies support the process of evaluating and monitoring strategic alliances?

The answers to the research questions were obtained on the basis of research conducted in 2024 in small and medium-sized enterprises in Poland, Spain, Romania, Italy and Lithuania, using the method of personal interviews. Due to the extensive empirical material, this article presents only the results concerning enterprises operating in Poland. The study is part of a broader project entitled "Sustainable Alliance Manager: Educational Experience Towards Cooperation Skills with Environmental Awareness", implemented with the support of the European Union under the Erasmus+ programme (Grant Agreement for the Erasmus+ Programme 2023-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000157968).

2. Literature review

In literature, alliances are seen as interorganisational relationships that go through a recognisable life cycle: initiation and formation, design and contracting, implementation and post-formation management, and evaluation, followed by possible recombination or termination (Das, Teng, 2000; Spekman, Isabella, MacAvoy, 2000). In a classic process approach, Ring and Van de Vena (1994) describe repetitive loops of negotiation–commitment–performance, in which partners adjust both formal agreements and informal rules of interaction, gradually building trust and reducing uncertainty.

Doz (1996) showed that the effectiveness of alliances depends on multidimensional learning – about the environment, the task, the processes, the competencies and the goals – which modifies the initial assumptions and coordination mechanisms in the course of cooperation. Synthesis reviews emphasise that the choice of governance form (e.g. joint venture vs. contracts), the division of decision-making rights and control mechanisms should be consistent with the level of uncertainty, the risk of opportunism and the degree of resource complementarity (Gulati, 1998; Todeva, Knoke, 2005). More recent approaches focus on the post-formation phase, where coordination routines, performance measurement systems and trust-building practices are crucial, as they determine the actual transfer of value and the durability of the relationship (Kale, Dyer, Singh, 2002).

The approach is complemented by an evolutionary perspective, in which alliances can be treated as dynamic strategic games based on adaptation and selection of strategies over time. Evolutionary game theory models, used, among others, by Wajzer and Cukier-Syguła (2019), provide a paradigm that deepens the understanding of cooperation mechanisms. The authors analyse two 2×2 models: single-population and two-population, based on structures such as Stag Hunt (a game involving deer) and Chicken (a game involving roosters), using replicator dynamics and phase diagrams. Their findings show that the stability of cooperation depends on the initial distribution of strategies and the "fields of attraction" between cooperation and defection – similarly to strategic alliances, where it depends on whether partners decide to act together in the long term, even at the expense of short-term unilateral gains.

From this perspective, strategic choices made during the alliance formation phase – including decisions on formalisation and governance structure – determine the partners' subsequent ability to learn, adapt and strengthen their relationship. The evolutionary approach emphasises that cooperation can be sustained but is vulnerable to disruption if trust-enhancing mechanisms are lacking. In this context, the Alliance Manager emerges as a situational strategist responsible for building a "cooperative ecosystem" and ensuring that cooperation is maintained in a stable cooperation zone. As in evolutionary game models, communication tools, formalisation of goals and systematic monitoring can shift the alliance towards sustainable cooperation strategies, even under pressure to pursue individual interests.

As relationships evolve, the importance of the specialised role of the Alliance Manager, acting as a boundary spanner between organisations, grows. The key tasks of this role include: (1) translating strategic goals into operational mechanisms (governance, indicators, coordination rituals) (Kale, Singh, 2009), (2) managing risk and trust – including, among other things, escalating disputes and calibrating control and partnership (Dyer, Kale, Singh, 2001), (3) orchestrating knowledge exchange and embedding good practices in the form of organisational routines (Zollo, Reuer, Singh, 2002) and (4) monitoring results and initiating course corrections (Heimeriks, Duysters, 2007).

Research on alliance capability shows that organisations that accumulate experience from multiple alliances, build post-formation procedures and a dedicated alliance function achieve higher results thanks to better partner selection, more efficient coordination and faster learning (Heimeriks, Duysters, 2007). At the micro-process level, effectiveness is supported by inter-organisational routines such as shared KPIs, project reviews or knowledge forums, which stabilise cooperation and reduce transaction costs (Zollo, Reuer, Singh, 2002).

Finally, the relational view argues that advantages can arise across firm boundaries when the Alliance Manager actively develops relationship-specific assets, knowledge-sharing routines, and resource complementarity, with adequate governance and control (Dyer, Singh, 1998; Gulati, 1998). In practice, many organisations institutionalise this function by creating alliance departments or offices, which allows them to standardise processes, train staff and accumulate know-how (Dyer, Kale, Singh, 2001).

3. Methods

The aim of this article is to examine strategic alliance management practices in organisations, with particular emphasis on the roles and tasks of those responsible for creating and maintaining them, the tools and technologies used to monitor the effectiveness of cooperation, the phases of alliance development, and methods of aligning the goals and strategies of partners. The study also aims to analyse solutions supporting the development of alliance managers' competences and to identify internal communication mechanisms that influence the sustainability and effectiveness of partnerships in the long term.

The research questions analysed in the article focus on key areas determining the success of strategic alliances: from structural conditions in organisations (the role of managers, training processes, formalisation of cooperation phases) to technological tools supporting monitoring and evaluation, and mechanisms for aligning the goals and strategies of partners. The results of the study indicate that effective alliance management requires not only a specific organisational structure, but also effective communication and knowledge exchange processes, both during and after the partnership. An analysis of these aspects allows conclusions to be drawn about practical solutions that can increase the effectiveness of alliances and identify challenges related to their maintenance in a dynamic market environment.

The analysis for the project was conducted in five European countries: Poland, Spain, Romania, Italy and Lithuania.

The research material was based on personal interviews with managers responsible for alliances and company presidents who took on these responsibilities due to their strategic importance and, in some cases, due to limited human resources preventing the creation of dedicated positions. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted between April and September 2024. The sample structure was as follows:

- 10 small and medium-sized enterprises from Poland,
- 10 from Spain,
- 10 from Romania,
- 10 from Italy,
- 10 from Lithuania.

Due to the extensive empirical material, this article presents only the results concerning Poland.

The sample was selected using *judgmental sampling* or *purposive sampling*, which means that participants were selected based on the researchers' knowledge, experience or recommendations. As emphasised by Frątczak and Mynarska (2007), in this type of research, individuals who best reflect the population under study are selected, and the sample includes entities with specific characteristics. In this case, SMEs that engage in strategic cooperation with other organisations and are involved in green transformation or conduct environmentally friendly activities were invited to participate in the study.

4. Results

One of the key elements of effective strategic alliance management is a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process of creating and maintaining alliances. The organisational structure in this area has a direct impact on the effectiveness of cooperation, the speed of decision-making and the ability to build long-term relationships. An analysis of the results of a survey conducted among Polish SMEs allows us to assess how the alliance management function is currently performed in practice and whether it is reflected in formal positions within company structures.

As many as 90% of the companies surveyed admit that they do not have a separate Alliance Manager position in their structures (Table 1). Responsibilities related to initiating and conducting partnership cooperation are most often taken over by owners, CEOs or members of the management board. In many companies, these are additional tasks performed alongside daily duties such as logistics, sales or customer service. In small and medium-sized enterprises, this role is usually taken on by members of management, which is a result of limited human and financial resources. However, in larger companies, as in one of the cases analysed, this function is sometimes performed by a director in a more formalised manner. The way alliances are managed depends on the nature of the planned cooperation. For example, in smaller organisations, different departments are involved in the process depending on the needs, e.g. logistics in contacts with suppliers.

In most of the companies surveyed, alliance management is centralised and carried out by top management. Although this solution works well in small organisations, it may limit the possibilities of building more complex partnerships. The lack of a dedicated Alliance Manager position means that cooperation is conducted in a reactive and ad hoc manner, which hinders long-term planning and relationship development. Where the CEO or owners are responsible for alliances, the effectiveness of cooperation largely depends on their personal experience, negotiation skills and strategic vision. In smaller companies, the lack of resources to create such a position result in an informal division of responsibilities, and alliance management becomes less effective and dependent on the availability of those involved in the process.

Table 1.
Organisational structure – alliance manager

Question C1	Response frequency	
A person in the organisation who assumes, in an informal and unstructured way, some of the functions of the Alliance Manager, in addition to their own.	4	40
A person in the organisation dedicates half of their work time to carrying out their usual functions, and the other half assumes the functions of the Alliance Manager, especially the operational part.	5	50
There is a defined role for the Alliance Manager. One person in the organisation dedicates all of their time to carrying out the functions of Alliance Manager, but in managing Alliances, priority is always given to aligning the interests of the alliance parties rather than managing the alliance per se.	0	0

Cont. table 1.

The Alliance Manager role is strategic. The AM works in a more autonomous way focused on the management of the alliance (from an operational and corporate point of view). It also has recognition and trust from the members of the alliance and decision-making capacity. The company can even outsource the Alliance Manager function to an 'Expert'.	1	1
Catfish	1	10

Source: own study.

Another important area of analysis is the development of the competences of those responsible for managing strategic alliances. The effectiveness of inter-organisational cooperation largely depends on the knowledge and skills of the staff, but the way in which training activities are planned and implemented in the surveyed companies reveals significant differences in approaches. The results of the study provide an insight into how companies organise the process of improving qualifications, what mechanisms they use to identify training needs and to what extent these strategies fit into the long-term development goals of the organisation (Table 2).

As many as 67% of respondents admitted that training is mainly carried out in response to the current operational needs of alliances, rather than as part of pre-established development programmes. Employees' skills are developed primarily through professional experience and problem solving in their daily work. Many companies lack specialised training programmes and strategies for improving the qualifications of alliance managers, and training itself is sporadic or non-existent.

For 22% of the companies surveyed, training planning is based on a schedule and requests from employees. In such cases, there is a mechanism for gathering information from various organisational levels in order to match the training topics to project and operational needs. One of the survey participants indicated that his organisation provides training for both operational and corporate managers as part of the company's overall strategy. In many cases, competence development is based on daily practice, which limits access to modern alliance management tools and methods. Sometimes companies offer training in other areas, such as machine operation, software or first aid.

The survey results show that most companies do not have a consistent and long-term training policy for alliance managers, which makes it difficult to build key competencies in this role. Training that responds to immediate needs brings quick results, but a lack of long-term planning can lead to competency gaps. Companies that combine fixed schedules with ongoing responsiveness to needs reported from different levels of the organisation are more effective at developing their employees, including alliance managers. Many organisations fail to exploit the full potential of the training opportunities available on the market, which can undermine the effectiveness of management. In smaller companies, training decisions are usually made by the owner or management, which often results in a focus on strategic priorities at the expense of operational staff development.

Table 2.
Competence development

Question C3	Response frequency	
People are trained and developed according to the needs that arise derived from the activity of the alliances.	6	6
There is a training and development plan to anticipate the needs that may arise derived from alliance activity.	2	2
The organisation's strategy includes the training of operational and corporate AM.	1	1
The operational and corporate AM takes responsibility (proactive in their learning and development) for their training and development, and ensures that the people in their organisation are sensitised and integrate the alliance perspective into their daily activity.	0	0
Catfish	9	100

Source: own study.

The lack of a well-thought-out training strategy in many companies affects not only the development of alliance managers' competencies, but also the way relationships with business partners are shaped. When skills development is based mainly on experience and ad hoc activities, it is more difficult to implement modern management tools or effectively secure interests in the long term. As a result, the importance of formal cooperation frameworks is growing – from clearly defining the principles of resource use, through precise assignment of responsibilities, to guaranteeing high quality standards. In this context, formalising agreements becomes not only a risk management tool, but also a natural complement to development activities, allowing for better protection of the company's strategic interests.

An important element of effective strategic alliance management is the way in which they are formalised, which affects both the security of cooperation and its long-term stability. An analysis of the research results allows us to understand the extent to which companies decide to create a formal legal framework for partnerships, what factors prompt them to sign agreements, and how the degree of formalisation of relations correlates with the level of resource and investment commitment. The study showed that entrepreneurs recognise the need to formally regulate strategic alliances to clearly define the rules for the use of resources, the distribution of profits and to ensure legal protection in the event of disputes (Table 3). The importance of a solid and transparent legal basis for this form of cooperation was emphasised. Although in some cases partnerships arise spontaneously, based on mutual trust and without written agreements, most respondents indicate that formalisation significantly strengthens the security of interests. Established agreements allow for more effective risk management, more precise definition of the scope of responsibilities of the parties and maintenance of high-quality standards.

Respondents pointed out that signing a formal agreement is particularly important when dealing with new business partners, especially in situations where customers have non-standard requirements.

Although companies value long-term relationships and informal cooperation based on trust, they see formalising contracts as a key tool for defining responsibilities and maintaining high quality of operations.

The data shows that 80% of respondents are in the process of establishing a formal framework for cooperation, without joint investments or costs (e.g. commercial customer-supplier, subcontracting or licensing agreements). Another 10% are in the process of formalisation, including individual investments or expenses coordinated between partners (e.g. co-production, co-promotion, distribution and sales agreements). The remaining 10% are in the formalisation phase with joint investments or costs, without the need to create a new legal entity (e.g. co-production, co-promotion, distribution and sales agreements).

Table 3.

A way to formalise a strategic alliance

Question B2.	Response frequency	
34. formalised collaboration framework, without joint investments or expenses (client-supplier commercial agreement, subcontracting agreement, licence agreement...)	8	80
35. formalised collaboration framework, with individual investments or expenses, coordinated between the participants (co-production agreement, co-promotion agreement, distribution and sales agreement, ...)	1	10
36. formalised collaboration framework that involves joint investments or expenses, without the need to generate a new entity with legal personality (co-production agreement, co-promotion agreement, distribution and sales agreement, ...)	1	10
37. formalised collaboration framework with shared capital and new or updated legal status (shareholding, joint venture, absorption, etc.)	0	0
Catfish	10	10

Source: own study.

Another area of analysis is the alignment of objectives and strategies between partners participating in strategic alliances. Consistency of vision and priorities is the foundation of effective cooperation, but in practice, companies often combine activities aimed at mutual benefits with the pursuit of their own individual ambitions. The results of the study allow us to look at how companies balance the pursuit of synergy with the preservation of autonomy, and how these choices affect the durability and quality of partnerships (Table 4). The analysis of the survey results shows that companies participating in strategic alliances maintain their own priorities and individual goals, and the alliance itself mainly serves as a platform for the exchange of knowledge, experience and information. The effectiveness of such cooperation largely depends on agreeing on common goals and developing a unified vision for development. A consistent organisational culture based on values that promote cooperation, which can significantly increase the effectiveness of partners' activities, also plays an important role.

Although companies undertake joint initiatives to improve quality and increase profitability, their individual ambitions remain crucial. The success of an alliance often depends on the ability to support each other in achieving economic advantage and reducing costs.

Even in the absence of a formally defined alliance management system, a clear sense of common purpose can bring partners together. Converging interests and clearly defined priorities among both staff and business partners foster effective cooperation. Moreover,

practice shows that even without a formal goal-setting process, mutual understanding and support on key issues can lead to the development of lasting and successful partnerships.

Table 4.

Convergence of goals and strategies between partners

Question D1	Response frequency	
Each company has its own objectives and particular interests in relation to the alliance. There is no real intention to integrate objectives or strategies; clearly, they operate separately and the objectives are not shared nor are they expected to be so in the medium term.	4	40
There are certain initiatives that seek to integrate the strategy and objectives of the different companies involved in the alliance, but they are residual, and their implementation is complex.	3	3
There is a perceived cohesion and shared purpose among the managers of the different companies, and there are decisions that confirm this, such as the integration of some groups, shared indicators, etc.	2	2
There is a clear sense of shared purpose between the people of the different companies that make up the alliance, it is perceived that people pursue shared interests and objectives and there is a real interest in integrating groups, plans and even shared measurement indicators.	1	10
Catfish		0

Source: own study.

An important element of effective strategic alliance management is systematic monitoring of their progress and evaluation of the effects of cooperation. It is the control mechanisms, analysis of quality indicators and the use of appropriate tools that determine whether a partnership will be able to maintain its effectiveness in the long term. However, the results of the study show that in practice, many companies approach this issue in an ad hoc and informal manner, which may limit their ability to detect problems early and implement corrective measures (Table 5). Most of the companies surveyed admitted that they do not have clearly defined procedures or specialised tools for monitoring the progress of cooperation after the alliance has been established. The assessment of results is usually based on general outcomes, such as the level of order fulfilment, customer satisfaction or the quality of cooperation. If the results are unsatisfactory, the partnership is not continued.

Many respondents do not use dedicated monitoring systems, assuming that ongoing cooperation is beneficial for both parties. Some companies use simple communication tools, such as WhatsApp, to maintain contact with partners and efficiently exchange daily information. The downside of this approach is the inability to collect structured data that could feed into monitoring systems on a regular basis. However, one company pointed to the need to implement more advanced IT solutions that would support the decision-making process and enable ongoing monitoring of the degree to which objectives are being achieved. Such support could help assess the extent to which alliances contribute to economic growth and improve the company's image.

Respondents use a variety of methods to monitor service quality indicators, including response time, customer satisfaction and delivery timeliness. Some companies cooperate with research units, use technical documentation or advanced computer programmes for detailed process analysis.

However, it is worth noting that Polish companies still lack uniform standards for monitoring and evaluating alliances – an informal approach remains dominant.

Table 5.

Monitoring the course of the alliance and assessing the effects of cooperation

Question B3.	Response frequency	
38. not monitored	5	50
39. individual evaluation; KPIs: Result; Effects: liquidation, maintenance	4	40
40. individual and joint evaluation; KPIs: Result and process, Quality of the relationship, Type of alliance selected; Effects: liquidation, reconversion, maintenance	1	1
Catfish	10	100

Source: own study.

Representatives of the surveyed Polish companies unanimously emphasise that cooperation with business partners promotes the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of employee competences. The experience gained remains within the organisation, forming the foundation for subsequent projects and driving further development. Partnerships also enable the implementation of innovative materials and technologies, which translates into increased operational potential. Managers emphasise the importance of open communication with employees, both through formal and informal channels, so that they are fully aware of the company's strategy and directions of development (Table 6). Such transparency facilitates understanding of the organisational context, increasing team motivation and effectiveness. In practice, however, the approach to knowledge sharing varies – some companies use structured procedures to identify and transfer knowledge gained in projects to other teams or partners, while others base the learning process solely on everyday experience. It also happens that, despite formal processes, the objectives of knowledge sharing are not clearly defined. The lack of systematic analysis of the experience gained means that valuable information remains within a narrow group of project participants, and the entire organisation misses out on the opportunity to use it. In some companies, the effectiveness of cooperation is only evaluated after the project is completed, and the conclusions discussed within the team help to optimise future activities and strengthen relationships with partners. However, some companies limit themselves to sharing only general information, thus protecting strategic data and trade secrets. This approach highlights the challenge facing companies – finding a balance between openness in sharing knowledge and protecting key information and competitive advantage.

Table 6.

Feedback and knowledge acquisition

Question B4.	Response frequency	
Moment: No reflection on what has been learned; Who identifies it: Nobody reflects on what they have learned; Who it is shared with: What has been learned is not shared	1	1
Reflect on what was learned at the end of the collaborative project; The project leader identifies the learnings; Learning is shared within the collaborative project team	3	3

Cont. table 6.

Without defined objectives, we reflect on what was learned during and at the end of the collaborative project; The team participating in the collaborative project identifies the learning; Learning is shared with other teams within the organisation or with the collaborating organisation	5	5
Learning objectives are established before starting the collaboration project and reflection is carried out during and at the end of said process; The inter-organisational team participating in the project identifies the learning; Learning is shared with other teams within the organisation and with the collaborating organisation	1	10
Catfish	1	10

Source: own study.

The data presented in Table 6 confirm significant differences in approaches to reflection on acquired knowledge and its diffusion in the surveyed companies. Although most companies declare that they undertake activities related to the identification and dissemination of experience gained during cooperation, these practices are often informal and not linked to clearly defined learning objectives. Only a few companies implement systematic solutions that include planning knowledge objectives at the project initiation stage and regular reflection during its implementation. These results indicate that the potential of alliances as a source of organisational learning is in many cases only partially exploited, which limits the possibility of sustainable knowledge transfer and its institutionalisation within the organisation.

5. Discussion

The survey results confirm that strategic alliance management in Polish SMEs is largely based on ad hoc solutions, both in terms of roles and procedures. The lack of a dedicated alliance manager in 90% of the surveyed companies indicates that the model in which owners or management are responsible for initiating and coordinating cooperation, often combining these responsibilities with their day-to-day operational tasks, continues to dominate. These conclusions are consistent with the findings presented in the literature, which emphasises that in the SME sector, limited human and financial resources favour centralised management and a low level of specialisation (Das, Teng, 2000; Kale, Singh, 2009).

At the same time, recent research indicates that even in conditions of limited resources, developing Alliance Management Capability promotes the growth of innovation and internationalisation of SMEs, which emphasises the importance of a more formalised approach to roles and competencies in managing inter-organisational cooperation (Al-Tabbaa, Zahoor, 2024).

In the area of competence development for those responsible for alliances, a reactive approach prevails, consisting of organising training in response to current needs. While such activities may bring short-term benefits, they also limit the possibility of long-term and strategic organisational competence building (Gomes, Barnes, Mahmood, 2016). These results confirm the observations of Heimeriks and Duysters (2007), according to whom the lack of a systematic

approach to skills development in SMEs means that the effectiveness of cooperation depends primarily on the individual skills of managers rather than on sustainable organisational solutions.

An analysis of the phases of the alliance process indicates that most of the surveyed companies (80%) are at the stage of formalising a cooperation framework without joint investments. This may indicate a cautious approach to the commitment of financial resources, characteristic of SMEs, which prefer flexible and relatively low-cost forms of cooperation (Todeva, Knoke, 2005). At the same time, respondents emphasised that formalising agreements increases the security of the parties' interests and facilitates risk management, which is consistent with Gulati's (1995) view, pointing to the role of contracts in reducing uncertainty and potential conflicts.

Current empirical research also shows that strategic alliances are an important mechanism for building dynamic internationalisation capabilities and competitive advantage in SMEs, even if the cooperation is initially based on limited capital involvement (Peng, 2025).

In terms of aligning goals and strategies, the study found that while companies maintain their own strategic priorities, they also seek to identify areas for joint action and value creation. This confirms the thesis of Doza and Hamel (1998), according to which the sustainability of alliances is based not on full integration of objectives, but on strategic coherence and a shared vision of cooperation.

The lack of standardised tools for monitoring and evaluating cooperation remains a significant problem. Half of the companies surveyed do not regularly monitor the effects of alliances, which limits the possibility of organisational learning and improvement of subsequent projects (Inkpen, 2001). At the same time, the results indicate that companies using formal assessment tools are more likely to engage in systematic knowledge transfer practices, confirming the importance of knowledge management as a source of competitive advantage (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995).

Reviews of the latest literature indicate that alliance management capabilities, including formal monitoring routines, learning mechanisms, and linking collaboration to strategic objectives, are increasingly recognised as a key factor in the sustained effectiveness of inter-organisational alliances (Vurro et al., 2024).

6. Summary

The research conducted has allowed us to formulate a number of recommendations for improving the management of strategic alliances in small and medium-sized enterprises. In particular, the need to professionalise the role of alliance manager, a more systematic approach to competence development, formalisation of cooperation as a risk mitigation tool,

integration of partners' goals and strategies, and standardisation of monitoring and evaluation of cooperation outcomes were identified. An important role was also assigned to knowledge management, which can be a sustainable source of competitive advantage.

At the same time, the study has certain limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the analysis is based on respondents' declarations, which entails the risk of subjectivity in the assessments. Second, the research sample was limited to Polish SMEs, which makes it difficult to directly generalise the results to other institutional and cultural contexts. Thirdly, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for a full assessment of the long-term effects of alliance management. These limitations indicate the need for further research, particularly of a comparative nature.

The novelty of the presented research lies in the empirical demonstration of the actual, largely informal nature of alliance management in Polish SMEs and the identification of the gap between the declared need for strategic cooperation and the level of its organisational embedding. The study also provides new insights into the importance of even partial formalisation of roles, procedures and assessment tools as a factor increasing the effectiveness of alliances in conditions of limited resources.

From the perspective of management and quality sciences, the presented results broaden the knowledge on the specifics of inter-organisational management in the SME sector, which remains relatively poorly recognised empirically. The study integrates the perspectives of strategic management, quality management and knowledge management, indicating that the effectiveness of alliances depends not only on strategic decisions, but also on the quality of organisational processes and learning mechanisms. Thus, the article makes both a cognitive and an applied contribution, providing a basis for further analysis and practical recommendations for SME managers.

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