Turiba University

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Synopsis of the Doctoral Thesis

POSSIBILITIES FOR INCREASING COMPETITIVENESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES THROUGH THE PARTNERSHIP IMPROVEMENT MODEL

Study Program: Business Administration

Developed for

Doctor's degree in Business Administration

Scientific Field: Business Management Science
Subfield: Business Administration

Riga, 2019

Synopsis of the Doctoral Thesis **"Possibilities for Increasing Competitiveness of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises through the Partnership Improvement Model"**

The main text of the Doctoral Thesis is presented in 256 pages and illustrated with 17 pictures and 97 tables. Thesis contains 7 appendices. The list of literature includes 163 sources of literature.

Form of the Doctoral Thesis: dissertation in the field of business administration in the field of business management science.

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Defence of the Doctoral Thesis shall be held at the public sitting of the Doctoral Board for Business Administration at Turiba University on May 21, 2019 at Turiba University, Graudu Street 68, Riga.

The Doctoral Thesis and its Synopsis is accessible for public review at the library of Turiba University, Graudu Street 68.

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ANNOTATION

The topicality of the theme of the Doctoral Thesis "Possibilities for Increasing Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises through the Partnership Improvement Model" is related to the insufficient competitiveness of SMEs working in Latvia in several sectors of the national economy. Accordingly, the importance of topical and improved partnership for promoting competitiveness will increase, starting with the development of technical documentation of the product to be produced and the supply of the necessary resources for its production, ending with the acquisition of a new market in oversea countries and sales of the manufactured product. SME owners and managers often lack the knowledge, skills and experience to identify partners who fit their business goals and build mutually beneficial partnerships.

The target of the Doctoral Thesis is to investigate the changes in the competitiveness of SMEs in major sectors of the economy and to reveal the importance of improved partnership in increasing the competitiveness of enterprises through the partnership improvement model. Several tasks are defined in order to achieve the target of the Doctoral Thesis, the most important of which are to explore the theoretical aspects of competition, competitive advantage, competitiveness and partnership, to reveal their interrelation; to explore the importance of partnership in increasing business competitiveness; to analyse the economic performance of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises working in the most important sectors of the Latvian economy; to explore changes in SME competitiveness and identify sectors of the economy where micro, small and medium-sized enterprises show higher competitiveness; to explore the impact of SME partnerships and partnerships on the performance and competitiveness of SMEs in the domestic and overseas countries; to develop a model for improving the SME partnership and assessing its compliance.

To achieve the target, there was made a wide-ranging research on the theoretical aspects of competitiveness and partnership, the most important concepts are defined; changes in the competitiveness of SMEs in sectors more important for the development of the Latvian economy; identified key aspects of SME competitiveness and partnership; identified obstacles to a mutually beneficial partnership; several models have been developed for SME owners and managers to form management decisions about partner identification, building mutually beneficial partnerships and maintaining them updated.

The Thesis consists of an introduction, 3 chapters, conclusions and proposals, a list of bibliographic units and other data sources. The main text of the Doctoral Thesis is described in 256 pages and illustrated with 17 pictures and 97 tables. There are 3 appendixes. The bibliography includes 163 bibliographic and data items.

CONTENTS

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Research Topicality. The topicality of the theme of the Doctoral Thesis "Possibilities for Increasing Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises through the Partnership Improvement Model" is closely related to the intense economic globalization processes and insufficient competitiveness of SMEs working in Latvia in several sectors of the national economy. Nowadays, entrepreneurship is impossible without involving partners and the creation of mutually beneficial partnerships. Accordingly, the importance of updated and improved partnerships in promoting the competitiveness of SMEs will increase, starting with the development of the technical documentation of the product to be produced, the supply of the necessary and appropriate resources for its production, the acquisition of a new market in the overseas countries and the sale of the produced product. This requires the owners and managers of SMEs to take constant care of increasing the competitiveness of their products in the domestic market and overseas markets. It is therefore of general importance to identify and attract business-friendly partners inland and abroad. Observations in practice show that SME owners and managers often lack the knowledge, skills and experience to identify partners who fit their business targets and to form mutually beneficial partnerships.

Nowadays, the partnership is widely used to build and strengthen the competitive advantage. It is based on the integration of resources, knowledge, experience and various opportunities – every individual, companies or other organizations involved in the partnership have their own resources, resource suppliers, their own markets and their partners in the distribution of goods. It is a significant wealth that introduces great opportunities for business development and / or for increasing the competitiveness of SMEs in the local market and globally.

Export markets play a key role in forming partnerships. Partnership-based companies that deal with services and / or sales of goods have accumulated the specific knowledge and skills needed for successful entrepreneurship that cannot be obtained at any world university. As part of the partnership, its members have new opportunities to reduce the cost of acquiring the export market, to gain new knowledge of customer changing quality requirements, their quantitative and qualitative characteristics; save time for partner search and minimize failure effects when identified partners do not work on a *win-win* basis. In practice, it has been proven for many times that a mutually beneficial partnership accelerates the resolution of many complex business issues, increases the efficiency of adopted management decisions, contributes to the quantitative and qualitative

matching of production resources, reduces production costs, and promotes the compliance of manufactured products with changing customer requirements. Successful partnerships help SME owners and managers identify the threats to the external environment in a timely manner, minimizing their negative impact on the company's performance.

The socially economic value of the partnership is based on the mutual correspondence of the partners, the awareness of the need for mutual cooperation among the parties, based on mutually beneficial economic interests – it will be more profitable than the one, trying to achieve the desired effect in the external business environment. In forming a partnership, i.e. selecting potential partners for cooperation, it is essential to be able to assess the need for a potential partnership and its relevance to the business objectives and development strategy of every company. A partnership based on the potential of other entities and organizations to promote resource efficiency and help raise the competitiveness of stakeholders is one of the most effective and legal ways for SMEs to relieve competitive pressure from large companies.

The topicality of the research theme is reinforced by the lack of scientific research in the Latvian academic environment on partnership and their role in improving the competitiveness of SMEs. Practically important questions about partner identification, evaluation and forming mutually beneficial partnerships, their theoretical aspects and the connection with the improvement of competitiveness of enterprises and other organizations are still not included in higher education study programs. Thus, identifying and partnering with business partners becomes a difficult barrier to key business stages and increase the competitiveness and value of SME products, because if one has the idea and the other has the resources to implement that idea, the two will ultimately benefit.

Recognizing the important role of SMEs in the development of the national economy, many scientists from different parts of the world are exploring the different dimensions of these partnerships, seeking the most appropriate model for building a more resource-efficient partnership, producing more quality products and increasing the competitiveness of SMEs in local markets, especially overseas. Researching a large number of scientific publications on this subject, research in this area is divided into several groups. Over the last decade, great attention has been paid to building partnerships to achieve innovative goals - developing new products and modernizing technologies (Sarvaiya, H., Eweje, G., Arrowsmith, J. 2018; Henttonen, K., Lehtimäki, H. (2017); Simba, A., Ojong, N. (2017); Eadie, R., Potts, S. 2016) The second is related to exploring the legal and economic aspects of the partnership in launching overseas markets. In this

context, the positive aspects of the different forms of partnership are analysed and assessed, and the causes of failure are studied (Knoben, J., Bakker, RM 2018; Roxby., 2018; Bakker, RM2016; Ariño, A., Ring, PS 2010; A., De La Torre, J., Ring, PS 2001; Sheppard, BH, Sherman, DM 1998) The third research direction focuses on building strategic partnerships among companies and other stakeholders in different countries to achieve quantifiable goals (Saci, F., Jasimuddin, SM 2018; Dobre-Baron, O., Nitescu, A .. 2019; Bouncken, RB, Pesch, R., Kraus, S. 2016) For Developing New Products, Enhancing Competence of SME Managers and Staff, Developing Events partnership building with educational institutions and scientific organizations is important for increasing the company's competitiveness (Sadeghnezhada, et al., 2018; Griggs, 2015; Stăiculescu, et al., 2014; Billett, 2007) Billett, 2006; Cardini, 2006) The latest research group includes research on private-public partnerships, which are being focused on by politicians, businessmen and scientists (Viglianisi, A., Rugolo, A., Calabrò, J., Della Spina, L. (2019), Osei-Kyei, R., Chan, APC 2018; Eitan et al., 2018; Cheung, E., Chan, A.P.C., Kajewski, S. (2009); Abadie, R., Howcroft, A. (2004). The scope of research on the use of the accumulated money of merchants in the expansion and / or modernization of the national economy infrastructure is developing quite rapidly, therefore the potential co-operation participants have to learn to avoid repeating mistakes made by others and to establish mutually beneficial and effective partnership in the implementation of projects important for the development of the country.

According to the Thesis, a study is made on the advantages of competitiveness, the preconditions for their formation and the competitiveness problems of SMEs. Research results published in various academic journals and monographs reveal that researchers in many countries around the world are engaged in issues related to the peculiarities of SME competitive advantage in the context of intensifying economic globalization (Porter, 2011; Porter, 2008; Rzepka, 2017; Chih-Hsing,, 2017; Gu and Su, 2018; Boone and Kurtz, 2011; Davcik and Sharma, 2016; Ejrami, et al., 2016; Hitt, et al., 2014; Walker, 2016). Several researches have discovered new opportunities for using partnerships to build competitive advantage (Kurniawan, 2016; Mawdsley an Deepak 2018; Morgan, et al., 2018; Park, et al., 2015) In the past decades, research into the benefits of building a strategic alliance, its potential benefits has emerged in the academic world and losses (Walker, 2016; Russo and Cesarani, 2017; Shumate and O'Connor, 2010; Wittmann, et al, 2009). Various aspects of increasing competitiveness are also a constant concern of Latvian scientists. Among them are Počs, Emsiņš and Ozoliņa (Počs, et al, 2018); Geipele, i., Geipele, S.,

F.Fototova, and I.Stamure (K Fedotova, I Geipele, S Geipele, I Stamure, 2013), Denisov and Judrup (Denisov, Judrup, 2008), Vasilyev and Glebev (Vasilyev, Geelebow, 2010), Miglow and Solovyow (Miglav, et al., 2015); Beckowski, 2012 and many others.

Many scientific studies have demonstrated the importance of SMEs for the development of national economies. In the OECD countries *(The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development)*, more than 95% of all enterprises have the characteristics of an SME classification, employing more than 60% of all employees and the proportion of added value produced ranges from 50% to 60% (OECD, 2018).

According to the topic of the research, **the object** of the research – competitiveness of micro, small and medium enterprises, but **the subject** of the research – possibilities to increase the competitiveness of SMEs is determined, using the model of partnership improvement and updating.

Target of the Thesis:
to explore the changes in the competitiveness of SMEs in major sectors of the economy and to reveal the opportunities for an enhanced partnership in enhancing the competitiveness of companies through the developed partnership development model.

The following major **tasks** are defined to achieve the target:
1) explore theoretical aspects of competition, competitiveness and partnership;

2) explain the key concepts of competitiveness and partnership;

3) analyse the demographic indicators of Latvian enterprises;

4) analyse the performance of SMEs and identify sectors where micro, small and medium-sized enterprises show higher competitiveness;

5) study the impact of SME partnerships on the performance of SMEs;

6) identify opportunities for enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs through updated partnerships and developing a model for SME partnerships.

Hypothesis of the Doctoral Thesis: An important aspect of increasing the competitiveness of SMEs is a constantly updated and improved partnership that meets the company's business objectives.

To achieve the target of the research, the Thesis is subject to **restrictions:**
- SME competitiveness research is carried out in the period from 2010 to 2017;

- the competitiveness study includes the sectors most important for national economic development and the SMEs working in them;

- in the SME competitiveness study, the data of CSB *(the Central Statistical Bureau)* of the Republic of Latvia and Lursoft are used;

- the missing data on the economic performance of SMEs in 2017 are projected using the expert method.

The methodology of the Doctoral Thesis consists of the object and subject of the research, as well as a set of methods corresponding to the aim and tasks of the Thesis:

- Methodology of research of scientific works, including critical creative method and logical approach method is used to analyse and evaluate the results of other scientific research on the object and subject of the research, as well as the content of the most important concepts of the Thesis;

- Analysis and deduction, synthesis and induction techniques are used to identify key aspects of SME competitiveness building, as well as to identify key barriers to enhancing partnership compliance;

- Graphic methods are used to study the nature of dynamic queue changes in the indicators included in the SME Competitiveness Study and to identify trends, as well as in the development of competitiveness and partnership building models included in the Thesis;

- Quantitative research methods, together with sociological research methods, are used to obtain relevant data from respondents on the use of partnerships to increase the competitiveness of SMEs and to achieve the results of the survey;

- Statistical methods are used in the processing of data used in the SME competitiveness study, as well as other methods for achieving the goal and performing the tasks.

The research results reveal several **scientific novelties:**

1) the theoretical aspects of competitiveness and partnership have been studied and a model has been developed that reveals the interrelation of these concepts;

2) definitions of the most important concepts for the topic and purpose of the Thesis;

3) an updated study on the competitiveness of Latvian micro, small and medium-sized enterprises after the economic crisis and sectors where micro, small and medium-sized enterprises show higher competitiveness;

4) for the first time in Latvia, a survey of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises was conducted on the importance of partnership in enhancing the competitiveness of products produced by SMEs.

5) the most significant barriers identified that prevent SMEs from building a sufficiently effective partnership to increase competitiveness and achieve targets;

6) opportunities to increase the competitiveness of SMEs through mutually beneficial, updated and improved partnerships;

7) using the results of the research, the model for updating and improving the partnership developed can be useful for continuing research on the competence of SME owners and managers in building appropriate partnerships and their ongoing updating.

Practical significance of research results:

a) develop a model of competitiveness and partnership between partners to enable SME managers to increase their level of competence in the development of appropriate partnerships and take more appropriate decisions to update and develop partnerships;

b) Definition of the most important concepts for the topic and purpose of the Thesis, as well as critically creative evaluation of other research results devoted to the partnership, for the development and improvement of study programs on issues of increasing competitiveness and building more effective partnerships;

c) the results of the study on the competitiveness of Latvian SMEs after the economic crisis and the results of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises' competitiveness can be used to improve the government policy for state support and to update the SME support program;

d) open opportunities to use partnerships to increase competitiveness can be useful in making management decisions not only for SMEs but also for the competitiveness of large companies;

e) identified major obstacles to building a sufficiently effective partnership for government decision-making on enhancing the competitiveness of the business environment, increasing the number of SMEs for cooling, and raising the level of competence of SME owners;

f) the developed partnership model for upgrading and upgrading the partnership, as well as other models developed in the course of work to enhance knowledge and leadership decisions in partner identification and mutually beneficial partnerships to increase the competitiveness of manufactured products in local and overseas markets.

Theses to be defended in the Doctoral Thesis:

1) in scientific research, there is a great diversity of the most important notions of the topic of work and the object of research - competitiveness and partnership, besides, several scientific articles reveal obvious inconsistencies in practice and the content of defined concepts;

2) micro, small and medium-sized enterprises working in the national economy of Latvia show different results in increasing competitiveness by economic sectors and enterprise groups;

3) The results of the research reveal the most important partnership effects in domestic and overseas countries, which should be taken into account in increasing the competitiveness of the products produced by the SME partnership;

4) Developed partnership-building, updating and enhancement models open up opportunities for SME owners to identify partners that are more appropriate to their business goals and to take care of a renewed, improved and mutually beneficial partnership.

The results of the research have been approbated at several local, international scientific conferences and other events, the most important of which are:

1. The author has presented his research at international scientific conferences:

   1.1) Report „Strategic Partnership Model: from Design to Assessment" international scientific conference 2nd International Conference Actual economy: Local solutions for Global Challenges: ACE – 2015, Czech Republic, Prague December 10-11, 2015.

   1.2) Report „Strategic partnerships in the construction Industry in Latvia" 13th EBES Conference, Istanbul, June 5-7, 2014.

   1.3) Report „Strategic Partnership Multi-Factor Case Analysis" International Scientific Conferences: 4th WHITHER OUR ECONOMIES, November 13-13, 2014. Mykolas Romeris University.

   1.4) Report „Development of partnerships in construction material production", XIV International scientific conference of Turiba University, 30.05.2013.

   1.5) Report „Analysis of Competitiveness of Latvian Enterprises, The 2nd International Conference on Business and Management İzmir, Turkey April 27-29, 2012.

   1.6) Report „The points of intersection of business and higher education" VIII Annual International Conference on issues of economic development in the modern world, „Sustainable Development of Russian Regions: Human and Modernization" Yekaterinburg, Russia, April 22-23, 2011.

1.7) Report „Līderība, partnerība un vadības lēmumu atbilstība – pamats „Sakret" izaugsmei Baltijas valstīs" Latvijas Bankas gadskārtējā tautsaimniecības konference „Globālās problēmas un lokālās iespējas: Baltijas valstu sasniegumi un perspektīvas" *("Leadership, Partnership and Compliance of Management Decisions - The Basis of" Sakret for Growth in the Baltic States "Annual Banking Conference of the Bank of Latvia" Global Challenges and Local Opportunities: Achievements and Prospects of the Baltic States ")*, October 12, 2011.

1.8) Report «Внутренние и внешние коммуникация компании. Почему это важно и как это сделать» International Conference «Будмикс-Украина» Yalta, Ukraine September 24-26**,** 2012,

1.9) Report „The strategy of partnership – a factor of increasing value and competitiveness of enterprises" International conference Dry mixes for the XXI century: technologies and business, Veliky Novgorod, Russia, August 17-19, 2010.

1.10)   The Markets for Drymix Mortars in the Baltic States and Competitiveness. Annual international conference: Russian Mortar Days with Market Focus. Moscow, Russia, December 01-02, 2010.

2.   The results of the research have been used in the improvement of the study program in the issues of business management and improvement of competitiveness. Several years of lectures in professional study programs on identifying potential partners and building mutually beneficial partnerships.

3.   For several years the author has participated in the work of the State Examination Commission in defending bachelor and master thesis in business management programs.

4.   The results of the research are presented in several business conferences of entrepreneurs in Latvia and foreign countries, as well as in professional qualification improvement courses for SME owners and managers in issues of partnership building and updating.

5.   The results of the research have been discussed several times in the RTU *(Riga Technical University)* Convention and the Convention of the Faculty of Material Science and Applied Chemistry of RTU on issues related to the selection of partners and improvement of the established partnership in order to increase the competitiveness of the higher education institution and the faculty and the rating in the international evaluation.

The research results are presented in several scientific articles, scientific journals and other editions:

1. Vanags A., Ābeltiņa A., Zvirgzdiņa R. (2018) Partnership strategy model for small and medium Enterprises. Problems & Perspectives in Management Volume 16, Issue 1, 2018. pp. 336-347.

2. Zariņa, V., Vanags, A., (2015) Strategic Partnership Model: from Design to Assessment 2nd International Conference Actual economy: Local solutions for Global Challenges: ACE – 2015 +, Czech Republic, Prague 10-11.12.2015. 225-226 p.

3. Zariņa V., Begec S., Vanags A. (2014) Strategic partnerships in the construction Industry in Latvia; 13th EBES Conference proceedings, ISBN: 978-605-64002-7-8, Thomson Reuters Conference Proceedings.

4. Vanags, A., (2014) Strategic Partnership Multi-Factor Case Analysis. International Scientific Conferences: 4th WHITHER OUR ECONOMIES. Mykolas Romeris University.

5. Vanags, A., (2013) Development of partnerships in construction material production, Proceedings of the XIV International scientific conference of Turiba University, 30.05.2013, ISSN 1691-6069.

6. Zarina, V., Strele, I., Fogelmanis, K., Vanags, A., (2012) Analysis of Competitiveness of Latvian Enterprises, International Journal of Business and Management Studies. Vol. No 2, 2012, ISNN: 1309-8047 (Online)

7. Vanags, A., (2012) "Inovācija Latvijas lielā iespēja" *(Innovation as Latvia's Great Opportunity)*, Forbes, Economy, March edition.

8. Ванагс А. (2010). Стратегия партнерства – фактор повышения ценности и конкурентоспособности предприятия. Доклады конференции BALTIMIXhttp://www.baltimix.ru/confer/confer_archive/reports/doclad10/sakret2010.pdf.

9. Долгий Э.М., Ванагс А. (2010). Стратегия партнерства – фактор успешности и повышения конкурентоспособности компании. Žurnālā Будівельні материалы, вироби та санітарна техніка. Випуск 37, 2010, стр. 68-75.

10. Ванагс А. (2008). Франшизная система – основа для эффективного развития товарного зрака. Сборник докладов СтройХИМИЯ 2008, Киев МБС, стр. 22-25.

The volume and structure of the Thesis are tailored to the topic of the work. It is subordinated to the object and subject of the Research, as well as the purpose and tasks. Structure design takes into account the relevant rules and the willingness of the potential reader to find the results of the study that interest him as soon as possible. Therefore, the Work is divided into 53 chapters and subchapters, accompanied by an introduction and end, as well as a list of

bibliographic units and other data sources used. The results of the study are presented on 256 pages and included in 3 annexes. 17 pictures and 97 tables are added to complement, refine and detail the text.

The first chapter of the Thesis presents theoretical aspects of theoretical issues: competition, competitive advantage, competitiveness and partnership, using a wide range of scientific articles and other academic publications. In the works of other authors, the explanation of the most important concepts of the Theme and the interrelation and interaction of these concepts are identified. Using the results of theoretical research, several models are being developed that give new knowledge and a clearer picture of how SMEs can develop and increase their potential by engaging partners and building mutually beneficial partnerships. Based on the knowledge gained and an in-depth understanding of the subject and subject of the study, explanations of the most important concepts are developed and their interrelationship is revealed.

The second chapter of the Thesis focuses on the competitiveness of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and its changes in the post-crisis period up to 2017. At the beginning of the chapter, the demographic indicators of enterprises working in the Latvian economy are studied, which give general knowledge about the ability of SMEs to resist threats to the external environment and the level of competence of SME managers in making effective management decisions, taking into account rapidly changing events in the external business environment. Further research focuses on the specific competitiveness of SMEs and the decisive economic outcomes of the change in the breakdown by industries dominated by private business and products with higher added value. Summarizing the indicators of competitiveness changes obtained in the course of the research, the necessary knowledge about the sectors of national economy is obtained, where micro, small and medium enterprises show higher competitiveness in conditions of rapidly changing external environment.

The third chapter of the Thesis focuses on the results of the empirical research on SME partnerships with different entities and organizations and the impact of the established partnership on the competitiveness of the company. In this case, qualitative and quantitative research methods corresponding to the purpose, object and subject of the research are used, surveying a wide range of SME managers and processing the data obtained in the research. This identifies the most important barriers to identifying suitable partners and building a sufficiently effective partnership. As a result of the research, new knowledge on the results of the partnership between micro, small and medium-sized enterprises is acquired by establishing partnerships with enterprises in the domestic and overseas countries, as well as with educational institutions and scientific organizations. The results of the study have been used to develop a partner

identification and partnership building and partnership compliance model that can be useful for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to find the most suitable partners for their activities and to constantly update and develop the partnership network.

1. SME Competitiveness, Partners and Partnerships – the Most Important Theoretical Aspects

The main categories of market economy – competition, competitive advantage, competitiveness and partnership – are studied in the narrower sense – in the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, their importance in the whole national economy – cities, regions and counties. In this context, the focus is on partnership and partnership as a key competitive strength. In the public communication space as well as in the academic environment, the concepts of "competition, competitive advantage and competitiveness" are used rather broadly, but observations in practice show that their users often have a vague content about the content of these concepts.

For the purpose of studying the concepts necessary for the Doctoral Thesis, dictionaries published in Latvian and English are used, as well as a wide range of scientific articles that reveal the wide variety of the content of these concepts. There are a number of shortcomings in the explanations of the concepts selected for the evaluation, the most important of which are the features of tautology, plagiarism and subjective idealism, as well as the mismatch between economic theory and practice. The assessment of the concepts selected for the work will lead to the development of a model of elements of SME competitiveness included in Picture 1.1.

As it can be seen from the model of the elements that make up the competitiveness of SMEs in the figure, most of the research works included in the research are devoted to finding out the consequences of competitiveness by ignoring the causes (Magretta, 2012; Delgado et al., 2012; Chao-Hung, Li-Chang, 2010; Jankowska, et al. , 2010; Keegan, WJ 2007; Several studies focus on the consequences of competitiveness - profit, quality product and other elements (Zelga, 2017; Dennisisov, 2016; Martin et al., 2006; Wang, 2014; Vanags, 2013; Saloner, 2001; Besanko, 2000; McCarthy, 2015). Researchers have therefore drawn attention to such profitable aspects as a qualitative product (Reguia, V., 2014; Siudek, and Zawojska, 2014; Popa, and Pater, 2012. Jankowska, et al, 2010); low production costs (Humbatova, 2018; Jared, et al., 2018; Denisenkov, 2016; Sujova, and Hlavackova, 2015; Maurilio, and Rodrigo, 2015); ability to operate and flexibility (Liše, 2014; Chao-Hung, Li-Chang, 2010; Jankowska, et al, 2010) in a rapidly changing business environment (Zelga K., 2017; Ambec, 2013; Lee, J. And Karpova, EE, 2018; Fankhauser, 2012).
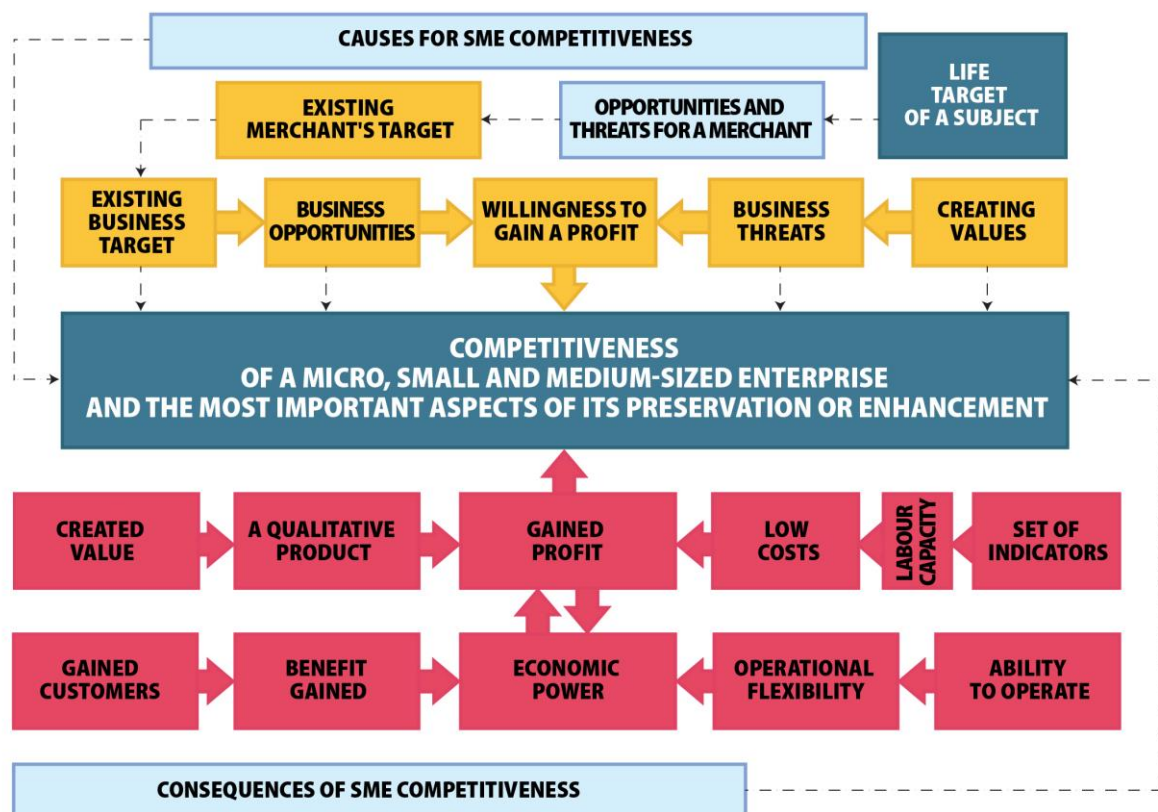
Picture1.1 **Key elements of SME competitiveness**
Source of information: Developed by the author, using the acquired knowledge of competitiveness

An important aspect of generating profits is the threat and skills to avoid them, as well as opportunities and their use (Hanson, et al., 2012; Flanagan, et al., 2007; Newbert, 2008; Yalçınkaya, et al., 2015; Akhter, and Barcellos, 2013 Porter, and Linde, 1995), with which businesses have to face the challenge of increasing the competitiveness of their business. In a number of studies, increasing the competitiveness of SMEs is linked to increasing productivity (Delgado et al., 2012; Humbatova, 2018; Zelga, 2017), the adequacy of the price of the product produced (Liše, 2014; Christodoulopoulou, and Tkachev, 2014; Baccaro, and Tober, 2017; Toni , et al., 2017) and its uniqueness (Zelga, 2017; Denisenkov, 2016; Vanags, 2013; Jankowska, et al., 2010; Siudek, and Zawojska, 2014) and other competitive elements that are studied in many countries around the world.

Taking into account the research results on the elements of competitiveness, the development and updating of the competitiveness of SMEs is being developed, which gives a more complete picture of the elements that make up the competitiveness, their interconnection and interaction. The developed model is included in Picture 1.2.

In the model below, the competitiveness of SMEs is subordinated to predominant elements – competitors, as well as threats and opportunities in the

external environment. Owners and managers of SMEs are different and unique entities, so they perceive the external environment and the threats and opportunities in it differently, using often very unique sources of information. These data sources are divided into groups in the model. These data are used for management decisions on the measures to be taken to increase competitiveness.
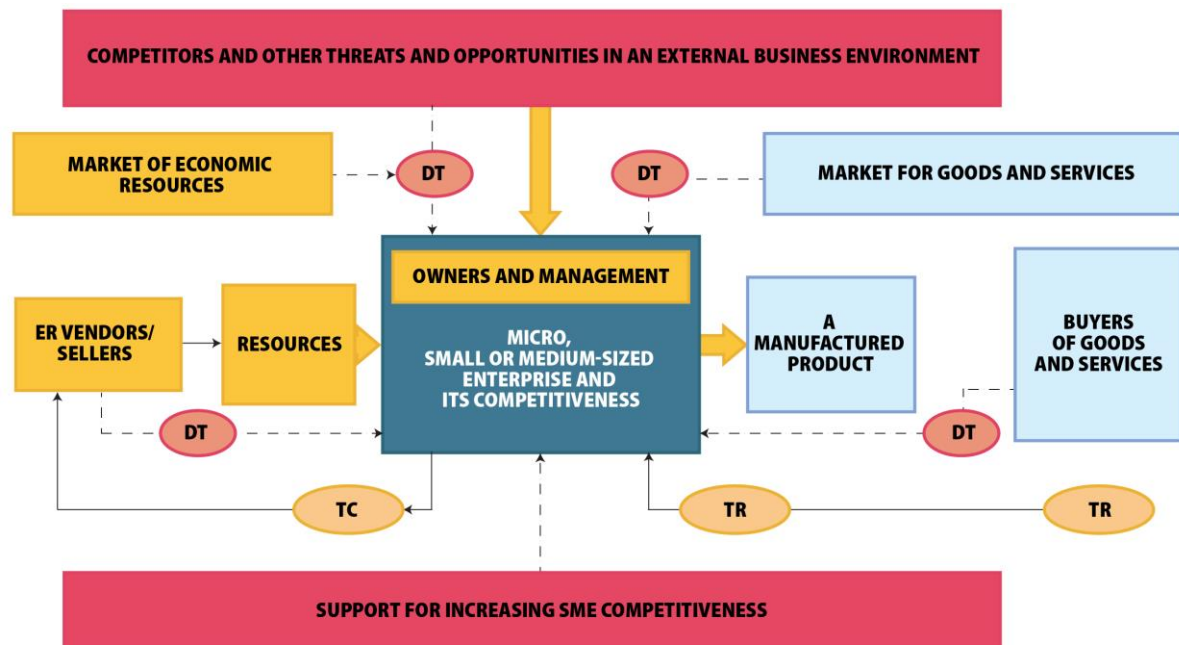
Picture 1.2. **SME Competitiveness Formation and Actualization Model**
Abbreviation of abbreviations used in the picture:
DT - data; TR - Total Revenue; TC - Total Costs; PK – services; ER - Economic Resources
Source: Model developed by the Author

In practice, many SMEs have noted that many SME owners and managers do not pay enough attention to changing customer requirements. Therefore, the product offered on the market is sometimes outdated or its price does not correspond the alternative products offered by competitors (Liše, 2014; Wang, 2014; Siudek, and Zawojska, 2014; Jared, et al., 2018; Zelga, 2017; Denisenkov, 2016; Liše, 2014). The figure shows that the sales of manufactured products generate the company's income - TR, which is the only bearer of potential profits. But the existence of profit can be verified by settling with the resource suppliers, which is represented by the abbreviation - TC - total cost.

Taking into account the results of the research on the content of the concept of competitiveness, an explanation of the term "competitiveness of SMEs" is more appropriate for the purpose of the Thesis:

> SME Competitiveness – a set of company-specific features that are combined with other resources and are constantly used to achieve the company's business target.

The content of the concept of competitiveness, as defined above, is used in further empirical research to identify the potential opportunities for an enhanced and improved partnership for SME competitiveness.

The paper contains a comparatively large number of research results in which authors have sought to reveal the content of competitive advantages (Bharadwaj et al., 1993; Dash, A.K. 2013; McCarthy, N., Rouse, W.B., Serban, N. 2015, etc.). The identified explanations reveal several shortcomings. Several definitions are tautological and do not correspond to the regularities and observations of economic theory in practice (Zainurossalamia, et al., 2016; Powell, 2001; Dash, 2013; McCarthy, et al., 2015; Keegan, W.J. 2007; Tabarsa. 2013, etc.). In some cases, the explanation is unclear and fuzzy (Hosseini, et al., 2018; McCarthy, N., Rouse, W.B., Serban, N 2015; Bharadwaj et al., 1993, p. 89; Huff et al., 2009)

Factors affecting competitiveness have been extensively researched in the second half of the last century. As a result, several theories have been developed in which the advantages of competitiveness and certain factors influencing competitiveness are studied in depth and detail (David, et al., 2017; Rothaermel, 2016; Pearce and Robinson, 2014; Dess et al., 2018; Barney, 2002; Saloner et al, 2001). The following theories of competitiveness and competitiveness formation are important for the purpose of the work, the research object and the subject:

a) the theory of the uniqueness of the quantitative and qualitative composition of the company's resources, its use in the development of competitive advantages (Saranga et al., 2018; Davcik, and Sharma, 2016; Jensen, 2016; Peteraf, 1993; Gimeno, 1999; Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991) - *Resources Based View* or **RBW**;

b) the theory based on the workforce employed in the company, its knowledge, skills and wisdom (Salunke, 2019; Rezaee, F. and Jafari, M. 2016;) *Knowledge Based View* or **KBW**;

c) theory of using the potential of an enterprise's internal and external environment to build competitive advantage (Saranga et al., 2018; Klarner, et al. 2018; Siyamtinah, 2017; Ejrami et al. 2016; Grant, 1996; Sirmon et al. 2003; Hoopes., DG, Medsen, T. 2008) - *Capability Based View* or **CBW**;

d) market-oriented theory (Grant, 1991; Oliver, 1997; Steininger, et al. 2011; Pearce and Robinson, 2014;) - *Market Based View* or **MBW**;

e) the theory of building relationships in building a competitive advantage for a company (Mesquita, et al. 2008; Kotabe, et al. 2003;

Lavie, D. 2006; Domoto, 2003; Dyer and Singh, 1998;). - *The Relational View of Strategy* - **RVS**.

Keeping the methodology used in the previous chapters, the partnership study begins with an explanation of the concept. For this purpose, the research included in the research papers is used. Unfortunately, several publications reveal scientifically incomplete explanations of the partnership. Selgren believes that partnership is a scheme (Sellgren, 1990), Murey - that partnership is a great opportunity (Murray et al., 2010), Krevens - partnership is an effort (Cravens, 2013), etc. In several definitions, the authors argue that the partnership requires a joint effort by the partners (Rathi, et al., 2014) or joint agreement (Kurniawan et al, 2016; Järvi, K., et al., 2010; Albuquerque, 2015). In recent research, scientists are trying to predict how IV Industrial revolution with new opportunities will change the content of competitiveness and partnership (Hogeforster, (2014; Brettel, et al., 2014; Lee, et al., 2018; Nagy, et al., 2018; Crnjac et al., 2018;) The definitions that are most relevant to the theme of the work are the definitions in which the partnership is defined as a relationship of cooperation between individuals and companies with a specific purpose (Shanahan, et al, 2016; Järvi, K., et al 2010; Piltan, and Sowlati, 2016; Kim and Park , 2003; Mohr and Spekman, 1994).

Taking into account the results of the research on the content of the partnership concept, the following definition of SME partnership or partnership is being developed:

> SME Partnership – a set of relationships between individual individuals, companies, and other organizations set up by an SME manager or owner to achieve a business target.

The above-mentioned content of the concept of partnership is used in an empirical study to find out how to improve the competitiveness of SMEs through updated and improved partnerships.

The results of the study are used to reveal theories of competitive advantage with the partnership summarized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Relationship between theories of competitive advantage and partnership

Competitiveness (*KSP)* Theories	Causes of forming partnerships	Predicted Effect
Company Resource Forming Theory	The potential quantitative and qualitative effect of using partner resources that can be used to build partnerships	Competitiveness formation and higher business competitiveness
Theory of the Employed Knowledge	Opportunities to improve knowledge through the knowledge of potential partners	Opportunities to produce more knowledge-intensive products and competitiveness
Final Consumption Market Theory	Potential opportunities to learn new markets or market segments in partnership	Opportunity to increase production and formation of competitiveness
Theory of relationship building	The need to increase the market power of SMEs to compete successfully in domestic and foreign markets	The likelihood of a rapidly changing market environment and the formation of competitiveness is increasing
Theory of Dynamic Opportunities	Opportunities to increase the efficiency of the resources available to SMEs in terms of restructuring and use of resources by attracting partner resources.	Opportunity for new products and competitiveness formation
Transaction Cost Theory	Opportunities to reduce transaction costs through potential partners	Possibility of cost reduction and price reduction

Source of information: Author's table using (Russo and Cesarani 2017)

The most important for the theme of the thesis and the aim of the research are the theories of competitiveness building based on the knowledge of the employees, the product market and the theory of relationship building. By using the lessons of these theories and attracting partners, SMEs can successfully build the necessary competitive advantage at a particular place and time. Continuing the study, the benefits of partnership are discovered (Vanags, 2013; Ivancevich and Duening 2006; Nguetoum, LF, 2017; Boone., LE and Kurtz, DL 2011; Pride, et al, 2008; Wheelen, TL and Hunger, JD, 2018) and shortcomings that should be taken into account by SME managers (Kakko, A. 2016; Rezaei, et al., 2018; Brink, 2017; Box, et al., 2017; Zarina, et al., 2012; , 2015), building a partnership at a specific time and place.

The most significant results of the research on competition, competitive advantage and partnership are used to combine these concepts in one model

and to discover the effect of their interaction. The model is included in Picture 1.3.
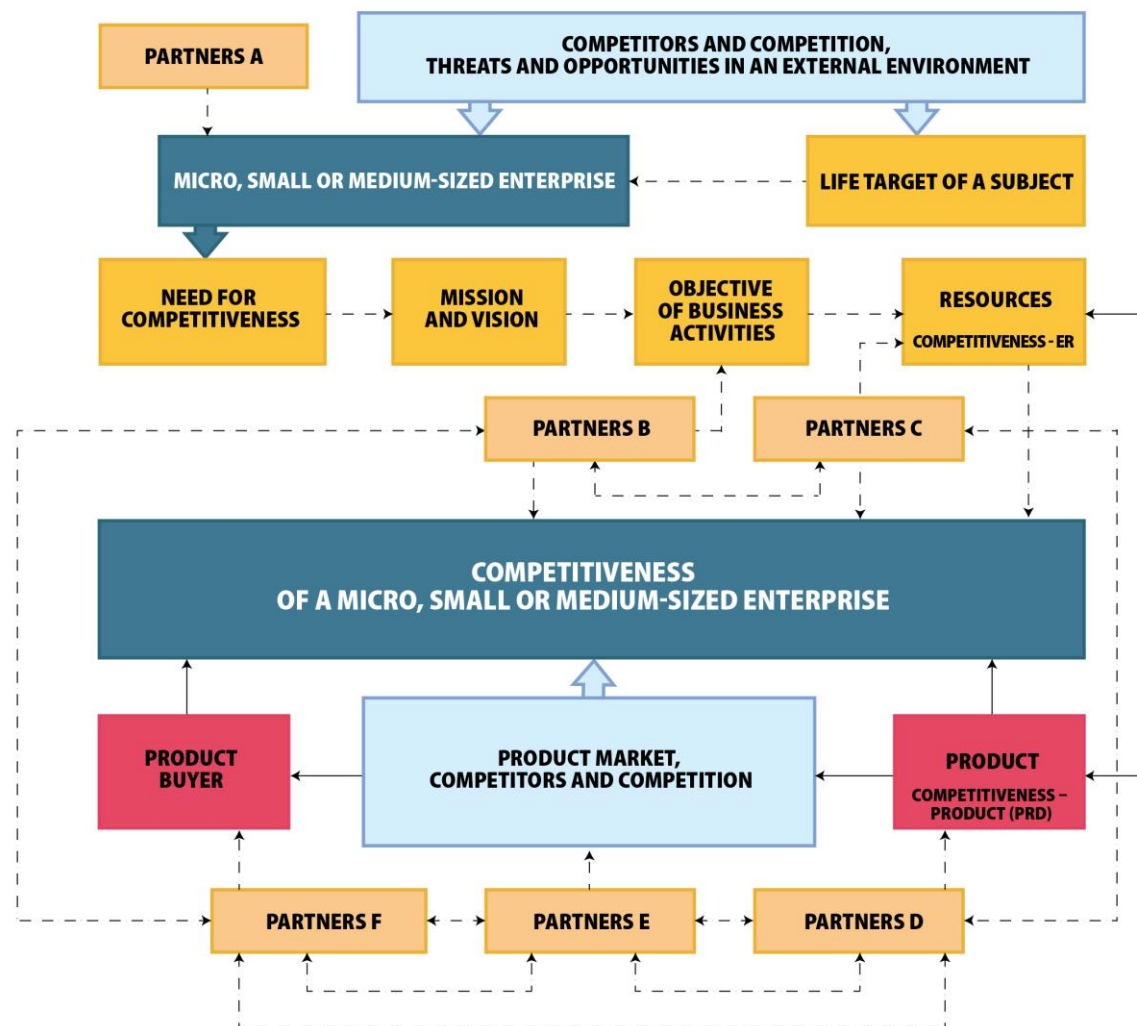
Picture 1.3 **Interrelation and interaction among competitiveness, competition, competitiveness advantages and partnership**
Source: Model developed by the Author.

The model included in Picture 1.3 is described in detail in the Doctoral Thesis. The most important elements of the model are the different types of partners and their relation to certain elements of the competitiveness of SMEs that contribute to the development of a particular competitive advantage at different stages of the company's development. The types of partners shown in the figure, their differences and their use in creating a particular type of competitive advantage are summarized in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2
Interrelation among theories of competitive advantage building and partnerships

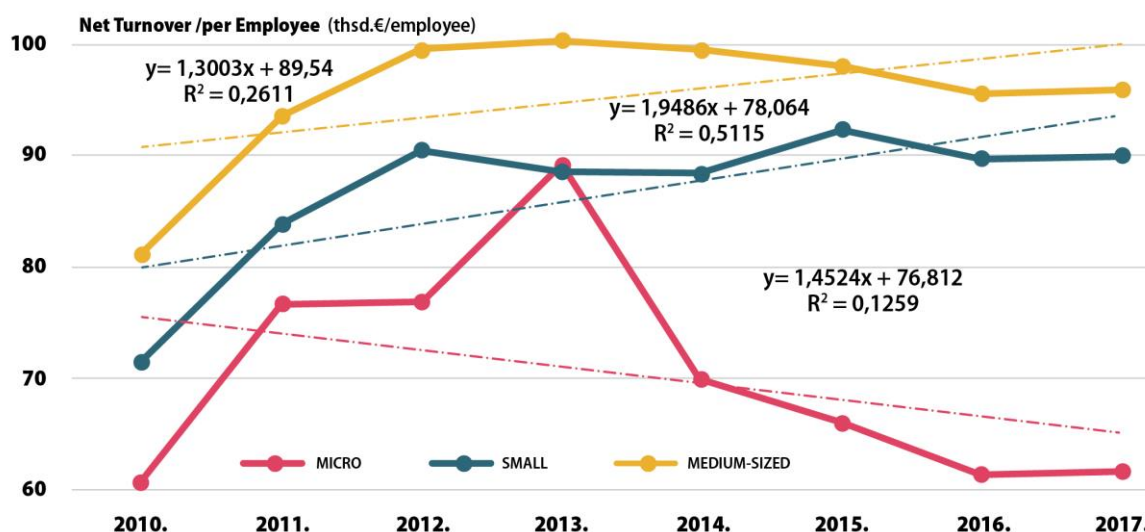| Types of partners	Reasons for building a partnership on the need to increase SMEs' competitiveness	Type of competitiveness advantage
Partners A – founders of the company	Necessary funding for company equity capital formation, new knowledge, financial availability restrictions	Knowledge and resource potential competitive advantage
Partners B - Target Companions	Upgrading knowledge and experience, concentration of resources to achieve the goal, opportunities for using partner partnerships.	Target competitive advantage
Partners C - ER Suppliers	Potential opportunities for purchasing resources and ensuring their quantitative and qualitative relevance, taking into account competitors on the market.	Resource Compliance Competitive Advantage
Partners D - product promoters	The need to consolidate the volume of products produced to sell at better prices in domestic and foreign markets.	Competitive advantage of a consolidated and relevant product
Partners E - product distributors	Knowledge of the finished product market and more favorable sales rules in the domestic and foreign markets are needed.	Competitive advantage built on the product market
Partners F - product buyers	The need to attract buyers and build a loyal attitude of buyers towards the product produced by SMEs	The advantage of competitiveness created by loyal buyers

Source of information: Table compiled by the Author, using the results of the research

As it can be seen by the information gathered in Table 1.2, for the successful operation of SMEs and the necessary competitive advantages, there is a necessity of 6 types of partners with different resources and competences. This does not exclude the possibility for one partner to combine several functions. The thesis analyses and evaluates the most important causes of the attraction of the partners and their expected effects.

2. Evaluation of SME Competitiveness Changes in Major Sectors of the National Economy

The deduction method - from general to specific - dominates the presentation of the research results contained in Chapter II. Therefore, the data on the economic importance of SMEs in the EU, in the OECD countries and beyond are revealed at the outset, revealing the major challenges that SMEs in EU countries will face in the next decade and the need for EU countries to support their efforts to overcome these challenges (UEAPME, 2018). The distribution of EU support required for these measures largely correlates with the problems of increasing the competitiveness of SMEs working in Latvia and building partnerships in the domestic and overseas countries. In order to gain an overall picture of the impact of the external business environment on the competitiveness of SMEs, the demographic indicators of enterprises by industry and sector groups are analyzed and evaluated. The results of the study show that the instability of external business has had a more negative impact on economically active companies in the service sectors. The new merchants prefer the manufacturing industry, their growth rate in the post-crisis period is more than 2 times higher than the growth of enterprises established in the service sectors. Increasing the competitiveness of SMEs operating in the ICT sector is of strategic importance in the reporting period, and the growth of start-ups is one of the highest.

The following study uses 4 absolute economic indicators – number of enterprises, employees, net turnover and value added, as well as 2 performance indicators - labour productivity indicators, which are calculated using net turnover and value added indicators. These indicators are calculated by sectors more important for national economic development and groups of SMEs. Competitiveness assessment includes changes in absolute and efficiency indicators as well as structural indicators during the reporting period. In order to get an idea of the sectors of the economy where micro, small and medium-sized enterprises show higher competitiveness rates, the Labour Summary includes labour force efficiency indicators used in the study, calculated using net turnover and added value. The results obtained on the net turnover of SMEs per employee are included in Picture 2.1.
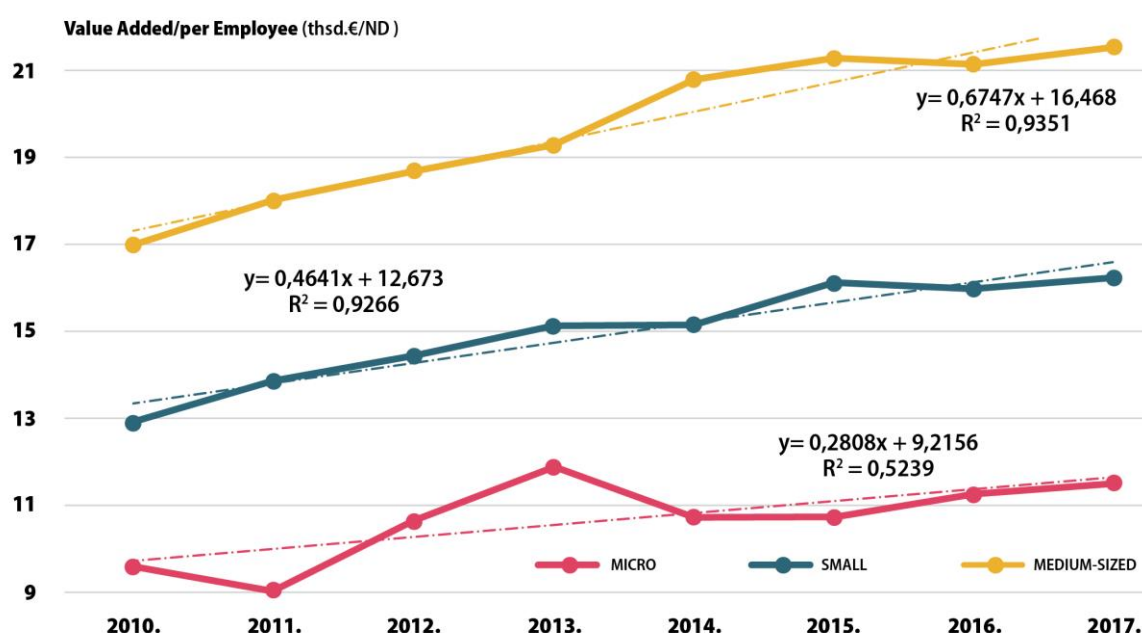
Net Turnover /per Employee (thsd.€/employee)

$y = 1,3003x + 89,54$
$R^2 = 0,2611$

$y = 1,9486x + 78,064$
$R^2 = 0,5115$

$y = 1,4524x + 76,812$
$R^2 = 0,1259$

MICRO   SMALL   MEDIUM-SIZED

2010.   2011.   2012.   2013.   2014.   2015.   2016.   2017.

Picture 2.1

Net turnover per employee of SME products - dynamics and tendencies of change

Source: Image created by the author, using data of CSB of the Republic of Latvia and calculation results

Picture 2.1. The dynamics and trend of the graphical models included in the survey reveals the negative impact of the external environment on the net turnover per employee of the products produced by SMEs working in the researched sectors during the reporting period. The reason for this is the large instability of products and employees produced by SMEs, the quantitative and comparative indicators of which are analyzed and evaluated in the Work by economic sectors and groups of SMEs. To a greater extent, this refers to the dynamics of changes in net turnover of products produced by micro-enterprises per employee. The coefficient of determination of the linear trend function R2 in this case is the lowest - R2 = 0.1259, and at the end of the period the value of the indicator decreases and therefore the function of the trend is negative. This is due to the lack of competitiveness of micro-enterprises to produce and sell products with an upward trend. Smaller and medium-sized enterprises have a slightly higher competitiveness and resistance to external threats. The coefficient of determination in this case is R2 = 0.2611 and R2 = 0.611, which is significantly higher and the trend function is positive. This means that small and medium-sized enterprises are more competitive, but many of them face difficult challenges that have a negative impact on the stability of net turnover growth. This is largely due to the inadequate knowledge and skills of SME managers to build mutually beneficial partnerships that could be used more effectively to increase competitiveness.

The models of dynamics of changes in the productivity of SMEs, taking into account the changes in value added, together with linear trend functions are included in in picture 2.2.

Value Added/per Employee (thsd.€/ND)

$y= 0,6747x + 16,468$
$R^2 = 0,9351$

$y= 0,4641x + 12,673$
$R^2 = 0,9266$

$y= 0,2808x + 9,2156$
$R^2 = 0,5239$

MICRO   SMALL   MEDIUM-SIZED

2010. 2011. 2012. 2013. 2014. 2015. 2016. 2017.

Picture 2.2

Value-added per employee per SME - dynamics and tendencies of change

Source: Image created by the author, using data of CSB of the Republic of Latvia and calculation results

Graphical models in Picture 2.2 show the nature of the change in the value added of the products produced and the trends per employee in each SME group. In this case, compared to the models in Picture 2.1, the situation is much more stable, and the amplitude of dynamic oscillations has drastically reduced. However, the level of labour efficiency in relation to the PV produced per employee is relatively low and volatile. Therefore, the quotient of the dynamic queue character trend determinant - R2 = 0.5239, but for small enterprises it is significantly higher - R2 = 0.9266, and for medium - sized R2 - 0.9351. The results of this study largely correlate with the quantitative differences in labour productivity achieved by SME groups and the stability of the changes, which largely determine the competitiveness changes of micro, small and medium enterprises in the sectors of the economy included in the research.

Further research identifies those sectors of the economy where micro, small and medium-sized enterprises show higher competitiveness in the post-crisis period. For this purpose, the above-mentioned increase in absolute and efficiency indicators is used throughout the period. Such a methodology is based on the axiom that the faster growth of the indicators of economic

activity and their proportion included in the research is related to the increase of production efficiency and is used as convincing evidence of higher competitiveness. Using this methodology, the economic performance indicators of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises and their growth in each economic sector are evaluated. Thus, the competitiveness of companies is measured by the number of seats occupied in each of the indicators that are added together. As a result, the lowest scores in each of the indicators indicate the higher competitiveness of the respective group of companies in the sectors covered by the study. The full description of the application of this methodology is included in the thesis, but the competitiveness indicators of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises are included in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Indicators for Changing SME Competitiveness

Industries of the National Economy	Competitiveness summary indicators for SME groups			Sum
	Micro Enterprises	Small Enterprises	Medium-Sized Enterprises	
Manufacturing /Production	14	23	23	**60**
Construction	19	16	24	**59**
Trade	23	23	14	**60**
Transport	24	22	13	**59**
Hotels	28	21	13	**62**
ICT services	14	20	26	**60**
Operations with real estate property	13	21	26	**60**
Professional Services	17	20	21	**58**
TOTAL	**152**	**166**	**160**	**478**

Source: Table compiled by the Author, using LR CSB data and calculation results

As it can be seen in Table 2.1 below, micro companies show higher competitiveness in the Real Estate, ICT, Industry and Professional Services sectors. During the reporting period, the Small Business Group shows higher competitiveness in the Construction, ICT Services, and Professional Services and in the Real Estate sector. During the reporting period, the companies in the Transport and Industry, Professional Services and Hotels and Restaurants sectors show higher competitiveness in the group of medium enterprises. The results of the study show that the competitiveness of SMEs is determined not

only by the size of the company and the efficiency of production, but also by the characteristics of the product produced in each economic sector and the ability of companies to establish sufficiently effective relationships with their domestic and cross-border partners. Therefore, the results of the research can be used for SME associations as well as state and local government institutions to update existing and develop new measures for SME support, taking into account the sector of the economy, where the largest share of net turnover and added value of manufactured products is concentrated.

3. Opportunities for Using Improved Partnerships to Increase the Competitiveness of SMEs in Latvia

Chapter III of the Thesis summarizes the results of the research on partnership building and its use in increasing the competitiveness of SMEs. More attention is paid to the relevance of the content and form of the partnership to the type of economic activity of the parties involved in the partnership, the purpose of the action and other elements of the partnership's relevance. The research has shown that managers and owners of SMEs have a fairly vague and vague idea of partners, partnerships and strategic partnerships, its use to create a new competitive advantage and increase competitiveness in order to achieve a specific business goal.

The study found that SMEs working in the Latvian economy have a relatively low share of innovative products in total production, a large backlog in the introduction of modern technologies for the production of products suitable for export and a low level of resource efficiency (Eurostat, 2018) - these are one of the most important challenges to face SMEs working in Latvia. This makes it necessary to evaluate and develop existing partnerships, to look for strategic partners to increase competitiveness in domestic and overseas markets.

The necessity of updating the partnership is also determined by the inevitable IV Industrial Revolution driven by nanomaterials and nanotechnologies (Deloite, 2018). Scientific research shows that, in the context of the upcoming industrial revolution, the most significant feature that market economy will require from businesses is the ability to cooperate and address complex issues in the production and sale of goods (Lee, et al. 2018; Nagy, et al., 2018; Crnjac, (2017), Nowadays corporate co-operation and complex issues are unimaginable without the need to restructure the partnership and attract new partners to reach the goal of SMEs. Therefore, the empirical study focuses on different types of partnership and results of cooperation with partners in their own country and in cross-border countries.

The large number of SMEs in the country, which exceeds 110 thousand and the superiority of micro-enterprises - more than 90%, make the selection of the general cluster difficult. When evaluating various options, the set of members of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (abbreviated as LCCI), the total number of which is equal to 2.4 thousand, but 2.35 thousand or 98% of them meet the criteria for classification of SMEs, is considered the most appropriate. But there are 2 051 companies in the field of economic activity included in the research, of which 1 536 micro enterprises, 425 small and 90 medium enterprises. The sample set required

for the study is determined based on the methodology appropriate to the task (Kathrynn, and Lawrence, 2018; Gravetter, et al, 2017; Arhipova, Baliņa, 2003) and making the following basic assumptions: the confidence level should not be lower than 95% and the standard error should be 5 % borders. By making the necessary calculations, a sample set is made up of micro enterprises - 308 units, small - 203 and medium - sized enterprises - 74 units, which are divided by the sectors included in the research according to the structure of SMEs of LCCI. In the follow-up of the research, the compliance of the structural division of the sample population with the proportion of SMEs actually working in the sectors of the economy is used, using the correlation method, and the following results are obtained: in the micro-enterprise group the compliance level reaches 48%; small businesses - 65% and medium-sized enterprises - 83%. The results of the correlative comparison show that the distribution of the sample population by economic sectors is satisfactory to obtain scientifically significant results.

A questionnaire with 20 questions was developed for the research on obtaining the data on SME partnerships and their impact on the competitiveness of enterprises and the development of competitive advantages. These issues focus on the relevance of SME partnerships, the effects of partnerships and the main causes of these effects in terms of increasing the competitiveness of SMEs, as well as the global aspects of partnership. The questionnaire used to achieve the goal of the research corresponds to the group of quantitative studies - each respondent had to evaluate the answer according to a 10-point scale. The survey was conducted in the winter of 2018, and it increases the relevance of the research results. The responsiveness of SME owners – LCCI *(the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry)* members to the survey was relatively high.

When selecting the completed questionnaires and summarizing the results of the responses, it turned out that the proportion of responses received to the sample is 89%, in the micro-enterprise group - 94%, in the small enterprise group - 76% and in the group of medium-sized enterprises - more than 86%. Thus, 518 companies are included in the subsequent study, of which 197 are micro, 111, and 210 medium-sized. The results of the correlative comparison show that the number of enterprises included in the further study and their structural distribution are very closely correlated with the structure of the sample set ($R2 = 0.895$ to 0.977) and sufficiently close to the structure of SMEs in the economy ($R2 = 0.513$ to 0.932). This means that the results of the study are scientifically and practically important not only among LCCI members but also in the whole economy.

In order to get a general picture of SMEs and their partners, data on the breakdown of SMEs included in the study by sector group and the net turnover of their products are obtained; partners abroad, their share; share of exported products; SME trust in one partner abroad; distribution of foreign partners by country group; assessment of the established partnership in terms of their impact on competitiveness and other issues relevant to the achievement of the research objective and to prove the hypothesis. In the process of processing the survey results, the importance of the established partnership is calculated and the subsequent evaluation includes several important indicators - the minimum and maximum value; average, mod and median, as well as standard deviation.

The findings of the study show that a certain proportion of SMEs - respondents are sceptical about the results of cooperation with domestic and cross-border partners. Countries such as Russia, other CIS countries *(The Commonwealth of Independent States)*, North American countries and African continent countries have received the lowest rating. The highest rating has been received by the country itself - Latvia, other Baltic States, as well as Western European countries. In the micro-enterprise group, cooperation with partners in their country - Latvia and other Baltic countries - is higher. Partners from Latvia are also ranked higher in the Small Business Group, while partners from Western Europe rank second, followed by the Baltic and Eastern European countries. Owners of medium-sized enterprises are more optimistic about the results of cooperation from the countries included in the study. Partners from Latvia and other Baltic States, as well as partners from Western and Eastern Europe have received the highest rating.

The results of the study on the compliance of the established partnership with the strategic objectives are important for increasing the competitiveness of SMEs. The results of the survey on the responses received from all participants in the survey are summarized in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Respondents "Assessment of Partners" Compliance with the Company's Strategy
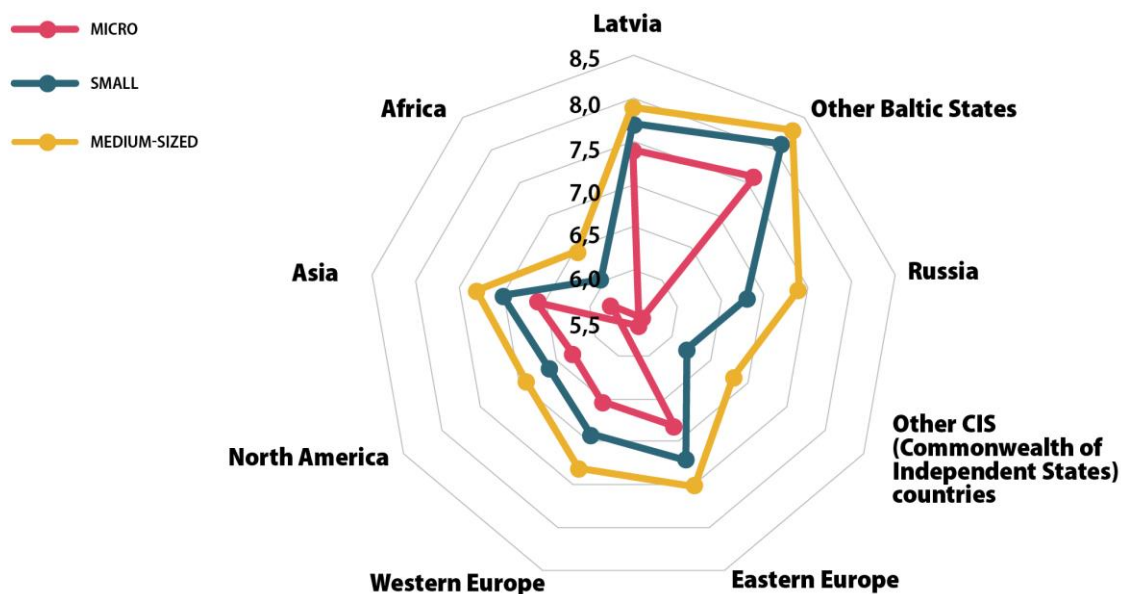
Partnership Nationality	Min	Max	Mx/Mn	Average	Moda	Median	SDN
Latvia	3	9	3,0	8,4	8	7	0,47
Other Baltic States	2	9	4,5	8,7	8	8	0,43
Russia	2	8	4,0	7,5	7	7	1,28
Other CIS countries *(The Commonwealth of Independent States)*	2	8	4,0	7,2	7	6	1,54
Eastern European countries	3	8	2,7	8,1	8	7	1,33
Western European countries	1	9	3,0	8,9	8	8	1,46

North American countries	1	8	2,7	7,8	8	7	1,52
Asian countries	1	9	3,0	7,2	7	6	1,49
African countries	1	7	3,5	6,8	7	6	2,42

Source of information: Table compiled by the Author, using the results of the research

The data in the Table indicate that respondents rank Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania more in line with their strategic goals. A similar rating is given to partners from Eastern European and Western European countries as well as to North America. The results of the study by SME groups are evaluated in the doctoral thesis and it is revealed that partners from Latvia and other Baltic States, as well as from Russia, are more fully in line with the micro-enterprise strategy. In small companies, the strategic partnership is better implemented in cooperation with partners from Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, as well as from Russia and other CIS countries. But medium-sized companies have established more successful cooperation in implementing strategic plans with partners from Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, as well as from Western Europe and Asia.

Within the framework of the study, the credibility of SME partners is considered to be one of the most important aspects of increasing competitiveness. Therefore, in order to achieve the goal of the research, respondents' assessment of this issue is central, which corresponds to the observations in practice. The results of the survey are summarized in Table in 3.2. Evaluating the average response rates of respondents, it shows that partners from Estonia and Lithuania as well as Asian countries have received the highest rating. They are followed by partners from Latvia and Eastern Europe. In turn, the lowest average confidence level of partners is found in Africa and other CIS countries, followed by Russia and North American countries. The results of the study on the reliability of the partners by SME group and the countries included in the study are summarized in Picture in 3.1.

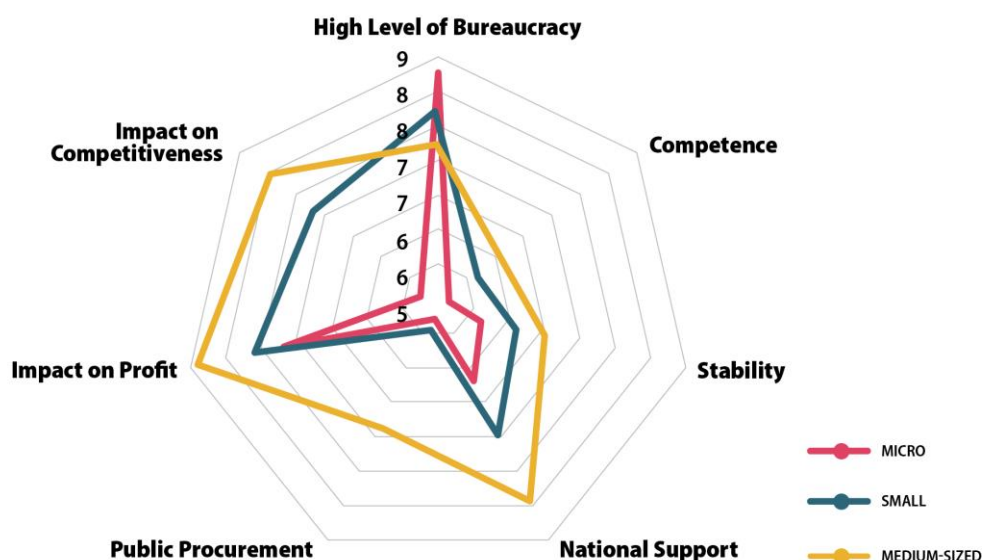**Results of assessment of confidence in partners by SME groups**

Source of information: Picture developed by the Author, using the results of the research

A greater consensus on the partners' credibility assessment is the top and bottom left of Picture 3.1, where the reliability assessment of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania partners, as well as the countries of Western Europe, North America and Asia, appears. Conversely, the most controversial ratings reveal the credibility of partners from Russia and other CIS countries.

In the course of further research, the data obtained from the survey on partners - supply of resources and sales of manufactured products - are analyzed and evaluated. The results of the study show that partnerships are most valued by medium-sized companies, where they are more satisfied with volume, resource quality and delivery time. Similar results are obtained by studying the quality of the partnership in marketing the products produced. The lowest rating in this case is shown by micro-enterprises, whose partnerships are much weaker and more unstable. Micro companies show the greatest dissatisfaction with the quality, volume and price of resources delivered by partners. But in terms of product sales, the biggest claims are for sales prices and sales time, but for quality products, the rating is very close to small and medium businesses. This means that SMEs operating in Latvia are capable of producing a competitive product, but for many of them, the distribution of the product and the selling price are the weakest spot. These results are described in more detail in the Doctoral Thesis.

The last section of the empirical study is devoted to SME partnerships with public administration institutions, educational institutions and scientific organizations, which are important partners in enhancing the competitiveness of

SMEs. The results of the study on the results of SME partnership with public administration institutions and their processing results are summarized and included in Picture 3.2. The reflection of the data shows a great difference of opinion between the survey participants and the groups of participants about the results of the cooperation with the partners - public authorities.
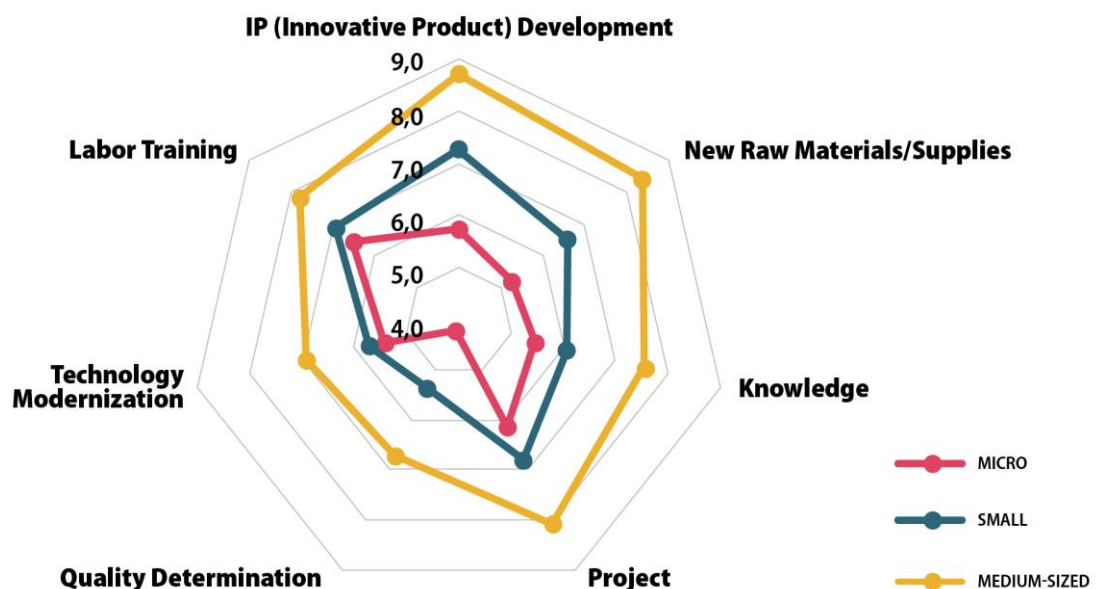

Picture 3.2

Results of cooperation among public authorities - SME partners by SME groups

Source of information: Picture developed by the Author, using the results of the research

The picture shows that micro-enterprises are very concerned about the great bureaucracy in public institutions, which is often difficult to understand in practice in trying to preserve and increase the competitiveness of companies. Therefore, the rate of bureaucracy in public institutions is rated at 8.3, which is the highest rating compared to other criteria. Micro-business owners show great dissatisfaction with access to public procurement, which is an important aspect of the existence of smaller businesses. This is the lowest score - 5 points. They also consider the level of competence of public authority employees in various business matters to be relatively low, but especially those related to the development and support of micro-enterprises. There are similar problems among small businesses. Respondents in this group rated the performance of public authorities on the organization of public procurement and the level of competence of public authorities as the lowest. The situation is more optimistic in the answers of the owners of medium-sized enterprises - respondents. They show the greatest dissatisfaction with the activities of state institutions on the competence of employees, as well as on the stability of state institutions and fulfilment of promises.

The results of the study can be largely explained by the different experiences, knowledge and understanding of how to build partnerships with public authorities and what to expect from them. On the other hand, this survey indirectly reveals the arrogance and complacency of the employees of the state institutions with the results of their work. Many of them are trying to separate themselves from the problems of SMEs, especially those of micro-businesses, development and competitiveness. Often, decisions taken by state institutions are more in line with EU directives than with the threats in the Latvian business environment, which create insurmountable barriers for many business entities. National regulatory enactments reveal the negligent attitude of state institutions to the necessity of increasing the competitiveness of SMEs in the conditions of economic globalization. Building partnerships and collaborating with educational and scientific organizations is critical for SME owners and managers to maintain their business performance, growth and competitiveness. The results of the study show that the assessment of SME co-operation partners on issues related to education development is slightly more optimistic than the results of the evaluation of the activities of state institutions. To a greater extent, SMEs are satisfied with the partnership in the training of the workforce, as well as in improving knowledge about specific issues of business development and competitiveness. SMEs are comparatively high in their cooperation with scientific institutions in the development of innovative products and enterprise development projects. For a more detailed picture of this issue, the results of the study are included in Picture 3.3.

Picture 3.3

Results of evaluation of educational and scientific institutions in the context of partnership by SME groups

Source of information: Picture developed by the Author, using the results of the research

The results of the research included in Picture 3.3 are generally somewhat more optimistic compared to the evaluation of the partnership with public authorities. Not surprisingly, micro-business owners are not satisfied with the results of collaborating with educational and scientific institutions, but the level of dissatisfaction is much lower. The lowest rating in this case is given in the quality control of the products produced. This is crucial for maintaining and enhancing the competitiveness of businesses. Micro-businesses are quite dissatisfied with their experience of collaborating on new materials and technology upgrades. The results of workforce training and project development are higher. For small businesses, the partnership score is significantly higher. This applies to a greater extent to the development of innovative products, training of the workforce and project development. But in the development of new technologies and in the modernization of existing technologies the results of cooperation are rather weak. A similar situation arises when small businesses want to work together to determine the quality of their products and raw materials. The situation is better seen in the results of the mid-sized companies. In this case, the highest rating is given to cooperation in the development of new, innovative products. Good results have been achieved in partnership in developing new raw materials and projects. Greater dissatisfaction is recorded in the partnership in determining the quality of products and resources produced, in the modernization of technologies, and in gaining specific knowledge on competitiveness issues. But nevertheless, these results are significantly higher than the ratings of micro and small business partnerships.

To summarize, it should be acknowledged that building effective partnerships with public and scientific institutions for SME owners - respondents was rather unsuccessful. What is the reason for this? The answer to this question goes beyond the aims and objectives of this work, but the experience gained in entrepreneurship and partnership building with educational institutions shows a restrained attitude from both sides - SME owners and managers often have a poor idea of what kind of help can be obtained from education and training scientific institutions. In practice, it has been observed that there are many entrepreneurs who are afraid to disclose their low level of competence in increasing the competitiveness of the company, so the often adopted management decisions are erroneous and inadequate. But educational and especially scientific institutions, including universities, are rather reluctant to engage in applied research with SMEs. The results of the research reveal many untapped opportunities for improving SME co-operation and building partnerships with educational and scientific institutions. Their development and development can make a big contribution to increasing the competitiveness of SMEs as well as large companies in both domestic and foreign markets.

As a result of the empirical study, relatively large unexploited opportunities are identified in relation to the identification of suitable partners for SME activity and effective partnership building. The results of the survey reveal that, in practice, micro and small businesses have an aggravating lack of understanding of partners and partnerships, especially as regards finding suitable partners and building mutually beneficial partnerships, sharing knowledge and resources. Many have strange questions about the relevance of the partnership and the dimensions of this compliance, the audit of partnerships, their updating, restructuring and improvement. In the light of the above findings on the results of the study, the Partnership Improvement Model, included in Picture 3.4. The model included in this figure contains only the most important elements of partnership building and its improvement. The model is built using elements of systemic approach. It contributes to increasing the flexibility of the model and its widespread application in partnership building, identifying inappropriate partners, and developing a partnership network. The developed model is intrinsically closely related to Picture 1.2 which shows the relationship between competitive advantage, competitiveness and partnership.

SME partnership building is based on the problems that SME owners face when they start their own business and start producing, which is shown in the developed model. Taking into account the insufficient level of competence of the SME owners in developing the competitiveness of the company and finding the necessary partners, the model shows one of the possible solutions - to invite a consultant. In many cases, a business consultant can become the first SME cooperation partner. This is largely the case for micro and small businesses.
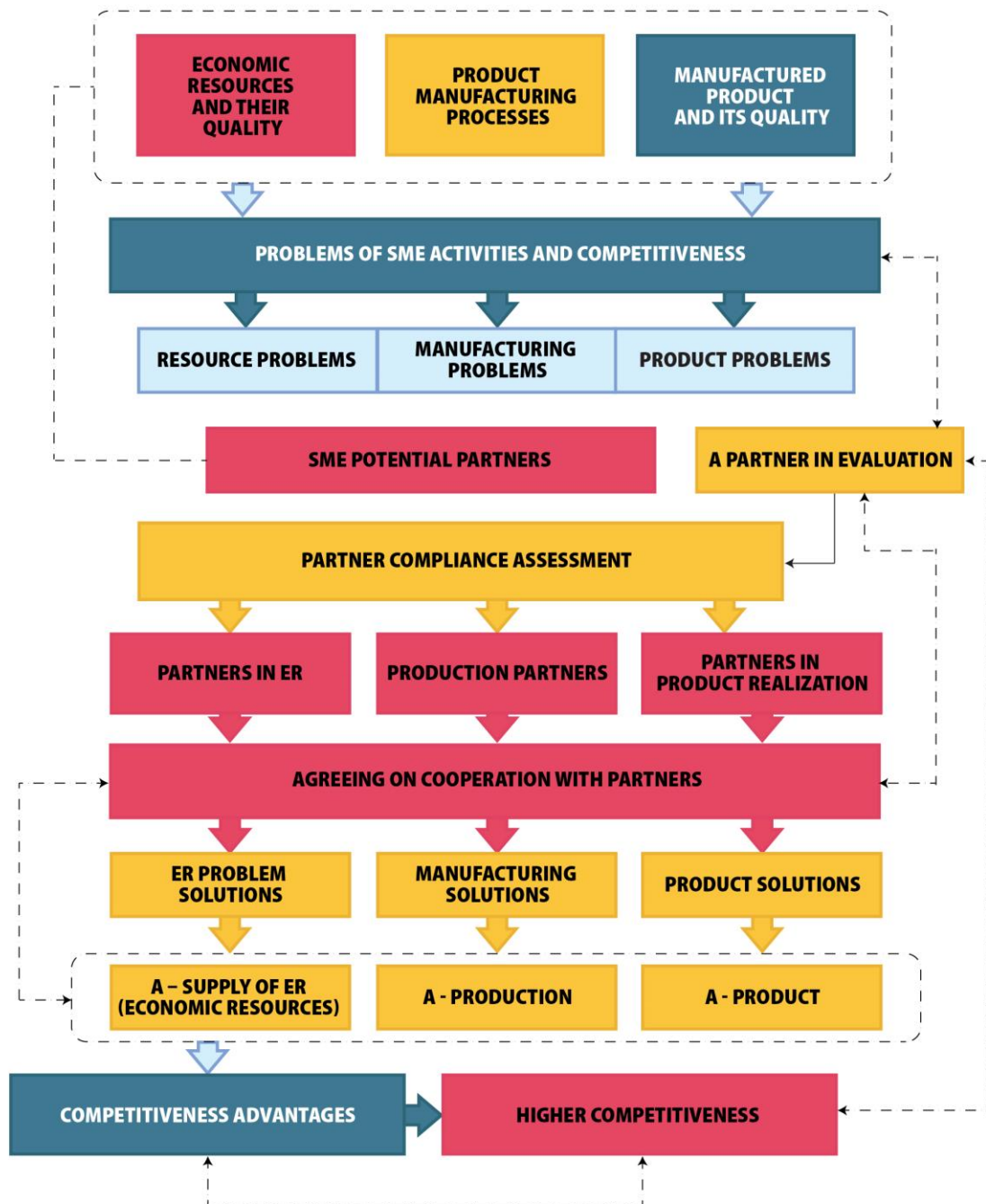
SME Partnership Improvement Model for Competitiveness

The picture shows that all the problems that arise and may arise for SME owners are divided into 3 groups - problems of resources, production and finished product. This distribution is followed in the design sequence of the entire model. Therefore, the partners required to achieve the goals of SME activity and increase competitiveness are divided into 3 large groups according to the problem classification. Thanks to the efforts of a consultant-partner and the entrepreneur, we find the most suitable cooperation partners for solving specific problems.

Thanks to cooperation with various partners, the entrepreneur is able to find the most suitable solutions for the supply of economic resources, stabilization of production processes and sales of the produced products. As a result, the company's performance improves in quantitative and qualitative terms. That is why in the model with a dashed line these new elements, which have been developed by the cooperation partners, are covered. The full name of the new elements is as follows: A - ER supply = supply of appropriate economic resources; A - Production = relevant production processes; A - Product = manufacturing an appropriate product that includes quality and fitness requirements for potential buyers. As a result of the cooperation with the partners, the product produced acquires the necessary competitive advantage and SMEs will increase their competitiveness in the intended market segment.

The model includes several types of feedback. They provide control functions to a large extent and help the partner searcher and the developer to make sure that the decisions taken are consistent with the internal and external environment, the changes that have occurred, and the business objectives. Thus, feedback leads to an increase in the flexibility of the system and its constant adaptation to changes that may affect the company's competitive advantage and the competitiveness of the product.

When applying the developed model in practice, the user should take into account that in every case when new problems arise in relation to the necessity of increasing the competitiveness of the company in new circumstances, the solution of the problems should be started with partners and auditing of the established partnership or conformity assessment. If the business owner or manager cannot do this on their own, the partner should seek help - the consultant and the joint forces should find an acceptable solution to the existing problems. In this way, SMEs gain an updated and improved partnership that helps the company to remain competitive and to raise it to a sufficient level.

The developed model has great practical significance. It can be useful not only for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to update and develop partnerships. Large companies can also use the model with great success – the distribution of problems in groups is similar, which means that all partners can be divided into groups according to the identified problem groups. The technical-economic capacity of the overall partnership is different and the role of one partner in the operation of the larger company increases. But one should not allow a company to be hostage to the hands of individual partners. Its partner load needs to be reduced by diversifying partners – resource suppliers and distributors of finished products across the globe. The model for updating and improving the partnership with good success can also be used by the leaders of other organizations to make decisions about increasing the efficiency of the managed organization and increasing competitiveness.

In order to increase the practical application of the developed model, the most important elements of mutually beneficial partnership formation are identified. They have been developed on the basis of the results of the study - taking into account the effects of partnership-building and partnership functioning identified during the partnership study.

The developed model is practically approbated by the company "Sakret" which has been successfully operating in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia for more than 15 years. Good feedback on the developed model has also been received from LCCI members who use it to assess compliance and enhance competitiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research presented in the doctoral thesis on the importance of updated partnership for increasing the competitiveness of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises make it possible to draw theoretically and practically significant conclusions. The full set of conclusions is included in the Doctoral Thesis, but only the most significant conclusions from both the theoretical and practical point of view are included in the summary:

1. The results of the study on the importance of partnerships to enhance the competitiveness of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises show that the Hypothesis is proven, the tasks are fulfilled and the goal is achieved.

2. The growth of SMEs, the nature and dynamics of their development are mainly determined by the competition between companies in the respective country for better opportunities to attract buyers to their products; Competition, or competition in competition, is a necessary condition for pursuing business goals.

3. The basic categories of market economy - competition, competitive advantages and competitiveness - are studied in the thesis for the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, their importance in the whole national economy, focusing on the integral part of competitiveness - partners and partnership.

4. The first chapter of the thesis presents the results of the research on the key concepts included in the dissertation – "competition, competitive advantage, competitiveness and partnership", which are necessary for a scientifically correct study and the results of the research on their relationship with SMEs and their competitiveness.

5. The results of the research show that the explanation of the most important concepts of the work in the publications that make up the academic environment is in many cases inconsistent with the topic of the work and the object of the research;

6. The developed SME competitiveness development and updating model enables interested persons to acquire new knowledge about the measures to be taken to increase the competitiveness of SMEs, which can be successfully applied in practice. The model also includes cash flows that enable the SME owner to ascertain the sufficiency of competitiveness at a particular location and time.

7. The study focuses on theories of competitive advantage building and selects those that can give SME managers the knowledge they need to build the competitive edge of a managed company, ranging from the product to the market.

8. Using the results of the research, the most significant advantages and disadvantages of partnership building are identified in relation to the need to

increase the competitiveness of SMEs; these results can be important for SME managers in decision making on the most appropriate partner choice and in the compliance assessment of partnerships to increase the company's competitiveness.

9. In order to gain more in-depth knowledge of competition, competitiveness advantages, competitiveness of SMEs and partnerships, their interconnection and interaction, a graphical model combining these concepts in a single system is being developed. It is used for the development of the Main Model of Work applicable to the assessment, updating and improvement of compliance of SME partners and partnerships.

10.   Small and medium-sized enterprises form the economic basis of the whole European Union, including the Latvian economy - 99.8% of all businesses are in this category. They employ 93 million people, accounting for 67% of total employment in the EU-28 non-financial business sector, accounting for 57% of the added value created. 86% of the economically active population live in Latvian SMEs and produce 72% of the value added.

11.   The results of the study on business demography provide significant knowledge on the impact of the external environment on the competitiveness of enterprises, given the absolute dominance of SMEs in the total number of enterprises, the results obtained are considered to be important for acquiring new knowledge about the changes in the competitiveness of SMEs during the reporting period.

12.   The results of the study show a dramatic change in the competitiveness of SMEs after the crisis compared to the pre-crisis period. In the post-crisis period, the competitiveness of SMEs has increased, largely due to government support measures and targeted business activities.

13.   Models of dynamic queues describing changes in the number of economically active enterprises and their functions are seen as clear evidence of the instability of the external business environment and the negative impact on business competitiveness. In such circumstances, it is impossible for small and medium-sized enterprises, but also for large companies, to implement appropriate measures to increase their business efficiency and competitiveness.

14.   In the course of the next study, the study of changes in the competitiveness of SMEs uses the economic performance indicators of enterprises by economic sectors included in the research and by groups of SMEs.

15.   The number of micro enterprises in the economic sectors included in the survey has increased 1.5 times during the reporting period, the number of small enterprises - by 17.5%, and the average - by 12.4%. The fastest growth in micro-enterprises - 2.4 times is observed in the ICT sector, in the

small enterprise group - and in the restaurant sector - 1.2 times, in the Transport sector - 1.3 times, in the group of medium enterprises - in the Industry sector - 1.12 times.

16.   Business practice and theoretical research have shown that the workforce is the most important resource for increasing the competitiveness of the company and achieving its goals. The number of employed in micro enterprises has increased by almost 38%, the fastest increase in the labour force is found in the ICT sector - 2.4 times and in the Professional Services sector – less than 1.8 times.

17.   In small enterprises, the number of employed in the reporting period has increased by 9%, the largest increase in the number of personnel employed is found in the Hotel and Restaurant sector - less than 1.5 times and in the ICT services sector - 1.3 times, but in medium-sized enterprises the number of employees has increased by almost 13%; the biggest increase is observed in the hotels and restaurants sector - 1.7 times, in the ICT services sector - 1.25 times and in Transport - 1.35 times.

18.   The net turnover of micro-enterprises in total has increased by almost 1.4 times, in the ICT sector - by almost 1.4 times, in the Industry sector - by 15.5%. The net turnover of products produced by small businesses has risen less than 1.2 times. The biggest growth is observed in the ICT services sector - more than 1.6 times in the Industry sector - by 12.3% and in the Transport sector - 12%.

19.   Graphic models of dynamic lines of net turnover of SME products demonstrate the existence of external imbalances in the reporting period, and the weak orientation capabilities of SME managers in external threats and opportunities.

20.   The added value of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in comparison to net turnover is a more concentrated indicator from the point of view of the merchant. During the reporting period, the value added produced by micro-enterprises has increased by almost 1.7 times. The largest increase, 2.7 times, is observed in the Construction sector, followed by the ICT sector with 2.5 times more growth.

21.   The value added of products produced by small enterprises has increased by 1.42 times, the fastest growth is observed in Construction - almost 2 times, in Hotel and restaurant sector - 1.9 and in ICT services - 1.8 times. In medium-sized enterprises, the total value added has increased more than 1.5 times. The biggest growth is found in the Industry sector - almost 1.4 times.

22.   Net sales of manufactured products per employee in micro enterprises during the reporting period have increased by only 1.5%, in small enterprises - by 26%, and in medium enterprises - by 18.3%. The fastest

growth - 1.6 times in the ICT services sector, 1.4 times in the Trade sector and 1.3 times in the Construction sector.

23.	Value added per employee in micro enterprises has risen by almost 21%, in small enterprises by 25%, and in medium-sized enterprises - by 27%. The largest increase in productivity was observed in the ICT services sector - 1.6 times, in the real estate sector *„Real Estate Operations"* - less than 1.5 times and in the construction sector - 1.5 times, in the Industry sector - 1.37 times.

24.	In order to assess the changes in the competitiveness of SMEs, companies are divided into groups - micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, but the indicators of competitiveness changes are evaluated separately for each group by economic sectors. Thus, indicators that compile competitiveness are obtained.

25.	The aggregated competitiveness indicators show that micro-enterprises show higher competitiveness in the real estate sector *„Real Estate Operations"*, ICT services industry, industry and professional services sector; Small Business Group - Construction Industry, ICT Services and Professional Services; in the medium-sized enterprise group - Transport, Industry, Professional Services, Hotels and Restaurants.

26.	Chapter III of the Thesis summarizes the results of the research on partnership building and its use in increasing the competitiveness of SMEs, focusing on the relevance of the content and form of partnerships to the type of economic activity of the parties involved in the partnership, the operational objective and other elements of the partnership's relevance.

27.	For the implementation of the empirical study, SMEs belonging to the LCCI members are selected as the most appropriate set, considering the strikingly high consistency of their structural composition with the structural breakdown of SMEs by economic sector, as evidenced by the correlation of the respective data.

28.	According to the sampling methodology mentioned above, micro enterprises - 308 units, small - 203 and medium-sized enterprises - 74 units are included in the sample. The results of the correlative comparison show the high level of compliance of the sample population to the general population.

29.	The responsiveness of LCCI *(the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry)* members – SME owners to the survey was relatively high, the proportion of responses received to the sample totalled 89%, but in the micro-enterprise group - 94%, in the small enterprise group - 76% and in the medium-sized enterprise group - more than 86%; thus, 518 companies are included in the next study, of which 197 correspond to micro, 111 to small and 210 to medium.

30.   The results of the correlative comparison show that the number of enterprises included in the further study and their structural distribution are very closely correlated with the structure of the sample set ($R2 = 0.895$ to 0.977) and sufficiently close to the structure of SMEs in the economy ($R2 = 0.513$ to 0.932). This means that the research results can be of scientific and practical significance not only among the members of the RTCL, but also in the whole economy.

31.   To obtain the necessary picture of respondents and their partners, data on the breakdown of SMEs included in the study by sector groups and net turnover of products produced therein are obtained; partners abroad, their share; share of exported products; SME trust in one partner abroad; distribution of foreign partners by country groups and other issues relevant to the achievement of the research objective and proving the hypothesis.

32.   In the process of summarizing the survey results, the importance of the established partnership is calculated and a number of important indicators - minimum and maximum value - are included in the future assessment; average, mod and median, as well as standard deviation.

33.   The results of the research show that the highest rating in the development of the competitiveness of SMEs has been received by the country of economic activity - Latvia, other Baltic States, as well as Western European countries.

34.   Many SMEs – respondents are sceptical about the results of their cooperation with their partners in cross-border countries, the lowest rating being given by countries like Russia, other CIS countries, North American countries and countries of the African continent.

35.   In the micro-enterprise group, the results of cooperation with partners in their country - Latvia and other Baltic countries - are higher. They are followed by Eastern European partners. Partners from Latvia are also ranked higher in the Small Business Group, while partners from Western Europe rank second, followed by the Baltic and Eastern European countries.

36. Owners of medium-sized enterprises are more optimistic about the results of cooperation from the countries included in the study. Partners from Latvia and other Baltic States, as well as partners from Western and Eastern Europe have received the highest rating.

37. Within the framework of the research, significant results are obtained regarding the compliance of the partnership with the strategic goals of SMEs; Credibility of SME partners; partnership in the supply of resources and sales of the products produced.

38. Researching SME partnerships with public administrations, educational institutions and scientific organizations reveals that micro-enterprises are very concerned about the high bureaucracy in public institutions, which is

often difficult to understand in practice in efforts to maintain and enhance the competitiveness of enterprises.

39. The comparatively low scores are derived from the level of competence of public authority employees in various business matters, but especially those related to the development and support of micro-enterprises. The respondents of small and medium-sized enterprises evaluate the activities of state institutions, which are related to the organization of public procurement and the level of competence of employees, as well as the stability of state institutions and fulfilment of promises made.

40. The results of the study can largely be explained by the different experiences, knowledge and understanding of how to build partnerships with public authorities and what can be expected of them. The results of the survey indirectly reveal the arrogance and self-satisfaction of the employees of the state institutions with the results of their work, many of them trying to separate themselves from the problems of SMEs, especially the activities of micro enterprises, development and competitiveness.

41. Building partnerships and collaborating with educational and scientific organizations is critical to SME owners and managers to boost growth and competitiveness. The results of the study show that SMEs are satisfied with the partnership in the training of the workforce, as well as in improving knowledge about specific issues of business development and increasing competitiveness. SMEs are comparatively high in their cooperation with scientific institutions in the development of innovative products and enterprise development projects.

42. As a result of the empirical study, relatively large unexploited opportunities have been identified in the identification of suitable partners for SME activity and in building effective partnerships to increase competitiveness.

43. The results of the empirical and theoretical research are used to develop a model of partnership updating and optimization that includes the most important elements of partnership building and improvement. The model is based on the results of previous research work and using elements of systemic approach. It contributes to increasing the flexibility of the model and extending its application to practice in partnership building and developing the partnership network.

44. The developed model has great practical significance. It can be useful not only for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to update and develop partnerships. Large companies can also use the model with great success - the distribution of problems in groups is similar, which means that all partners can be divided into groups according to identified problem groups.

45. The model of updating and improving the partnership with good success can also be used by the heads of state and other organizations to make decisions on increasing the efficiency of the managed organization and increasing competitiveness.

46. The key elements of building a mutually beneficial partnership are identified with a view to enhancing the practical application of the developed model. They have been developed on the basis of the results of the study - taking into account the effects of partnership-building and partnership functioning identified during the partnership study.

SUGGESTIONS

The results of the research, the theoretical findings and the conclusions provide the following major suggestions:

1. Recommend to the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) to use the results of the research in the activities aimed at raising the level of competence of SMEs and also of the managers of large companies in the formation of partnership, its audit and improvement.

2. For small and medium-sized enterprise associations:

    2.1. use the results of the study to develop measures to improve the state support system for SMEs and submit them to the government;

    2.2. use the results of the study to enhance the knowledge of SME managers in partnership;

    2.3. consider and evaluate the models developed in the Thesis and, in case of acceptance, recommend them to be used by SME managers for decision-making on partnership building and their development.

3. Recommend to the Association of Building Material Producers to use the Author's developed model for the development of the partnership network and the continuous improvement of the partnership.

4. Higher education institutions offering study programs on Entrepreneurship: to recommend the content of the study programs to be supplemented with the results of the study on the partnership and its possibilities to increase the competitiveness of enterprises.

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