

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES AND CORE COMPETENCIES. THE CASE STUDY OF THE UZDROWISKO CIECHOCINEK S.A.

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Abstract

Purpose: This article addresses the relationship between dynamic capabilities and core competencies of companies. Both categories are among the most popular and practical issues in management science, fitting into the resource-based view of the firm. They should be consciously worked out in the company and both have the potential to become sources of sustainable competitive advantages. Despite a good study of the two issues in the literature, little attention has been paid to their relationship. The author has attempted to do so believing that it will contribute to further empirical research.

Method: A case study of a leading Polish sanatorium company, the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A., which is in the process of permanent and purposeful organizational changes, was used. The starting point for the empirical study is the theoretical model representing the relationship between dynamic capabilities, core competencies, core products/services, and end products/services of company.

Results: The results obtained illustrate the positive relationship between the variables used in the study. It was found that dynamic capabilities positively influence changes of core competencies, and thus contribute to the development of core products/services and end products/services. These relationships support the creating and strengthening of sustainable competitive advantages of the studied enterprise despite the constant, intensive and often negative changes in the conditions of its business environment.

Keywords: dynamic capabilities, core competencies, strategic management, case study

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

This article addresses the issue of the relationship between the dynamic capabilities of companies, their core competencies, core products/services, and end products/services. Although no longer entirely new, these issues are still

the subject of lively discussion in the literature on management. Theoretical remarks based on an analysis of the literature on the subject are supplemented by a practical case study developed as part of the author's research. The purpose of this article is to test the positive relationship present in the literature between dynamic capabilities and core competencies. This relationship, inferring from a systematic literature review, has not yet been tested in scientific works based on organizations operating exclusively or predominantly in Poland. The inestimable practical value of the two concepts in question cannot be overlooked. Both are relatively easy to apply in practice and address vital business issues. Conceptually, they strive to explain through what positive and desirable changes take place in enterprises, which is a prerequisite for achieving and maintaining a long-term competitive advantage. It is hard to imagine these questions losing their relevance in a capitalist economy. In addition, the qualitative empirical research undertaken is intended as a contribution to further extended work in the research area undertaken and signals a necessary direction for further research.

For the development of this article, a research question was formulated with the following content: *Do dynamic capabilities positively influence core competencies in an enterprise subjected to a strong negative impact of its environment?* For the analysis of the case study, the company chosen was the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A., a flagship entity of the Polish spa industry, subjected to an unprecedented impact of the environment including the action of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This article begins with a section containing a literature review. It briefly discusses the basics of the issues of dynamic capabilities and core competencies, including, to the necessary extent, the terminological grid on which this text is based, which, given the multiplicity of definitions and approaches presented in the literature, is essential. In addition, this part, and the results of the systematic literature review, are the foundation for the development of the empirical research process and discussion. The next section presents the theoretical model as a starting point for the empirical research (Figure 1). It includes the relationships between dynamic capabilities, core competencies, core products/services and end products/services adopted in the article. In this relationship, the main variable is dynamic capabilities as naturally related to change – both triggering it and conditioning its desired shape in the organization. The next chapter – *Methodology* – describes the research methodology used and the course of the empirical study, the results of which are included in the *Results* chapter. The empirical data was obtained using a case study analysis of a flagship Polish spa company – the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. located in Poland's largest lowland health resort. The most important information about it was presented in the *Company* chapter. This company was chosen deliberately due to its undisputed status as a leader in the spa industry and the fact that it is in the process of continuous intensive modification of its various elements. This is due to the impact of unprecedented

changes in the environment and the limited financial resources obtained from the implementation of state contracts, which this company cannot give up. The *Discussion* section, in which the author comments on the results obtained in the empirical study in the light of the contemporary body of science in this area, is placed in the next part. The substantive part of the article is crowned by *Conclusion*, which, among other things, contains suggestions as to the directions of further research in the research area undertaken.

2. Literature review

The concept of core competencies and the concept of dynamic capabilities are part of a broader trend in management usually referred to as the resource-based view, which, in simple terms, tells us to seek and build competitive advantages on resources that have concrete, very specific characteristics (Cegliński, 2021; Barney, 1991; Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). The fact that there has been keen interest in both concepts since their introduction into the economic literature is undeniable. It seems that an important factor supporting the persistence of this trend is the great practical value of both ideas, allowing them to be applied relatively easily in business practice. They provide excellent research instrumentation logically capturing complex management problems.

The scientific discourse on the subject of dynamic capabilities was started in 1990 by D.J. Teece, G. Pisano, and A. Shuen (Teece *et al.*, 1990; *cf.* Teece *et al.*, 1997). The authors aptly noted that it is not only the bundles of resources and their characteristics that constitute the competitive advantage of a particular enterprise but also the specific mechanisms by which these enterprises learn and accumulate new capabilities and forces that limit the pace and direction of the processes being implemented. Undoubtedly, this is currently one of the most popular research areas of modern management. Unfortunately, at the same time, this naturally results in a relatively large range of terminological inaccuracies. This testifies to the continuous development of the issue. Nevertheless, for this text, it has been assumed, according to C.E. Helfat *et al.* (2007) that dynamic capability is the capacity of an organization to purposefully create, extend, or modify its resource base. This definition is simple, logical, and captures well the essence of the issue at hand. Indeed, dynamic capabilities are inextricably linked to change. In turn, this one should be influenced by the company's decision-makers.

In practice, dynamic capabilities take a variety of forms and support organizations in different ways. Their strength and value, however, erode over time as with any enterprise resource. Dynamic capabilities, for analytical reasons for this article, have been decomposed as proposed by D.J. Teece into three categories – sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring (Teece, 2007). Such a procedure is particularly justified for empirical research involving the category undertaken. In practice, each of the indicated components, as well as the ‘Dynamic capabilities’ variable

itself, should be treated as a latent variable. What is important is what shapes each of these variables. ‘Sensing’ includes gaining knowledge of the organization’s environment, particularly emerging opportunities and threats, studying the needs of target customers, and anticipating the movements of competitors (*cf.* Wilhelm *et al.*, 2015). The ‘Seizing’ includes those activities that aim, in general, to take advantage of the totality of the circumstances in which the enterprise finds itself. We can include such activities as exploiting identified opportunities and countering detected threats. The last variable, *i.e.*, ‘Reconfiguring’, refers to the continuous modification of a company’s resources, both tangible and intangible (Feiler and Teece, 2014), including the company’s ordinary capabilities.

When, C.K. Prahalad and G. Hamel brought the concept of core competencies to the scientific discussion in 1990 (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990), they understood this category as the collective learning in the organization, especially how to coordinate diverse production skills and integrate multiple streams of technologies. Core competence is what an organization can perform perfectly in comparison with its competitors. Thus, it is legitimate to treat them as the core of the company’s activities, to which all other activities and processes are subordinated. When considering what (and whether at all) core competencies an organization has, it is necessary to identify what it does at all, and what the services or products it provides consist of. In this sense, it is correct to treat them as extremely strategically valuable intangible resources, strengthening with their use. This does not exclude smaller or larger modifications due to changes in the business environment, including the development of technology. Differently, the idea of core competencies can be put by assuming that they are a harmonized combination of many resources and skills that distinguish a company in the market. Core competencies take various forms, including know-how, reliable processes, and even particularly close relationships with customers and suppliers.

The effective adaptation of the enterprise to changes in the environment, in turn, requires developed dynamic capabilities. This, in turn, should aim to build and maintain the competitive advantages of the enterprise. Without entering into a discussion of the multiplicity of definitions of competitive advantages, and remaining in the light of the accepted conceptual logic, it should be assumed that competitive advantage always involves striving to create and maintain above-average business performance in the competitive market. At the heart of competitive advantage is the ability to build key competencies at a lower cost and faster than competitors to generate new and improved products and services. Thus, a truly sustainable source of competitive advantage is created by the ability of managers to consolidate technology and production skills across the entire corporation and translate them into competencies that will allow specific business units to adapt quickly to changing opportunities (Cegliński, 2016; Haffer, 2003).

3. Theoretical model

The starting point and at the same time the basis for the empirical study is the theoretical model representing the relationship between dynamic capabilities, core competencies, core products/services, and end products/services of company (Figure 1). It was assumed that dynamic capabilities – as closely related to changes in the company – affect the creation, changes and maintenance of core competencies. They, therefore, constitute the initial variable of the relationship. Core products/services and end products/services are a tangible reflection of intangible core competencies (Hamel and Heene, 1994; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). Core products/services are or can be used to create a whole range of end products/services. In other words, end products/services are based on core products/services. A classic example of core products already pointed out in the literature is the internal combustion engines at Honda or adhesives for the 3M company. These have been the basis for a huge portion of end products for many years. Naturally, organizations should focus and nurture their core competencies, and whenever possible, strive to protect and refresh them.

Returning to the theoretical model (Figure 1), it is assumed from the literature that dynamic capabilities positively influence the state of core competencies, which translates into their material reflections – core and end products/services.

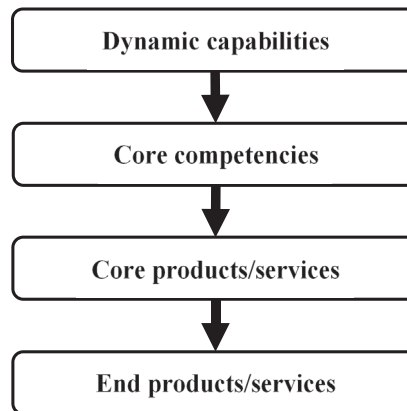


Figure 1.
Relationships
between dynamic
capabilities, core
competencies, core
products/services,
and end products/
services

Own elaboration.

4. Methodology

For empirical research, a case study method was used, through which the case of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. was examined. This entity is well suited to practically illustrate the relationships under consideration. It is a leader in the Polish spa market, struggling with unprecedented changes in the business environment, to which it must adapt. No longer just to maintain its leading position,

but to survive at all in the long run. Moreover, the company is classified as a large enterprise according to the EU classification (it has more than 250 employees; Commission Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 of June 17, 2014, declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market in application of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty).

The case study does not aim to empirically test the conceptual model and formulate generalized conclusions but provides a practical example for an in-depth understanding of how dynamic capabilities support the organization in realizing effective and sustainable strategic change. Qualitative research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Sutton and Callahan, 1987) seems more appropriate for understanding the subtle phenomenon of creating and renewing organizational resources and capabilities. Case studies have a wide range of research applications. Among other things, they can be used to describe, test theory, or create theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gersick, 1988; Pinfield, 1986; Kidder, 1982). On the other hand, the use of quantitative research, particularly surveys, makes it possible to demonstrate basic trends and relationships. The issue of strategic management is a complex phenomenon and is almost always individualized to the needs of a particular entity. Therefore, a specific procedure was adopted and followed to ensure the reliability of the results obtained using the case study.

In the fourth stage of the procedure, a series of interviews were conducted with executives from all key areas of the company under study, including the company's CEO. In particular, an interview with the latter allowed the development of a holistic view of the company, which was extremely valuable to the researcher. Thanks to his kindness, a full-day study visit was made possible, which included a visit to all business units of the company, including the production plant of the flagship mineral water 'Krystynka' and the historic headquarters of the board of directors. The interviews had to correspond to the three-stage procedure for identifying key competencies (Figure 3). Then (stage 5) the collected materials were analysed. Subsequently, the collected research data was reduced, and a preliminary case description was prepared and finally revised.

To identify the key competencies of the studied enterprise, the case study adopted a procedure consisting of three stages (see Figure 3). In the first step, a set of competencies of the studied enterprise was prepared. At this stage, care was taken to ensure that the competencies noted were not judged in any way, regardless of the source of the indication, which is, in particular, interviews with managers, the author's observation (in the course of the study visits) and an analysis of the enterprise, its competitors and their environment based on the materials provided and publicly available. Step 2 verified whether and which of the identified competencies are key competencies. A three-question-based test proposed by Prahalad and Hamel (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990) was used, with a slight adjustment:

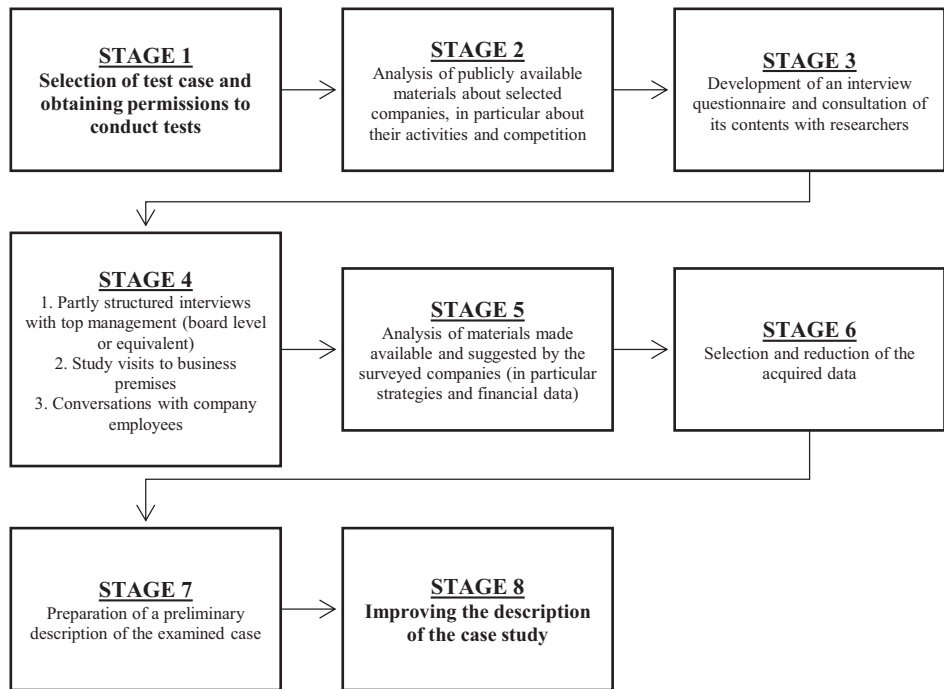


Figure 2.
Framework plan for
the course of the
study using the case
study method
Own elaboration.

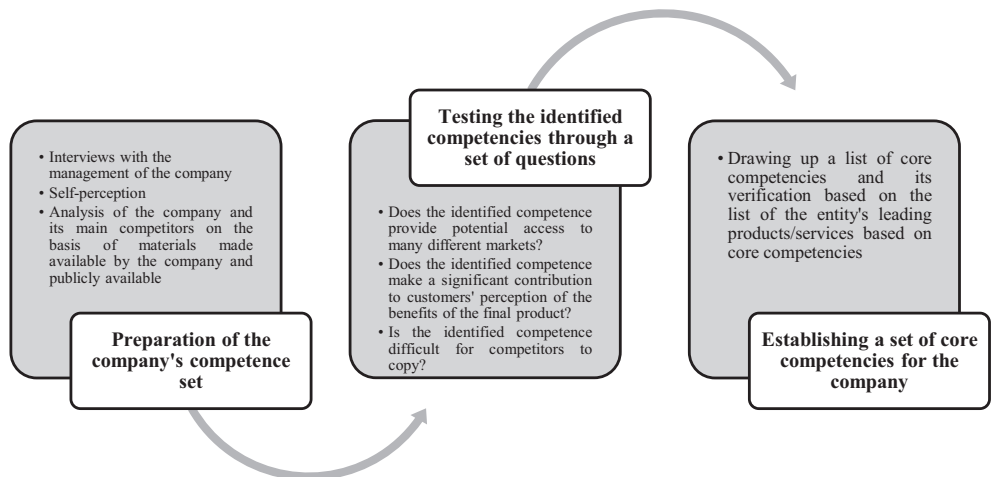


Figure 3. Procedure
for identifying the
company's core
competencies
Own elaboration.

- 1) Does the identified competency provide potential access to a wide variety of markets?;
- 2) Does the identified competence make a significant contribution to customers' perceived benefits of the end product?;
- 3) Is the identified competency difficult for competitors to copy?

Three positive responses allow for conjecture (not certainty) that the company's identified competence is a core competence. Thus, as such, it is important to the nature and competitiveness of the final products/services. In the last, third stage, a final list of key competencies was compiled, which was verified at the end by analysing their impact on the enterprise's final products/services. The list of key competencies prepared in this way was juxtaposed with the identified, categorized components of the dynamic capabilities of the enterprise under study. This made it possible to assess the relationship between the identified key competencies and dynamic capabilities.

5. Company

The Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. is an entity with a long and rich history, currently successfully struggling with unfavourable changes in the organization's environment. Ciechocinek (the locality in which the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. is situated) is the largest health resort in Poland included in the group of lowland spas (located at an altitude of no more than 200 meters above sea level). Since December 2012, the company has been operating as a joint stock company. At that time, the *kujawsko-pomorskie* province became its owner.

The activities of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. are divided into three main groups. The first – spa treatment – the leading profile of the company's activities. It is an integral part of the Polish health care system. The UC S.A. provides spa treatment services in four stationary sanatorium and hospital facilities: Spa Baths No. 1, Dr Markiewicz Spa Hospital No. III, Spa Hospital No. IV 'Dom Zdrojowy' and Spa Sanatorium No. VI 'Grażyna'. In addition to the above-mentioned facilities, the UC S.A. has a health resort outpatient clinic, which provides outpatient treatment to patients both with referrals from the National Health Fund and those choosing private treatment. The activities of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. include treatment and rehabilitation of children and adults, in particular in the following areas: 1) musculoskeletal system, 2) peripheral and central nervous system, 3) circulatory system, 4) upper respiratory system, 5) metabolic diseases. Currently, the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. faces problems requiring often radical strategic decisions. The company is forced to provide services on behalf of the National Health Fund at rates regulated at a low level. Despite attempts to raise them, they are barely enough to cover the actual cost of a patient's stay. The company defends itself from realizing losses on publicly funded stays, and as a result, investments are being made to develop

new sources of revenue. Among other things, the expansion of the base dedicated to customers who pay for their stays with their own funds.

The second part of the UC S.A.'s business is production activities carried out by the company's Spa Production Plants, *i.e.*, the salt brewing plant, the spa mining plant, and the mineral water bottling plant. The third branch of the company's activities is the management of real estate owned by the company. However, this one should be considered a side business, although it generates a small amount of revenue.

6. Results

The sources of the competitive advantage of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. should be seen in both the core competencies and organizational capabilities that make up the dynamic capabilities. Of course, such specific conditions as favourable geographical location cannot be overlooked, but this factor is static, not dynamic. Based on the research, the following organizational capabilities comprising the UC S.A.'s dynamic capabilities were identified:

- 1) The capability to perfectly develop procedures and maintain them without negatively affecting the company's organizational culture and flexibility ('seizing'/ 'reconfiguring');
- 2) The capability to effectively seize opportunities with limited financial resources ('seizing').

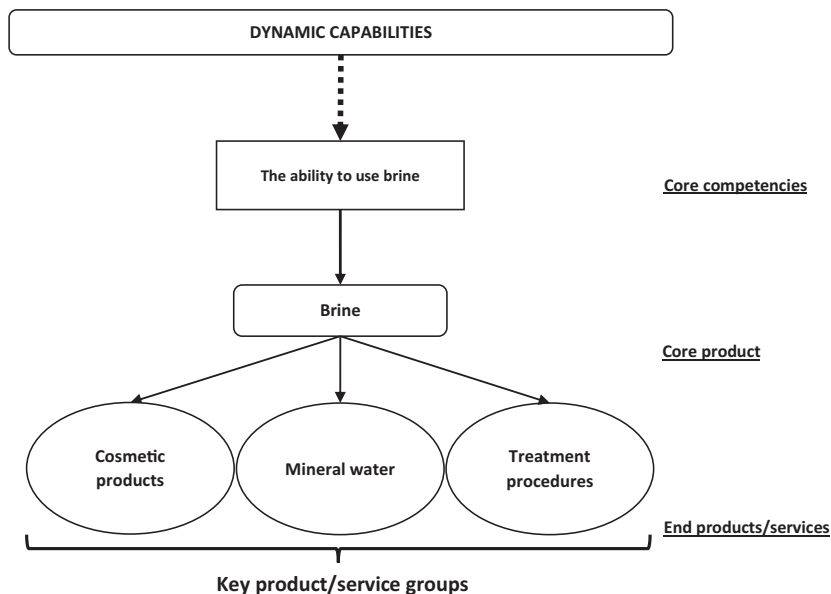


Figure 4.
Relationships
between dynamic
capabilities, core
competencies,
key products/
services, and end
products/services
of the Uzdrowisko
Ciechocinek S.A.
Own elaboration.

Concerning the first dynamic capability, the most frequently identified problems were the constant need for the enterprise to operate in an extremely turbulent environment. While it is now accepted that turbulence is an immanent feature of an organization's environment, in the case of the company under study it takes on special significance. Suffice it to point out that the spa industry was hit by some of the most severe consequences of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of a decree of the Council of Ministers, the operation of spas in Poland was suspended from October 24, 2020, until further notice (the ban was lifted as of March 11, 2021). This meant that the UC S.A. could not provide services that were part of their core business, both publicly financed and privately funded spas. In addition, this was also accompanied by a decline in revenue from products and accompanying services purchased by patients. The lost revenues were never fully compensated by public funds.

In the light of the situations outlined above, the company has developed a series of processes and a specific organizational culture conducive to maintaining the flexibility that is unique in the industry. Virtually the entire workforce, not just the management, is aware of and understands the specifics of the conditions in which the company finds itself. The high transparency of the company's operations and the surprisingly informal communication at all organizational levels ought to be highlighted as well. Regular quantitative surveys conducted at the company also indicate a growing understanding of the strategy, the motives behind key organization-wide decisions, increased trust in the management and immediate superiors, and consequently increased job satisfaction.

Dynamic capability characterized as the capability to perfectly develop procedures and maintain them without negatively affecting the company's organizational culture and flexibility (was categorized as 'seizing' and 'reconfiguring' as proposed by D.J. Teece (Teece, 2007).

Another identified general problem of a strategic nature is the need for the company to operate almost constantly on the brink of financial profitability. This state of affairs should be evaluated differently from the vast majority of enterprises. After all, it should not be forgotten that the company is owned by the *kujawsko-pomorskie* province and the fact that, due to the specifics of its operations, it is forced to fulfil contracts concluded with the National Health Fund (especially for sanatorium stays). Furthermore, the company is obliged to maintain unprofitable historic buildings, including their renovation, *e.g.*, the graduation towers, which are a landmark of the Ciechocinek health resort, recognizable probably all over Poland. Despite this, as pointed out by respondents and confirmed by other research materials collected, the company has developed its own ways of dealing with this fact. The key one, in turn, is the ability to perfectly read market changes and, thanks to this, take advantage of emerging opportunities. This includes not only expanding the accommodation base and the offer for private visitors but also

implementing small innovations into the operation of the enterprise. Based on the above, dynamic capabilities were established, which were called the capabilities to recognize and effectively seize opportunities with limited financial resources. They were categorized as ‘sensing’ and ‘seizing’.

The analysis indicates that the core competency of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. is the ability to use brine, while its core product is brine. Although it does not directly affect the entire spectrum of the company’s activities, it is the greatest asset of the entire resort, which the company has mastered to perfection. In fact, without brine, the area of the city of Ciechocinek would lose the value of the spa, and the business model of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. would require major changes. Brine is used for therapeutic treatments. It is used to produce food-grade salt, sludge and medicinal lye sold by the company. It is also used to produce cosmetics signed with the company brand. The company extracts and processes the brine on its own using developed methods, which in principle can be successfully described as traditional. Moreover, the fate of the main tourist attractions managed by the company, in particular the Ciechocinek graduation towers, also depends on the proper use of brine. Figure 4 lists three main groups of end products/services – cosmetics, mineral water and treatment procedures. It is not necessary to detail this list, the applications of the brine are many, which is perfectly fine for the company’s management to commission further research, conceptual or production work.

7. Discussion

The identified dynamic capabilities support the continuous modification of the company’s core competency, which is the ability to use brine. It is the basis for the company’s growth strategy, which has been implemented since 2014. The company has been meticulously implementing a plan to increase the number of full-pay patients using the services it offers (Cegliński and Zajączkowski, 2018). In the long term, this is expected to make the company independent of public funds, mostly from the National Health Fund. In addition, the company is investing in the production of cosmetics and highly mineralized bottled water ‘Krystynka’. Cosmetics, mineral water, and leading treatments are based on brine processing procedures developed by the company.

Thanks to the identified dynamic capabilities, more than one problem situation was resolved. One of the major crises faced by the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. involved the detection of *cola* bacteria in a batch of ‘Krystynka’ water during a routine food inspection. These samples were taken at the wholesaler, while no samples were taken from the production plant before the first press release on the subject was published. An immediate decision was made to stop production and a sanitary-epidemiological inspection was launched. After a thorough inspection of the production facility, including a sampling of the stored water, no *cola* bacteria

were found. It can be said with almost 100% certainty that the contamination had already occurred outside the production facility, through no fault of the UC S.A. This blameless situation threatened a massive image crisis that would have affected the 'Krystynka' water brand, which had been built almost from scratch. According to information obtained by the board at the time, the material was already being prepared for broadcast on the 'Teleexpress' television program, as well as several newspaper articles, including in 'Gazeta Wyborcza'. A brief mention of the issue appeared in the local 'Gazeta Pomorska'. The company's authorities mobilized all available means to alleviate and prevent the publication of information about water contamination. What must be emphasized is that the journalist knew about the situation faster than the management. The situation lasted for a week. Allowing the publication of information about water contamination that was untrue, as it later turned out, carried a high risk of losing the image and clientele acquired so far. A situation identical to the one faced by Marwit, a juice producer located close to Toruń, was feared. On March 2, 2007, the State Sanitary Inspectorate detected *Yersinia Enterocolitica* bacteria in carrot juice. Immediately after their identification, it was decided to withdraw the products from the market and stop production to detect the source of the contamination. At the time, Marwit already had, among other things, a HACCP system in place, as well as an in-house laboratory to test the raw material supplied for juice production. The sanitary inspection carried out did not detect the presence of bacteria at the production site, and the source of the contamination was not identified. Nevertheless, it was decided to increase the scope of internal inspection and a statement to that effect was issued. Despite the manufacturer's lack of culpability, the company's image was severely affected.

Each death of a sanatorium patient is treated by the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. as a potential emergency. So far, no death other than natural death has been recorded due to the advanced age of patients. Injuries of various kinds during the provision of medical services are treated similarly. As an example, point to an ongoing civil lawsuit for damages with a bather who burned his heel in a hot tub. He argues that he was not properly informed by the staff of the possibility of a burn (this occurred through contact between his foot and the nozzle). A similar situation occurred when one bather slipped while leaving the tub. The Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. provides all the necessary safeguards, *i.e.*, steps, a non-slip mat, and a handrail, and informs about the slippery floor. Despite the evident lack of fault in this case, it was decided to include an additional clause in the treatment card informing about the possibility of slipping in offices where 'wet treatments' are given. In addition to the aforementioned situations, we can also point to the bursting of the 'Grzybek' fountain, a symbol of Ciechocinek under the ownership of the UC S.A., as well as the current increase in electricity prices.

Returning to the research question posed in the introduction to this article – *Do dynamic capabilities positively affect core competencies in an enterprise subjected*

to a strong negative impact of its environment? – in the light of the collected data and its analysis, it should be stated that the indicated relationship has been confirmed. The identified dynamic capabilities positively affect core competency allowing it to maintain its level and even strengthen it. They provide the capability to create and change the resource base of the Uzdrowisko Ciechocinek S.A. in conditions of turbulent changes and uncertainty in the business environment, which, despite the problems, allows the company to maintain its competitive position in the spa industry.

8. Conclusions

Based on the survey results obtained, it is reasonable to conclude a positive relationship between dynamic capabilities and core competencies. Their influence is also evident in the more specific categories, *i.e.*, core products/services and end products/services. The dynamic capabilities developed by the company allow the continuous and intentional adaptation of core competency to the constant changes in the business environment, consequently also the necessary modifications of core products/services and end products/services. Undeniably, there is a continuous increase in the complexity of the organization's environment and an accelerating pace of change. Economic reality provides more and more new evidence confirming these trends, suffice it to mention sudden technological changes, pandemics (*e.g.*, Covid-19), or armed conflicts drastically changing the business environment. These changes are extremely difficult to forecast and unpredictable. Companies, therefore, need to develop dynamic capabilities that allow them to operate effectively. The dependent core competencies then need to be studied and refreshed as needed. The categories, while in need of refreshing, are nonetheless relatively durable and difficult for competitors to copy, and apply to many aspects of a company's operations.

Further research should be directed toward testing the relationships between dynamic capabilities and core competencies present in the literature. It is desirable to further develop the research methodology used to study dynamic capabilities, core competencies, as well as the relationship between these two economic categories. On the one hand, case studies of companies are an added value to management science. On the other hand, however, there is a need for the results of reliable quantitative research having as its subject the relationship of dynamic capabilities with core competency, core products/services and end products/services. The research should be directed at companies in different industries and with different characteristics, including those relating to their most basic parameters. After all, it should be borne in mind that enterprises, as extremely complex economic units, differ significantly from each other, which can cause unexpected changes in the obtained results of empirical studies giving a completely different picture of reality than expected.

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