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Benchmarking in the process of creating a culture of innovation in hotel companies¹

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Abstract: The literature very rarely touches upon the issue related to the influence of benchmarking in shaping a culture of innovation in companies. Culture is understood as the tendency to pro-innovative activities and promoting favourable entrepreneurial and creative attitudes. The effect of building a culture of innovation includes the constant sharing of knowledge and the ability to see and then use the company's market opportunities. Therefore, this article attempts to identify those activities and behaviours which would be a testimony of a broad culture of innovation and, at the same time, the result of the application of benchmarking in the hotels researched.

Keywords: benchmarking, hotel company, a culture of innovation, innovation, tourism.

JEL codes: D23, L83, L84, M14, O31, Z32.

Introduction

The source and the consequence of any changes accompanying the socio-economic development include changing behaviour and the ways of organizing working processes. These two factors are, to a large extent, crucial to the efficiency and competitiveness of businesses, and are also examples of an organizational culture focused on the continuous tracking of changes and the permanent following of trends. The managers of such organizations are researchers and explorers rather than controllers and supervisors. They are characterized by their ability to encourage openness to new ideas with their co-workers, creativity in action, readiness for open interpersonal cooperation, as well as responsibility for the decisions taken.

These features and actions also constitute the greatest potential for the method of management called benchmarking, which emphasises knowledge

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sharing, transfer of best practices, thus creating a tangible contribution to the development of learning organizations (Bhutta & Huq, 1999). Benchmarking – understood as the implementation of the best solutions preceded by self-diagnosis, is one of the pillars of the learning organisation (Micyńska-Kowalska, 2005) – because it precedes the phase of inventing new solutions (Kowalczyk, 2003). Benchmarking is primarily a process that tends to look at other companies to learn both from their mistakes and successes, thus shaping the habit of constant curiosity and alertness in the employees. Companies which apply benchmarking are distinguished by their changing ‘mindset,’ which consists of a constant search of encouragement to create new values and organizational solutions. This, in turn, leads to the development and shaping of the culture of innovation in companies whose greatest strength are their workers.

Hospitality is the area and industry where the human factor and its attitude play a special role, and pro-innovation activities translate into increased interest in the proposed offer. The legitimacy of shaping and building a culture of innovation in this industry stems from globalization, the mass use of the internet, thanks to which opinions of the hotel services provided are global in scope, as well as high quality requirements resulting from customer experience in using hotel services.

These considerations led us to formulate a research problem expressed by the following question: how does implementation of benchmarking affect culture of innovation in hotel companies? Hence, the main purpose of the study is to analyse innovative attitudes and behaviours in the hotels surveyed, which resulted from the implementation of benchmarking. Achieving the set objective required answering the following research questions:

- Which hotel activities or behaviour patterns connected with benchmarking facilitate culture of innovation?
- Does “benchmarking knowledge” help in the development of innovative culture in hotels?
- Is the development of innovative culture in hotels affected by their belonging to a hotel chain or the category of the facilities?

Reflections on the empirical research are preceded by a theoretical introduction, emphasizing the relationship of benchmarking with innovation, and, in particular, the nature and determinants of a culture of innovation. In the following part of the article a method of gathering and processing of data is described. The number and structure of investigated hotels is determined. The results of the studies are presented, showing innovative attitudes and behaviour connected with benchmarking implementation.

1. A culture of innovation and the process of benchmarking – ascertainment of interrelationships

The issue of innovation fits with one of the main strands of research into the factors shaping competitiveness (Nowacki, 2010), and its definition primarily accents a novelty item, as expressed in taking specific actions for the first time, or their perception as being new and different from the existing solutions (Damanpour, 1991; Farazmand, 2004; Rogers, 1962; Polding, 2016). The trend of this concept also fits into the concept of innovation proposed by P. Niedzielski and W. Janasz. The former economist equates innovation with a permanent search for new combinations of production factors in order to produce new added value in the company (Niedzielski & Rychlik, 2006). Innovativeness can be defined as the ability to produce something original. It is also described as a process which directs employees to create new, useful and comprehensible outcomes (Eskiler, Ekici, Soyer, & Sari, 2016). Thus, innovation is one of the most important features of the organization. It helps to maintain the long-term viability and efficiency of the company which functions in a competitive environment (Nowacki & Staniewski, 2012; Talke, Solomo, & Kock, 2011), enabling the survival and a maintenance of the competitive edge of both small and large companies (Kaufmann & Tödting, 2002).

Innovation must be continuously implemented by all firms as they provide a basis for company competitiveness (see: Kowalska-Roszyk, 2007). Basic competitive strategies, such as cost leadership and quality leadership, have their sources in process and product innovation. The winners among companies implementing innovation are those firms that bring in innovation that meets customer needs and satisfies their desires to a greater degree, and at the same time is better adjusted to company resources and capabilities (PierścioneK, 2003). Given high level of competitiveness in tourism, it is necessary to monitor changes in demand, and adjust tourism offers continuously. It means that new or substantially changed products/services and processes need to be developed. Innovation in tourism is fundamentally important for company competitiveness (Paget, Dimanche & Mounet, 2010).

The interpretation of innovation is dominated by two approaches, namely the recognition of innovation as a result or process. In terms of the former approach, innovation is a change in production consequently leading to new products. In terms of the latter, innovation is all the processes of creative thinking aimed at the application and use of the improved solutions in organization and management, technology, social and political life, etc. (Huczek, 2011). Ochojski writes that 'the process of innovation – in contrast to Schumpeter's concept – is non-linear, but is the result of interaction and learning by trial and error and accumulation of specific and interdisciplinary knowledge (Ochojski, 2006). This is the way of learning and gathering infor-

mation and, above all, the nature of the process of the described actions is identical with the method of benchmarking. According to Kamande, benchmarking is a systematic and continuous process of exploration, measurement and implementation of best practices. In benchmarking the most important business processes in the organization are compared with the processes of the world leaders with the intention of obtaining information in order to use or adapt the best solution. This is to allow for the improvement of performance of the organization in terms of its products, services and processes to the level obtained by the model organizations (Kamande, 1997). Benchmarking can play a major role in identifying best practices, structures and procedures with respect to innovation (Radnor & Robinson, 2000). Knowledge collected and developed within the organization and gained from the market in the process of benchmarking facilitates the creation and implementation of innovation. In turn the reproducibility and systematic analysis of benchmarking foster a culture of innovation.

A culture of innovation comprises a plurality of artefacts. These include primarily (Huczek, 2011):

- the level of education and general engineering, economic, humanistic and social knowledge of all the employees (Roffeei, Kamarulzman, & Yusop, 2016),
- effective communication systems in the organization,
- ambitions and competitive atmosphere,
- incentive systems.

It seems completely reasonable to supplement this list with another factor, that is the permanent adaptation of management methods in the structure of the company, which in their methodological assumption allow to not only adapt quickly to the changes and needs of the contemporary market but cultivate new ways of thinking, the ability to rapidly introduce changes and creative evolution. Also, established contacts with the organisations which act as patterns (benchmarks) for the company concerned are important in shaping and building the culture of innovation of the company. This focus on the outside, on the market leaders, mobilizes and motivates employees but also forces them to focus on what is new and original.

Importantly two types of intangible assets, namely: knowledge, information and experience and the ability to learn quickly play a key role in both the benchmarking analysis and in the building of a culture of innovation of a company. The importance of these elements for innovation is mentioned by Ferraresi, Quandt, dos Santos and Frega, who associate innovation with the process of transforming knowledge into the value of a new or perfected solution (Ferraresi, Quandt, dos Santos, & Frega, 2012). On the other hand benchmarking as a method aspires to search patterns and triggers fast learning from others and creating new standards of benefits (Garvin, 1993; Simatupang & Sridharan, 2004). To paraphrase Batorski, it can be said that the company's advanced culture of innovation creates such conditions that learning is not only tolerated

but actually required (Batorski, 1998). Learning from the best, bench learning, is a perfect prelude to the construction of a culture of innovation, which is precisely the company's most valuable and intangible asset.

Finally, in the development of a culture of innovation, it is important to recognize the determinants of innovation based on the methodology of benchmarking in service companies such as hotels (vide Gierczak, 2014). The main one is the people, the workers, whose skills, commitment and openness to change facilitate the implementation of novelty within the organization. In view of the economic performance and the quality of hotel services, it is worth noting that the specificity of the hotel industry has to ensure that the innovative developed are not just the result of daily activities and duties. K. Gadomska proposes to capture innovation at every stage of human resources (Gadomska-Lila, 2011). By that very fact an organization in the phase of recruitment and selection should seek people who are creative and open to change and willing to accept motivational reward and possess pro-innovative attitudes.

2. Methodology

Location is one of the most important factors influencing innovativeness and economic performance of hotels. Innovations that are largely the result of benchmarking are, in fact, spatial phenomena taking place in geographically limited areas with a concentration of economic activity (Sorensen, 2007). The result of the location in large cities, under conditions of increased competitiveness, includes better utilization of human resources, introduction of modern technologies, marketing resources and the improvement of internal resources (Golebski & Majewska, 2015). Therefore, hotels located in Poznań were selected for the research. Poznan is a city where a competitive hotel market is particularly evident. That is proven by the rate of capacity utilization in hotels which amounts to slightly more than 50%. In those conditions the competitive struggle in Poznań hotel market is particularly fierce. Despite that between 1995–2012 the number of hotels increased from 15 to 67 and the number of beds rose from 3,263 to 5,616 in Poznan (Wojdacki, 2014).

12 hotels, which amount to 18% of all the existing hotels in Poznan, were selected for the study⁴. It is worth mentioning that these were high category hotels (3, 4 and 5-star), amongst which seven are the highest-star i.e. 4 and 5-star hotels (41% of such facilities in the city), and five are 3-star hotels (18,5% of all facilities). This structure was determined in a targeted manner because the hotel category was considered a differentiating factor in the use of benchmarking. Not without significance was the fact that benchmarking is used mainly by

⁴The study was conducted in 2016.

higher category hotels.⁵ Similar circumstances were taken into consideration in the choice of hotels on the basis of their belonging (or not) to hotel chains – and in this case the choice was deliberate. Half of the selected hotels belong to hotel chains, whilst the other half are managed by individual private owners.

Survey forms completed by the hotel directors acted as a research tool. In all cases the forms were filled out in the presence of the researcher. This approach allowed the respondents to have a clear understanding of the questions and enabled the researcher to instantly rephrase the questions if the terminology used in the form was not fully understood by the respondent. Each interview took about an hour to complete. Apart from the demographics which characterised the people surveyed, the questions were related to the use of benchmarking, taking all aspects of the method into account. The questions concerned the reasons for using benchmarking, items compared in the benchmarking process, areas of application, implementation of the method used, and the flow of information relating to the application of best practices. Questions were asked about formal and informal benchmarking, application of functional benchmarking for comparing business functions, and the benefits of using this method. It enabled to obtain an answer to the research question whether benchmarking facilitated the development of the culture of innovation in hotels.

All surveys were returned and all the surveyed directors confirmed the use of benchmarking⁶ in their hotels.

3. Results of the research

Moving on to the analysis of the data, it is worth noting that benchmarking is used in all the hotels surveyed. The mere fact of a decision on the use of benchmarking is a manifestation of innovative activities and reflects the desire to continuously increase knowledge, change radically based on the latest information, and observe competitors. It is also consistent with the classical behaviour with regard to innovation which is proposed by J. Schumpeter, as in this case, innovation refers to the introduction of a new method of production or the introduction of a new organizational management style (Schumpeter, 1991). One of the American scientists, J. Welch,⁷ even believes that learning

⁵ This has been confirmed by studies conducted in hotels for some years now by the author of this paper. It could well be a feature of hotels in Poland; nevertheless it is significant for the analysis.

⁶ All the hotel directors confirming the use of benchmarking referred to the definition of the method which was given by the authors of the survey e.i.: 'benchmarking is the company's search for the model, the best, existing practice solutions which lead to a competitive advantage in relation to specific competitors.' That was designed to exclude differences in the interpretation of the concept and standardization of test results..

⁷ American scientist and businessman.

from others is 'a sign of honor' and it is in the interest of everyone to be a keen observer of the actions of others (Burnewicz, 2003). Using the best experience of others we accelerate our own progress and development, going to a higher level, without losing time in gradual change and retraining. The directors of 6 out of 12 hotels, who give the possibility of introducing new technological solutions as the reasons for their interest in benchmarking, seem to agree with this view. A representative of one of the five-star hotels stated that the reason for implementation of benchmarking in the hotel was "operational innovation based on best practice", which presumably referred to innovation in day-to-day functioning of the company. Noteworthy is the fact that only the chain hotels became interested in that issue which, no doubt, is one of the reasons for achieving their competitive edge in the market. The non-chain hotels, however, could not see such an opportunity at all.

Significant differences are apparent in the frequency with which the researched hotels use benchmarking. The vast majority of the higher standard hotels (5 out of 7) use the method systematically, whilst 3-star hotels use benchmarking only when it is necessary. Once again attention is drawn to the approach of the application of this method in the chain hotels, because almost all of them use benchmarking systematically. The lack of regularity in the application of the method and shaped test procedures which are related to it, significantly reduce the competitive advantage of the 3-star hotels as well as the ones popular amongst single people. That case actually confirms the previous research conducted in the hospitality industry in other countries as it showed that managers of small and lower category hotels rarely apply benchmarking in relation to domestic and foreign competitors, not realizing that this is the way to improve the company (Milohnic & Cerovic, 2007). A 'proverbial' lower price of services offered is no longer a sufficient argument to convince customers to choose lower standard hotels.

In addition, benchmarking rejects the focus on short-term business results. This method appears as part of the wider strategy of the organization, not only as an ad hoc activity or a fad in management. It is also difficult to talk about a culture of innovation in the company when any actions taken in this direction are random and ad hoc. Benchmarking is a process just like building a culture of innovation. And finally, through its methodology, benchmarking in some way encourages constant search, care and dissemination of innovative attitudes and behaviour even in the search of patterns and in discovering the causes of success in others.

The directors' responses to the question concerning the areas of benchmarking application in their hotels provide interesting information. It is shown in Table 1. Notably, there was a large variation in responses (probably due to the fact that respondents had as many as 13 response options to choose from), but only three hotels used benchmarking to measure innovation. These were two 3-star and one 4-star hotels, classed as small and medium size enterprises and

functioning on the market 15 years or longer. More detailed information came from further analysis, where specific types of innovation were matched not only with the area of benchmarking application but also with the items compared (products, services, processes, etc), types of benchmarking, and effects of actions identified by the directors (Table 1).

As shown in the research, benchmarking in an organisation is most commonly used in the development of the product offer. It serves, above all, as implementation of the strategy for product imitation,⁸ and its objective is also a reduction in the cost of innovation and shortening the time of its implementation. Both the industry and the level of the company's development which is

Table 1. Types of innovation in relation to “benchmarking activity” in the studied hotels

Type of innovation	Area of benchmarking application	Items compared	Type of benchmarking applied	Effects and benefits of benchmarking application
Product innovation	Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Products of other firms – Services and service quality 	Product benchmarking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Quality improvement – Greater customer satisfaction – Gaining competitive advantage – Introduction of new services to the market
Marketing innovation	Sales and marketing	Promotional and advertising activities	Marketing benchmarking	
Process innovation	Work processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Organization of customer service – Methods of building customer relationships – Management methods 	Process benchmarking (processes connected with sales and customer service)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Streamlining of processes – Quick service – Time reduction in offering services
Organizational innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Human resource management – Management 	Company structure elements (divisions, offices, sections)	Organizational benchmarking	Changes in the approach to the management style

⁸ It is estimated that imitation absorbs about 65% of the cost of a pioneer's product innovation, and the average time of its introduction to the market accounts for only 70% of the time needed for the development of pioneering innovation.

the subject of comparative analyses determines, to a large extent, the possibility of using benchmarking in the development of innovative solutions. In this case, neither the industry nor the type of company is characterized by a significant degree of innovation. However, it cannot be excluded that the hotel directors did not consider innovative actions whilst using benchmarking in other areas.

Networking with other businesses and market leaders outside the industry is another element of the strengthening of the process of creating a culture of innovation. Such bold moves often result in new ideas and solutions which are difficult to find in the company's 'own backyard', however they require the ability to adapt new solutions and behaviour to the reality of the company. In the hotels researched, the search for a partner for benchmarking was only limited to hotels, that is competitive companies in the same industry.

Identification of barriers and challenges which had emerged whilst implementing benchmarking was the last issue which was analysed. These are presented in Table 2. Among the most important inhibitions are psychological barriers, such as the fear of competition or suspicion of bad intentions on the part of the partners. Also a serious problem is seen in inadequate skills of employees, raising a concern that the workforce lack the necessary knowledge and experience.

Table 2. Barriers and constraints in implementing benchmarking in the hotels surveyed

Type of barrier, challenge	Number of responses
Market barrier – fear of competition	7
The barrier associated with lack of knowledge	5
Fear of unfair intentions of potential partners	4
Lack of experience	3
Fear of high costs	1
Fear of novelty, innovation	3
Others, what?	
– The cost of training leaders	1
– The time necessary for the teams to implement processes	1
– No restrictions	1

The sum does not have equal 100%, as it could indicate any number of variants of answers.

Beside the most commonly indicated challenges and barriers which accompany the implementation of the method in the company structure (Gierczak, 2012, 2015), it is worrying that the very attempt to implement benchmarking raises serious concern in 3 out of 12 surveyed hotels. The method perceived as a novelty combined with the lack of knowledge about it, could pose a seri-

ous mental barrier among employees, thereby inhibiting openness to changes in the company. Only active benchmarking and continuous experimentation (Popławski, 2007) shape innovation attitudes and are a source of success.

Conclusions

The analysis of the development of a culture of innovation in the company seems entirely justified in today's increasingly open and integrated world economy and at such a high rate of competitiveness. Benchmarking as the method of management which is characterized by forward-looking thinking and the promotion of creative behaviour is worth mentioning amongst many determinants creating a culture of innovation. Benchmarking as well as a culture of innovation, also create one of the most sustainable competitive advantages and enable rapid progress. In short benchmarking today is an essential business skill, supporting the pursuit of quality excellence which is based on innovation and the rapid trends following on from this.

The results of studies on the development of a culture of innovation as a result of benchmarking in the hotels surveyed draw a picture of the organization's culture which includes some components of a culture of innovation, but they are limited. Firstly, most of the managers use informal benchmarking (7 hotels). It is known that from the theoretical- methodological nature, informal benchmarking is very simplified and thus criticized both by professionals as well as people who perceive it as espionage and even theft of the ideas of others. The lack of formal procedures makes it impossible to cooperate openly and honestly during a benchmarking analysis and considerably restricts access to confidential and valuable information which characterizes the area of innovation and R&D.

Secondly, the occasional benchmarking practice of an ephemeral character only temporarily stimulates alertness in employees and the enhancement of their intellectual engagement, thereby preventing their continuous learning and knowledge sharing.

Finally, noteworthy is the fact that the building of innovative culture is facilitated by membership in a hotel chain where benchmarking is systematically practiced. The same regularity could be observed in higher category hotels (4 and 5-star).

It should be stated that the lack of measures aimed at creating new solutions does not necessarily mean that the organization is unable to create a culture of innovation. The mere fact of the implementation of the method, apart from its correctness, enriches the corporate culture which, if it orientated to the past, is directed towards a culture of innovation. Nevertheless hotel managers should have the ability to perceive any form of innovation and create a climate conducive to innovation.

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