Recent Developments in the Global Business Environment[1]

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Abstract

This paper investigates recent trends and developments in almost 200 businesses located worldwide, mainly in the fields of strategic management and corporate performance using a qualitative research method. The research involves assembling key academic and other literature on the given subject as well as semi-structured interviews with managers in "Western" and Asian companies located all over the world to identify current business trends. Six hypotheses are formulated and statistically tested. The reliability is studied through Cronbach's α. Furthermore, the paper describes selected business trends in detail, including quotes from managers. It concludes by noting the limitations of the study and suggesting areas for further research.

Keywords: *trend, development, strategy, performance, management*

JEL Classification: M21

Introduction

Recent developments in businesses all over the world might be seen from different perspectives where globalisation plays a major role. International markets have been evolving so fast that companies willing to succeed in this highly--competitive world are often required to be aware of the major trends in international business in order to be able to satisfy all their stakeholders' and shareholders' needs.

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"Organisations are constantly confronted with intensive competition, turbulence and change, all of which pose new types of complex challenges, including innovation pressure, high levels of uncertainty, geographic diffusion, networking, self-managing employees, digitalization, shorter strategic lifecycles and sky-diving communications costs (Poulfelt and Mønsted, 2007; Hamel, 2007)," Friis, Holmgren and Eskildsen (2016) note. Therefore, being able to forecast changes and trends in international business environment plays a key role in corporate decision making.

Every corporation is exposed to a global economic environment which has been influenced by globalisation nowadays. Nevertheless, the geographical location of a firm, historical background of a country/region as well as an enterprise culture have played significant roles in developments taking place in the business environment. As Blahová, Pálka and Haghirian (2017, p. 251) point out "traditional "Western" (U.S. and European) and Asian management styles, with their differences in business values, objectives and practices, have now become interconnected, and the former barriers between nations have melted. Globalisation has increased interdependency among countries, however, this is only one of many drivers in international global strategy development".

Identification of changes influencing the current world provides an undisputable advantage to managers as well as strategy-makers to react on them in time. Capturing early signals of change allows business leaders to respond proactively.

Many scientists agree (e.g. Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2009) that analysing and understanding international business trends in time have gained far more importance in the current era. McKinsey and Co. (2016) found in their global trends survey of 1,316 executives representing the full range of regions, industries, company sizes, functional specialties, and tenures that the new powerful forces that influence the global environment are: growth shifts, acceleration of disruption and new societal deals. The global growth shifts are influenced mainly by (McKinsey and Co., 2016, p. 2) "globalisation of digital products and services which have been surging, new growth dynamics, with the mental model of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries given way to a regional emphasis on ICASA (India, China, Africa, and Southeastern Asia)." Industry disruptions involve particularly digitalization and a machine learning. New societal deal represents undertaking the economic experiments necessary to accelerate growth in many countries which struggle to sustain their economic progress.

To sum up, confronting the dynamics of recent changes in current turbulent world may seem to be a challenge for a vast number of business leaders, however, understanding them and reacting on them swiftly shall result in a rise of the economic profit and global competitiveness. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is

to explore and empirically test current trends in the global business environment identified during semi-structured interviews in 196 companies located all over the world. The following parts provide a summary of a theoretical background on the topic of business trends in the global business environment, a formulation of hypotheses, a characterization and a description of the methodology, a discussion and a summary of main findings including an identification of limitations of the study and a suggestion of areas for further research.

1. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

The subject of ongoing developments in the global business environment, particularly changes in management, leadership, strategic focus and performance management and measurement has become important to both academics and practitioners, which is evident from various studies (Bititci et al., 2012; Blahová, Pálka and Zelený, 2014; Blahová, Haghirian and Pálka, 2015; Bourne, Kennerley and Franco-Santos, 2005; Bourne et al., 2013; Carr, 2005; Franco-Santos et al., 2007; Franco-Santos, Lucianetti and Bourne, 2012; Kase, Slocum and Zhang, 2011; King and Zhang, 2010; Marr, 2009; Marr, 2012; Neely, 2007; Yoshida and Ito, 2006; and others).

Evidently, the contemporary business environment has become highly turbulent (Harrington, Boyson and Corsi, 2011), necessitating facing many changes that are structural rather than temporary. Zelený (2012, p. 49) notes that "advanced and mature societies are undergoing a fundamental transformation of their economic, political, technological and social lives. Developing countries are rapidly catching on and accelerating their participation in the transformation which is equally rapidly becoming global."

Edgeman (2015, p. 326) considers a "strategic and tactical alignment of four concepts of revival, survival, striving and thriving as to be consistent with common enterprise goals of being sustainable, excellent across a number of performance domains, resilient to the impact of some negative changes in its competitive and operational landscape, and robust to the impact of other negative factors".

Current changes and trends in business and management systems have been researched by many academics and practitioners so far. Blahová, Pálka and Haghirian (2017, p. 253) notes that "Garry B. Bruton and Chung-Ming Lau (2008) summarized existing management research on Asia. A total of 306 articles from ten journals that addressed Asian management were identified during the ten-year period from 1996 to 2005. The findings highlighted that Asian management research not only builds on the understanding of Asia, but also makes a critical contribution to the broad domain of management studies. Prior reviews,

as Bruton and Lau (2008) mention, have typically focused on the limited contributions in the existing Asian literature."

Management practices across firms and countries ("Western" and Asian) were also analysed by Bloom et al. (2012). For a period of ten years, the authors were using double-blind survey techniques and randomized sampling to construct management data on over 10,000 organisations across twenty countries. On average, they found that manufacturing firms in the United States, Japan, and Germany are managed the best (in contrast to firms from Brazil, China and India).

An investigation into strategic decision styles in Great Britain, the United States, Germany and Japan was performed by Chris Carr (2005). He noted that, for example, German and Japanese companies have long been considered more strategic, longer-term and less financially-oriented, as compared with those in Britain and the United States. However, this perception may have already changed.

Trends and indications in international business were also analysed by Czinkota and Ronkainen (2009). In their research, they identified five issues that were addressed by respondents from corporate, policy, and academic communities as well as across different geographic locations. Among these trends belong in particular: terrorism threat, globalisation, corruption, cultural adjustment and information and advancement of information technology.

Ernst and Young (2015) identified six megatrends (large, transformative global forces that define the future by having a far-reaching impact on business, economies, industries, societies and individuals) that might unfold in the future, namely digital future, entrepreneurship rising, global marketplace, urban world, resourceful planet and health reimagined.

Similarly, PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017) created an overview on how the megatrends are shaping business and society today and in the future. Among the megatrends they addressed belong: rapid urbanization, climate change and resource scarcity, shift in global economic power, demographic and social change and technological breakthroughs.

Another survey was conducted by the Forbes Insights – developed in collaboration with Gap International – in October 2016. Respondents represented a range of industries, including retail, telecommunications, technology, financial services, healthcare, media and insurance. Based on the research report (Forbes Insights, 2017), 400 top global executives revealed that 95% believe business is not as usual and 90% do not think the current environment is business-friendly. Key findings from the study include innovations that are the key to achieving market share, technology-driven world, disruptions via disintermediation (eliminating the middleman and sizing up smaller competitors), dismantling the hierarchy (replacement of old hierarchies with more flexibly arrangements supporting

collaboration of employees) and breakthrough partnerships (collaborating with third parties).

Business trends have been changing constantly. Although our research addresses changes that might have been influencing the business sphere recently, the research sample is still too low (almost 200 companies interviewed) to confirm their validity based on selected statistical methods. However, most of them have already been discussed and confirmed by world-renowned economists and business gurus and, therefore, we assume that these trends have a significant influence on the current business sphere.

On the basis of the literature review and in compliance with studies performed by renowned institutions/research platforms such as Pricewaterhouse--Coopers (particularly influencing formulation of H2, H4, H6), Ernst and Young (particularly influencing formulation of H1 and H5), Forbes Insights (particularly influencing formulation of H3), the following (alternative) hypotheses are formulated:

H1: *Developing new technologies, innovations, management of knowledge and intellectual property is clearly related to the future competitiveness of an organisation.*

H2: *The global sustainability of a company and the need for sustainable development are considered important trends in the business world.*

H3: *Aging societies are considered to be a problem in developed countries.*

H4: *The increasing integration of women into the workforce (predominantly in the developing countries) will increase in importance in the near future.*

H5: *A growing emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as future economic engines is considered a trend in the business sphere.*

H6: *Organisations tend to be formed like a living organism (i.e., breaking down traditional organisational boundaries to allow people, ideas and intellectual property to flow freely).*

Formulated hypotheses are based on the interpretivist or naturalistic paradigm typical for qualitative research (Davis, 2008) that is further elaborated in the section 2.2.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Collection and Sample

The first step in the research was to conduct a scoping study in the literature review process. The main purpose was to identify the relevant papers and studies with a focus on global management systems (particularly on "Western" – such as

in the United States or in selected European countries – and Asian) within the context of emerging global and business trends as well as to detect the key sources of research and the type of evidence available.

The research focused on works of "gurus" in the field rather than on an extensive review of the literature, which would have been impractical and of little additional value. The objective was to build a picture of how developments in the global business environment have been addressed in the literature and how they have been developing. Broad topics and research problems were preferred to specific models and frameworks. The review of the literature has uncovered business trends that are predicted for the near future.

Drawing on the previously discussed literature, we developed a questionnaire that identified our view of global business trends in the contemporary business environment. The initial questionnaire was pretested and revised by both academic and non-academic specialists.

The final questionnaire served as a basis for semi-structured interviews with managers in 196 "Western" and Asian companies located all over the world in order to investigate the issues related to global business trends in more depth and strengthen the validity of the findings. The research was undertaken by two academic teams from the Czech Republic and Japan in order to establish a multi-perspective view in the context of global business trends.

Table 1 shows the geographical division of countries (companies) involved in the research. The team aimed at achieving a balance between a number of Asian and Western countries that were interviewed. The total number of Asian countries involved in the research was 100 and Western countries was 96.

T a b l e 1

Geographical Division of Countries

Division of Countries	Number of Companies
Asian countries	100
Western countries	96

Source: Own Elaboration.

Table 2 shows the list of countries (companies) involved in the research. The majority of companies in a dataset of Asian countries were located in Japan (55%), China (12%) and South Korea (10%) and in a dataset of Western countries in the United States (44%), the United Kingdom (27%) and Germany (8%). The research was primarily focused on interviewing companies coming from those countries that have been influencing the global economic world in the past decades. Based on the World GDP Ranking (Knoema, 2017), top five countries

by GDP in 2017 were the United States, China, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom; and, South Korea reached the 12th position.

T a b l e 2

List of Countries

Asian Countries	Number of Companies	Western Countries	Number of Companies
China	12	Canada	2
India	5	Finland	1
Indonesia	2	France	5
Japan	55	Germany	8
Kazakhstan	1	Ireland	1
Philippines	3	Netherlands	5
Russia	3	Spain	3
Singapore	2	Sweden	1
South Korea	10	Switzerland	2
Thailand	2	United Kingdom	26
United Arab Emirates	1	United States	42
Vietnam	4		

Source: Own Elaboration.

The division of companies based on their sector (services, business and industry) is shown in the Table 3 (Appendix 1). The majority of companies both in Asian and Western countries comes from the industrial sector (68% for Asian countries, 58% for Western countries) followed by a business sector (20% for Asian countries, 33% for Western countries) and services (12% for Asian countries, 8% for Western countries).

The data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The respondents primarily came from large and very large companies based on the number of staff (Table 4 in Appendix 1) as well as revenues (Table 5 in Appendix 1) operating nationally and internationally. The percentage of large organisations (more than 250 staff) involved in the research reached 46% in Asian countries and 41% in Western countries, the percentage of medium-sized companies (50 – 250 staff) achieved 30% in Asian countries and 40% in Western countries, the percentage of small companies (10 – 50 staff) got at 22% in Asian countries and 11% in Western countries, and, the percentage of micro companies (less than 10 staff) reached 2% in Asian countries and 8% in Western countries.

In the majority of cases, the individuals themselves held senior positions (Table 6 in Appendix 1), i.e., 53% in Asian countries and 60% in Western countries. 45% (Asian countries) and 40% (Western countries) came from the middle management, and, only 2% (Asian countries) and 0% (Western countries) came from the lower level management.

Each interview lasted for approximately 1 hour. The majority of interviews were conducted by two researchers simultaneously and were recorded. Where

recording was not possible or allowed by the interviewees, we took notes and wrote them up immediately following the interview.

Through semi-structured interviews and the examination of corporate documents (mainly annual reports, balance sheets, profit and loss statements, cash flow statements, etc.), we collected information about the main trends and changes in the global business sphere and how and to what extent companies have changed in the field of performance management and measurement as well as strategies and business practices in the past decades and in relation to the financial crisis in 2008 and the subsequent recovery. Interviews were used here in preference to arms-length survey techniques, as executives considered their strategic decisions sensitive.

The interview questions were aimed at eliciting recent developments in the global business sphere, particularly at changes in corporate management techniques, performance management and measurement and business practices. All questions involved perspectives of past, present and future prospects.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions.

Questions 1 – 6, 8 and 11 were divided into four parts – the first part addressed the issues related to the period before 1990, the second part focused on the period between 1991 and 2005, the third part covered the period between 2006 and 2014, and future prospects (a period between 2015 and 2025) were discussed in the fourth part.

Questions 7, 9, 10 and 12 – 15 were open questions, leaving space for interviewees' comments.

Questions 1 – 7 focused mainly on the area of corporate management and performance. Managers were asked to indicate to what extent their company manages and measures the corporate performance in selected areas such as customers, employees, internal processes, external processes, innovations, technologies, management of knowledge and intellectual property, finance, environmental focus and social responsibility and how they are satisfied with contemporary systems of performance management and measurement in their companies.

Furthermore, they evaluated their overall performance within the given time periods. Based on a comparison with the closest competitors in their home country as well as abroad, interviewees estimated the corporate performance of their company to be better, same or worse within the given time frames and stated the most important performance indicators that have been used (or are going to be used in the near future) in the given areas.

At the end of this section, managers were asked to define particular trends in the given areas that have occurred recently and if their company is thinking to implement them in their business strategy.

Questions 8 – 15 concentrated on corporate strategies and business practices. Interviewees were asked to define the business model their company uses including their personal view on its advantages and weaknesses. Furthermore, they were to name a few characteristics of employees that they consider the most important for working in their company (e.g., individuality, loyalty, politeness, teamwork, flexibility, efficiency, discipline, sense of morality) in the given time periods.

At the end of this section, current changes in the business environment that have affected the interviewees' companies at the time of interview were to have been named – some examples were provided, such as aging society, decrease of population, global environmental issues, valued-driven competition, companies behaving like living organisms, globalisation of the market economy, intensifying competition for resources, international labour force, growing emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises, rise of emerging nations, technological innovations, female labour force, global sustainability, etc.

Managers were also asked to note what their companies do in order to adapt to changes related to a turbulent economic environment, economic crises and the transformation of whole economies.

During the interviews, managers were allotted space to share their own ideas and make comments that provided a valuable source of information, enriching the findings of this study.

The interview transcripts provided the main data set for the analysis, while observations and documents were treated as secondary data sources (Robson, 2002).

The interview data helped to form the major categories of global business trends. Company documents and observation notes were used to confirm the conclusions.

2.2. The Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

The analysis of semi-structured interviews was developed in response to the demands of the material collected. A wide range of techniques dealing with analysing qualitative interviews is available (e.g., Flick, von Kardorff and Steinke, 2004; Silverman and Marvasti, 2008; Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2009). Despite the fact that much qualitative research is interpretive and broad based and hypotheses are not typically used in this type of research, we used this interpretivist approach to describe, understand and explain those multiple realities in their complex and ever-changing nature (Davis, 2008). Different analytical techniques suited to the analysis of semi-structured interviews were brought together.

The steps followed in this research are similar to those presented by Schmidt (2004). In the first stage, categories for the analysis are set up. These are brought together, tested and revised in the second stage. Using this analytical and coding information, all responses from semi-structured interviews are coded according to the analytical categories. Based on these codes, case overviews are produced (the fourth stage) and form the basis of this coding for the selection of individual cases for in-depth single-case analyses (final stage).

The interview transcripts were read in detail and notes were taken. Based on the topics discovered, the draft analytical categories were formulated. Within the individual categories, detailed descriptions were provided. Each interview was classified and coded. The results of coding were represented by the compilation of quantifying surveys. Finally, these were interpreted in detail and based on them, hypotheses were tested.

2.3. Data Analysis

The reliability of the questionnaire was studied through Cronbach's α. This method allows for the calculation of the α coefficient if one variable is removed from the original set, making it possible to identify the subset that has the highest reliability coefficient. All the results reached a level of 0.804377 and higher, and therefore the scales are judged to be reliable.

3. Results

The analysis of the qualitative data led to a series of findings, which are presented and discussed in this section.

As stated, information about key developments and changes in selected businesses all over the world was collected via semi-structured interviews.

We utilized null hypotheses $H_01 – H_06$ based on alternative hypotheses H1 – H6 (defined earlier in the Methodology part). The data were analysed by the XL Statistics free software environment for statistical computing and graphics. The summary of results is shown as follows:

Summary of results: significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, sample size n = 196. Statistical power analysis: 0.804377.
Reject the null hypothesis based on alternative hypothesis H1 (p-value less than 0.05).
Reject the null hypothesis based on alternative hypothesis H2 (p-value less than 0.05).
Reject the null hypothesis based on alternative hypothesis H3 (p-value less than 0.05).
Reject the null hypothesis based on alternative hypothesis H4 (p-value less than 0.05).

Fail to reject the null hypothesis based on alternative hypothesis H5. Data failed to show evidence beyond a reasonable doubt (p-value greater than 0.05).
Fail to reject the null hypothesis based on alternative hypothesis H6. Data failed to show evidence beyond a reasonable doubt (p-value greater than 0.05).

One sample proportion test was used to analyse the data (Pan, 2002). Out of the six null hypotheses, four (1 – 4) were rejected and so we accept alternative hypotheses H1 – H4 (p-value is less than the significance level, $\alpha = 0.05$) and two failed to be rejected (p-value is greater than the significance level, $\alpha = 0.05$; there is no sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis).

According to Biau, Jolles and Porcher (2010), the p-value can be seen as the probability of obtaining a result equal to or "more extreme" than what was actually observed, when the null hypothesis is true.

A statistical power analysis for the two hypotheses that failed to be rejected was then pursued. The post-hoc power analysis used the obtained sample size and effect size to determine what the power was in the study. The confidence level reflected the confidence with which a significant difference between the two proportions was detected. The confidence level was set to 95%, i.e., there is a 5% probability of incorrectly detecting a significant difference when one does not exist.

Calculations – One sample proportion test (XL Statistics free software environments):
H1: One sample proportion test (single categorical variable, right tailed): Z-stat 12.286, p-value 0, sample proportion 0.938776, confidence interval 0.905003, 0.972548.
H2: One sample proportion test (single categorical variable, right tailed): Z-stat 10.857, p-value 0, sample proportion 0.887755, confidence interval 0.843286, 0.932224.
H3: One sample proportion test (single categorical variable, right tailed): Z-stat 8.857, p-value 0, sample proportion 0.816327, confidence interval 0.761779, 0.870875.
H4: One sample proportion test (single categorical variable, right tailed): Z-stat 6.143, p-value 0.000000000405, sample proportion 0.719388, confidence interval 0.656094, 0.782681.
H5: One sample proportion test (single categorical variable, right tailed): Z-stat –7.714, p-value 1, sample proportion 0.224490, confidence interval 0.165712, 0.283268.
H6: One sample proportion test (single categorical variable, right tailed): Z-stat –9,000, p-value 1, sample proportion 0.178571, confidence interval 0.124619, 0.232524.

The following figures show two examples of calculations in the XL Statistics software, namely calculations of the hypothesis H1 (on the left side) and the hypothesis H5 (on the right side).

F i g u r e 1

Calculations of H1 (left) and H5 (right) Using XL Statistics
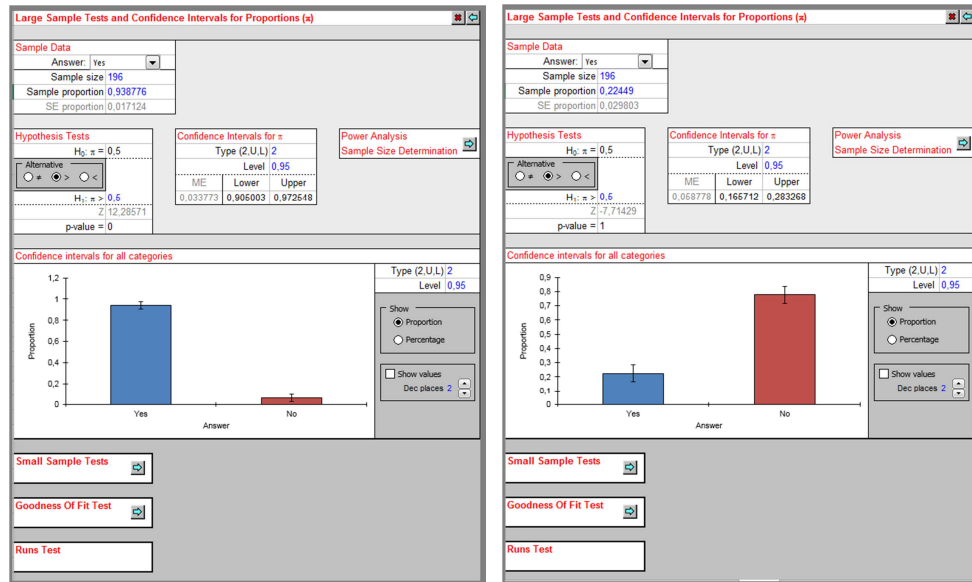
Source: Own Elaboration.

4. Discussion

The following part describes the key topics that have already driven or will drive change in the future, as identified during the literature review and interviews. Some include statements and quotes from managers to support the recent trends in the business sphere.

Developing new technologies, innovations, and management of knowledge and intellectual property has been clearly recognized by the managers who took part in the study as influencing the future competitiveness of an organisation. Innovations drastically influence the value-creation process. Technological innovations make new chances and new customers, making new markets. Fast-changing industries and customer preferences or heavy rivalry among competitors as well as many new technological inventions are factors fuelling the need to focus on innovations (Abell, 1999). The business sphere acknowledges the fact that innovations are important for staying competitive among rivals. The link between innovations and overall corporate performance has been investigated in many studies (Calantone, Cavusgil and Zhao, 2002; Hult, Hurley and Knight, 2004; Wheelwright and Clark, 1992).

However, based on the research results, organisations should renew their products and services, develop new technologies, innovate, and manage the knowledge and intellectual property constantly in order to avoid declining on the market. Christensen (2003) remarks that many different aspects have been revealed as necessary to help organisations stay innovative and ensure that they repeatedly can renew themselves to meet customer expectations. This can be confirmed by a statement of a senior manager (Healthcare sector, United States, large corporation) provided during the interview: "Keeping focus on meaningful innovations in key areas across the continuum of care and aligning the resources with customers and clinicians. Thus providing solutions that offer more value while lowering the cost of care."

Many interviewees confirmed that innovations must be a part of their corporate strategy to help shape the direction of the innovation. According to Zelený (2012, p. 61; 62), "the stream of new high-technology innovations is accelerating across the globe. They all have certain dominant characteristics in common e.g., reintegration, self-service and self-help empowerment (outsourcing to customer), disintermediation (elimination of the middle man), mass- and self-customization, high-technology impact, support-net bypass and digital economy."

In our research, a vast number of companies confirmed that technological (especially smart) innovations will bring positive effects to their companies. One CEO (Industrial sector, South Korea, middle-sized corporation) stated during the interview: "Our company is already experimenting with the small innovation, the technology where people can control machines using their smart phones."

Major structural changes are taking place in the environments and strategies of most businesses nowadays. Although many organisations have experienced that developing a strategy is time-consuming, or that the strategy becomes outdated rapidly or sometimes cannot be implemented easily (Poulfelt and Mønsted, 2007), it is even more important than ever for organisations to have a greater awareness of their strategy and how it is implemented.

More and more companies are aware of the fact that flexibility is an important area in strategy. Zelený (2010, p. 18; 19) developed an executive summary of the emerging view of strategy, noting that, e.g., "strategy is action, not a description of action, i.e. what a company does, not what it says, is its strategy" or "corporate strategy must involve changes in business model, not just in products and services; i.e. it must allow continuous reinvention of itself as a company and business" and proposing an action cycle of "Customer-Innovation-Processes--Finance – CIPF – that should become a strategy of any business."

The research has also confirmed that new business models and approaches have been used by companies all over the world. The business model concept

has gained increasing attention both in academic and business spheres recently. Morris, Schindehutte and Allen (2005) note that the business models should be considered from operational as well as strategic perspectives. The operational aspect of the business model focuses on value offering, creation, delivery, and revenue logic. The strategic aspect of the business model focuses on evaluating the sustainability of the value offering, creation, delivery, and revenue logic in the context of the dynamic environment. The strategic aspect has gained importance due to the shift in focus of the global companies towards potential business opportunities in the quickly expanding emerging economies having positive GDP growth trends as compared to the developed economies having flat or negative GDPs.

The global sustainability of a company and the need for sustainable development is considered an important trend in the business world. Edgeman (2015, p. 320) notes that "the sustainability of an enterprise is its capacity to create and maintain social, environmental, and economic value for itself, its stakeholders and society at large so that in both the near and long terms an enterprise's sustainability is its survival capacity. If sustainability connotes survival, then excellence is the capacity of the enterprise to both strive and thrive across an array of critical performance domains, where performance is comprised of both results and impact." Most companies are still not actively managing sustainability, even though managers from our sample think that sustainability and sustainable development are important for a variety of corporate activities. Those that do are gaining advantages for themselves and for society, as confirmed by the following statement: "The company follows four main principles, which include safety, respect for people, manufacturing and most importantly, sustainability. The company was once and is still the pioneer in sustainability, since the products are safe and have been producing things that are not affecting the public health in a negative way." (Senior manager, industrial sector, United States, middle-sized corporation.)

Based on the report World Population Ageing (United Nations, 2015, p. 14) "virtually every country in the world will experience a substantial increase in the size of the population aged 60 years or over between 2015 and 2030." Since the economies all over the world have been encountering the problem of aging societies, the situation has become challenging for the majority of companies. They keep their fundamental elements but they understand that it is necessary for them to change their business strategy which is suit to the social context.

The latest trend of aging societies (particularly in developed countries) has been evident and has been confirmed by the following statements provided by managers during the interviews: "Aging society is the most affecting change in

the company's business at the moment." (CEO, industrial sector, Singapore, large organisation) and "I think demographic change really affects us. The older skilled employees are leaving because of retirement but at the same time there aren't sufficient new young employees. That's why we're using so much foreign labour at the moment and try to create conditions for employment of women that are returning back to work after maternity leave." (Senior manager, industrial sector, Japan, middle-sized organization.)

However, many organisations are worried about the consequences, as confirmed in the following statements: "There are many organizations hiring too many new graduates which affects them in the long-run. With our consulting we try to explain that results can't come from doing this so quickly and hiring too many inexperienced workers. We are monitoring this closely as it has the potential to disrupt our company success rate. It is currently in its infancy but we are still taking it seriously as there is more pushback from consumers and other clients to make things more convenient for the organizations." (Senior manager, service sector, Japan, small-sized company) and "Company's top managers are from 50s generation, key employees are from 70s generation, while most of the employees are from 80s generation. This creates a generation gap; older generations are not good at applying information technology while young people do not have enough experience and courage." (Senior manager, industrial sector, China, large corporation.)

However, an aging population should not be considered negatively only. An aging population also creates new opportunities for companies worldwide. One manager confirmed that "the older people could be a source of revenue for companies because the majority of wealth in developed countries is held by older consumers." (Senior manager, service sector, United Kingdom, middle-sized company.)

Women form an important part of the labour force, but still remain underrepresented. There have been many issues that women generally face at work including career opportunities, equal pay, combining children and career, etc. In the global report published by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation (Thomson Reuters, 2015, p. 1) "only about half of the women polled are optimistic about the prospects of having a child and career. Women in emerging countries led by Brazil – where maternity laws are generous and family ties are close – are the most confident. By contrast, women in some of the richest countries – Japan, Germany, the UK, Italy and France – are least confident and feel having a family might wreck their careers."

Recently the demographic crisis has been threatening Japan to reshape the overall economy. For example, a research performed by the Center for Work-Life Policy (Hewlett, 2011, p. 1) reveals that "Japanese women with college degree

are much more likely than Americans (74% versus 31%) to quit their jobs voluntarily. But while childcare is the primary reason that most Western women take a career break, highly educated women in Japan are more likely to say that they're pushed off the career track by unsupportive work environments and managers who do not value them." Similar situation can be observed in other advanced Asian countries where the traditional male-centric work practices prevail and hold women back. Despite some governmental efforts (e.g., in Japan – the Abe administration enacted a law in 2015 which aims to increase a number of women in management as well as to raise female labour participation), the situation seems to be improving just slightly.

Integrating more women into the workforce (particularly in countries with a comparatively low number of female staff in the workforce) is considered by managers in our research as a solution for the critical situation of the aging population. Moreover, increasing female labour participation could add many millions of workers to the world's shrinking workforce, potentially increasing the world's GDP, too. This is supported by the following statement: "Diversity in our company is really low. Most of our employees are men and there are very few women in management. However, this situation has been changing. Women achieve higher performance in some business areas and, therefore, are very important for the company." (Senior manager, industrial sector, South Korea, middle-sized company.)

The growing emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as future economic engines could not be confirmed as a trend in the business sphere. The hypothesis failed to be rejected, as data failed to show evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. The Annual Report on European SMEs 2015/2016 (Hope, 2016) states that SMEs form the backbone of the EU28 economy with just under 23 million SMEs generating EUR 3.9 trillion in value added and employing 90 million people in 2015. Although SMEs have faced an enormous fallout since the economic and financial crisis of late 2008 and 2009, it seems that they have finally escaped from the worst. For the first time since the recession, SME employment grew by 1.1% in 2014 and by 1.5% in 2015 (Hope, 2016).

Customers today have so many choices that being able to adapt to the modern environment has become crucial for businesses of all sizes. However, SMEs are more likely to react faster to changes in the business world than their bigger counterparts, including flexibility, better adaptability to market conditions change, being closer to its customers (and observing changing preference), make decisions faster, etc. Gartenstein (2018, p. 1) adds: "Small businesses can take chances that would be more difficult for large companies. They can test new products in smaller markets, with minimal investment, observing variables and obstacles before

deciding to try an idea on a larger scale. The relative anonymity of a lesser-known brand is an advantage when trying a risky idea, in part because it lessens the possibility of negative publicity if the venture isn´t successful." On the other hand, in today's globalised world SMEs can have more difficulties to find funding and often face problems to reach a large number of customers as they are not able to finance massive campaigns in mass media as confirmed in the following statement: "We shall be aware of the fact that we often lose our fight with our bigger rivals in the field of negotiations with some suppliers as our power in negotiation is weaker. Because of this, we often achieve worse conditions." (CEO, business sector, Switzerland, middle-sized company.) Carrasco (2017, p. 1) concludes that "despite being more flexible in dealing with changes, the lack of financial capability can cause major problems for an SME if it is forced to endure long periods of crisis. For this reason, during economic depressions, small and medium-sized enterprises often face enormous difficulties to survive, which causes the closing of many of them."

The final hypothesis (Organisations tend to be formed like a living organism) failed to be rejected, as data failed to show evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. However, the trend of creating small business units with their own autonomy in order to react faster to ever-changing competitive environment has been documented in a number of business practices and models not only in contemporary business world but also in the past (e.g. Bata management and business model, Japanese, Chinese and Korean management systems, Amoeba management system developed by Dr. Kazuo Inamori – the founder of the Kyocera corporation in Japan, etc.). Dividing a company into small units headed by a manager who is responsible for all operations of the unit and achievement the profit is a basic feature of not only the Bata's system of management but also of management systems in corporations located in Japan, South Korea, etc. These companies form a system that is highly competitive and efficient. Companies behaving like a living organism are human-oriented, flexible, highly competitive, and, therefore, resilient against crisis more than their counterparts. A company shall not be considered as a machine. Thinking in biological systems represents an enormous change in the management and business world nowadays.

Conclusion

The current business world has put a lot of pressure on businesses from all sectors and of all sizes, and this comes in relation to the financial and economic crisis of 2008 and a fundamental transformation of mature societies (in particular in the United States, Japan and Western Europe). Such transformations contribute

to enormous changes of paradigms and business models, which have a great influence on corporate strategies and performance indicators.

This paper identified trends that have been influencing the business sphere recently on the basis of a literature review and semi-structured interviews with managers from companies from different countries all over the world.

Following the literature review, six null hypotheses based on alternative hypotheses were formulated and statistically analysed. They provided the basis for the construction of a questionnaire that was utilized while pursuing semi-structured interviews with managers in 196 "Western" and Asian companies located all over the world in order to investigate the issues related to global business trends in more depth. Four out of six null hypotheses were rejected (and so related alternative hypotheses were accepted), while two of six hypotheses failed to be rejected (p-value was greater than the significance level, $\alpha = 0.05$).

The findings were described in detail to show recent trends and developments in businesses. Among the trends that were identified during the research belong the following: developing new technologies, innovations, management of knowledge and intellectual property is clearly related to the future competitiveness of an organisation; the global sustainability of a company and the need for sustainable development are considered important trends in the business world; aging societies are considered to be a problem in developed countries; the increasing integration of women in the workforce (predominantly in the developing countries) will increase in importance in the near future.

Data failed to show evidence beyond a reasonable doubt in the following hypotheses – H5: the growing emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as future economic engines is considered as a trend in the business sphere; and H6: Organisations tend to be formed like a living organism (i.e., breaking down traditional organisational boundaries to allow people, ideas and intellectual property to flow freely).

This study has limitations that could be addressed in further studies. First of all, the empirical investigation of a higher number of firms is required. In this study, almost 200 companies (mostly from Western Europe, the United States, Japan, China and South Korea) were interviewed. However, the number is still too small in order to provide findings that are statistically significant.

Moreover, a few companies from other countries were included in the research sample; therefore, it is suggested to pursue the research in other countries (particularly in emerging ones), too. The sample was studied through Cronbach's α. It is proposed to use different statistical methods to verify the results in further research. A part of this study is based on a literature review method that, despite being systematic and rigorous, might have missed some relevant work.

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A p p e n d i x 1

T a b l e 3

Division of Companies Based on Sector

Sector	Number of Asian Companies	Number of Western Companies
Services	12	8
Business	20	32
Industrial	68	56

Source: Own Elaboration.

T a b l e 4

Division of Companies Based on their Size – Staff

Company Category	Number of Asian Companies	Number of Western Companies
Micro (< 10 staff headcount)	2	8
Small (< 50 staff headcount)	22	11
Medium-sized (< 250 staff headcount)	30	38
Large (> 250 staff headcount)	46	39

Source: Own Elaboration.

T a b l e 5

Division of Companies Based on their Size – Revenues

Revenues (USD millions per year)	Number of Asian Companies	Number of Western Companies
< 10	9	3
11 – 100	15	17
101 – 1,000	28	35
1,001 – 10,000	27	30
10,001 – 50,000	16	9
> 50,001	5	2

Source: Own Elaboration.

T a b l e 6

Division of Interviewees

Interviewees	Number of Asian Companies	Number of Western Companies
Top Management	53	58
Middle management	45	38
Lower level management	2	0

Source: Own Elaboration.