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INNOVATIVE BUSINESS SERVICES IN CREATING COMPETITIVENESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN POLAND

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An important symptom of the changes taking place in the contemporary sector of services is the growth in importance of business services. Their development is connected with an ever complex course of economic processes and the increasing competition. Under the conditions of the quickly changing market, intense technical progress, ongoing labour division and being its effect of specialisation, the majority of economic entities, particularly in the SME sector, is not self-sufficient and must use specialist services. Reaching in this respect for innovative solutions may have caused increasing effectiveness of processes within the organisation and raising competitiveness. The subject matter of considerations in this article is just an analysis of the use by SMEs in Poland of business services and assessment of their innovativeness as well as its impact on SME competitiveness.

Key words: business services, service innovativeness, SME, enterprises' competitiveness.

ІННОВАЦІЙНІ БІЗНЕС-ПОСЛУГИ В ФОРМУВАННІ КОНКУРЕНТОСПРОМОЖНОСТІ МАЛИХ І СЕРЕДНІХ ПІДПРИЄМСТВ ПОЛЬЩІ

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Важливим проявом змін, що відбуваються в сучасному секторі послуг, є зростання значення бізнес-послуг. Їхній розвиток пов'язаний з усе складнішим перебігом економічних процесів і зростаючою конкуренцією. В умовах швидкоплинного ринку, інтенсивного технічного прогресу, поглибленого поділу праці та похідної з нього спеціалізації більшості економічних суб'єктів, особливо в секторі МСП, є несамодостатніми та повинні використовувати спеціальні послуги. Застосування в цьому відношенні інноваційних рішень може спричинити підвищення ефективності процесів у межах організації і підвищення конкурентоспроможності. Предметом розгляду в цій статті є лише аналіз використання бізнес-послуг малими і середніми підприємствами в Польщі та оцінка їхньої інноваційності, а також їхній вплив на конкурентоспроможність малого і середнього бізнесу.

Ключові слова: бізнес-послуги, інноваційність послуг, МСП, конкурентоспроможність підприємств.

Problem formulation

The contemporary economic development is possible through the achievement of competitive advantages in individual areas of enterprises' activity. A particular role in setting up such advantages is played by small and medium-sized enterprises that fill up the niche not sufficiently attractive for large economic entities. Small and medium enterprises distinguish themselves with their ability to react quickly

to the changes taking place in the socioeconomic environment, adjusting their activities to the current situation and the needs of the market (local, regional, national, and even international) as well as their ability to absorb labour resources, especially in local markets [1, p. 3]. According to the CSO's data, in 2013, in Poland, there were operating 1.77 million enterprises, of which 99.8 % accounted for the SME sector (Fig. 1). Compared to the year 2009, it means an almost 6 % growth.

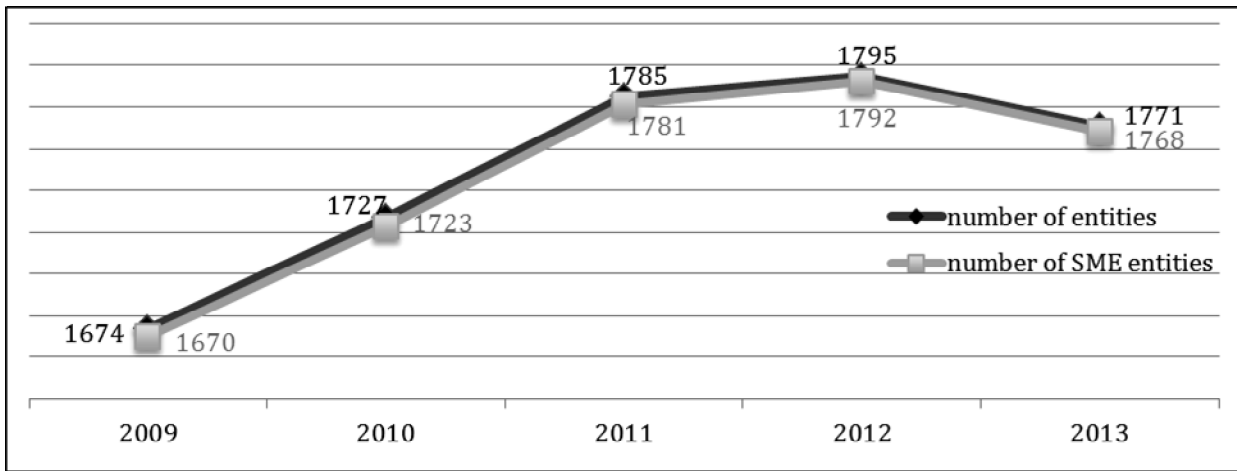


Fig. 1. Number of active enterprises in the SME sector against the all enterprises in 2009–2013

Source: own elaboration based on [2, p. 123].

The SME sector is an important part of the whole sector of enterprises not only for its number. In 2012, SMEs generated almost 49 % of gross value added produced by all enterprises, of which 30 % accounted for micro enterprises, 8 % for small firms, and 11 % for medium-sized ones (Table 1). In the years 2004–2012, the share of SMEs in creation of gross value added did practically not change; on the other hand, there slightly grew, at the expense of other entities and tax receipts, the share of large enterprises in creation of gross value added.

Table 1

Structure of GDP by the share of size of enterprises in Poland in 2004–2012

Year	GDP (mn PLN)	Gross value added created by enterprises (in %)					
		Total	SME				Large
			Subtotal	Micro	Small	Medium	
2004	923 248	70.5	48.6	31.0	7.6	10.0	21.9
2005	983 302	70.3	47.8	31.5	7.4	8.9	22.5
2006	1 060 031	70.7	47.8	31.0	7.4	9.3	22.9
2007	1 176 737	70.8	47.3	30.4	7.2	9.8	23.5
2008	1 275 432	71.1	47.2	29.9	7.4	9.9	23.9
2009	1 343 366	72.3	48.4	30.4	7.9	10.1	23.9
2010	1 416 477	71.6	47.6	29.6	7.7	10.4	24.0
2011	1 528 127	71.8	47.3	29.4	7.8	10.1	24.5
2012	1 596 378	73.0	48.5	29.7	7.8	11.0	24.5

Source: own elaboration based on [3, p. 15].

The share of the SME sector in gross value added, by evaluation of the factors of produce created by enterprises in Poland, is clearly lower than the average in the European Union's countries. According to the data provided by Eurostat, in 2011, micro enterprises in Poland generated 16.5 % of this index whereas the EU average accounted for 21.4 % (difference of 4.9 p.p.). A similar difference takes place in the case of small firms (13.5 % in Poland vis-à-vis 18.05 in the EU). However, for medium and large enterprises in Poland specific is an apparently higher share compared with the mean of the EU member countries – for medium-sized firms the indices are 20.9 % in the case of Poland and 18.5 % in the case of the EU, while for large – respectively – 49.1 % and 42.1 % [3, p. 16].

According to the CSO's data, at the end of 2013, the number of individuals working at enterprises in Poland amounted to almost 8.9 million (compared to the total number of employees in the country of 14.2 million), of which 6.2 million (70 %) were working in entities of the SME sector. Altogether, in micro and small firms, there were working more than one half (4.6 mn people) of employees in the entire sector of enterprises. At medium-sized enterprises, there was hired almost every fifth worker (1.6 mn people), while at large ones – almost every third (2.7 mn individuals) (Fig. 2). Against the background of the whole EU, the share of the SME sector in the number of employees is a little bit higher (by 1.8 p.p. in the year 2012).

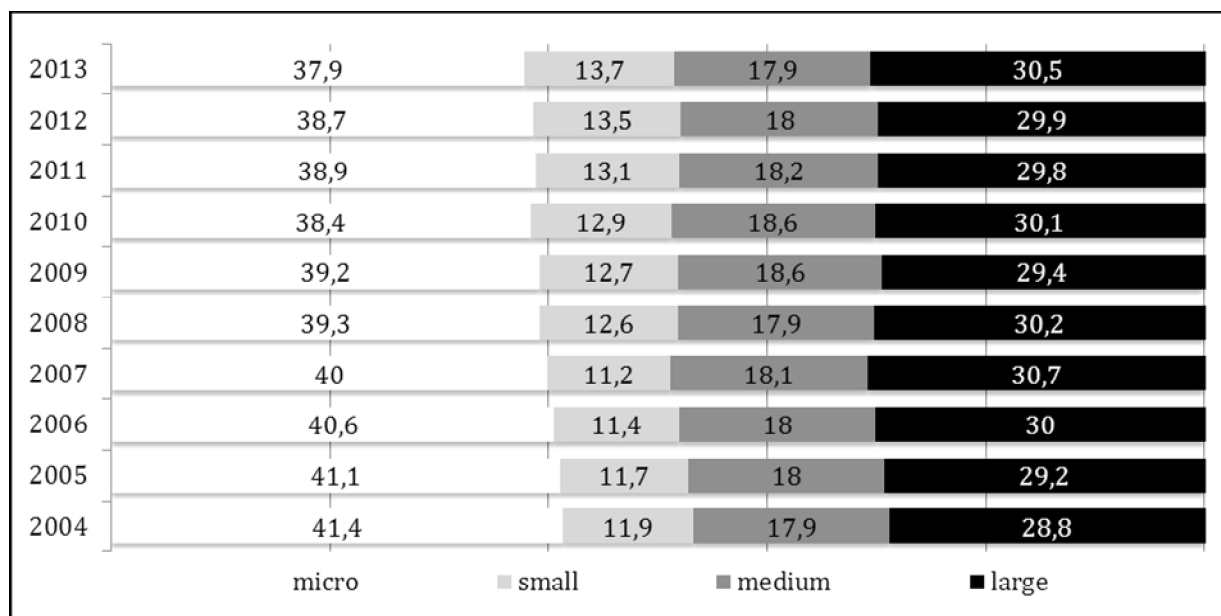


Fig. 2. Share of SMEs in the number of employees working at enterprises in Poland in 2004–2013

Source: own elaboration based on [4, p. 123].

In view of the share in creation of gross domestic product, the share in the number of registered entities and the number of employees, services are assigned with the key role in stimulating the economic development. There is commonly mentioned servicisation of economies or development of the services-based economies. In Poland, service enterprises account for more than 77 % of all the registered entities, they are accountable for more than 63 % of generated gross value added; hire more than 57 % of employees [5, p. 13; 6, p. 109]. At the same time, the service sector is characterised by a high dynamics and flexibility as well as an intense competition. The requirement for a permanent rivalry demands a search for new and already successfully applied ways of formation of competitiveness. One of them is the use of innovative business services.

Business services are connected with servicing the economic activity and entrepreneurship for which they are complementary [7, p. 19]. They comprise all services rendered by specialised firms for other entities for the purpose of raising their effectiveness, productivity, and competitiveness [8, p. 1]. *Sensu largo* they should be understood as services provided for customers for the purpose of use thereof in a further process of production. *Sensu stricto* their precise definition comes down to the enumeration of the types of service activity supporting implementation of various functions of enterprises. Business services are a motive force for entrepreneurship development. The use thereof provides the enterprise with cost reduction, allows focusing on the basic activity, contributes to an increase of enterprises' goodwill and growth of competitiveness as well as ensures an access to new technologies [9, p. 120]. The entities providing business services include enterprises carrying out, *inter alia*, their activities within the framework of IT, telecommunication services, in the field of information, legal, accounting and tax advice services, in the field of research and development services, management and consultancy, engineering and architecture services, advertising, market and public opinion research as well as the services related to employment. These are the so-called knowledge-intensive business services [10, p. 4], intrinsically

characterised by high innovativeness, what stems from the development of the accompanying them infrastructure and the required creativity [11, p. 205].

In 2013, the value of net income from total sales of the enterprises providing the services related to the operation of business (employing 10 and more persons) amounted to a little bit more than 84.5 billion zlotys (the growth by 6.7 % vis-à-vis the previous year). Business services have an important contribution to the functioning of the Polish economy. According to the statistical data, the three sections including them generated in 2014 totally 13.6 % of gross value added, hired 15.2 % of all employees, and reached the 10.1 % share in total proceeds [12, p. 26].

Analysis of current research outputs and publications

The notion of innovativeness of business services is difficult to define. This stems from the complexity of the very notion of innovation. Innovation should, therefore, be understood as translation of invention into the reality [13, p. 8], as the process of transformation of a creative idea into a useful product, service or a mode of action [14, p. 345]. An innovation is every idea or thing, which is new for the individual as it is qualitatively different from the forms he or she is familiar with, irrespective of the objective novelty [15, p. 13]. In turn, Drucker [16, p. 42-43] describes innovations as penetrating all the spheres of activity carried out by the firm alterations of the model of product, marketing method, the price offered, services for the customer or changes in organisation and methods of management. Damanpour [17, p. 555] defined the innovation as a product, service, process, programme or equipment that is new for the organisation which adopts or implements it. Amabile et al. [18, p. 1154–1155] define the innovation from the organisational perspective describing it as a successful implementation of creative ideas at the enterprise.

The innovation is perceived as a strategical instrument serving building and increasing enterprises' competitive abilities. The research carried out on various areas of the implementation of innovative solutions shows their great impact on enterprises' market successes, with a simultaneous identification of the relationships between the propensity to innovations and the size of the enterprise [19, p. 1579]. In this context, they may be considered from the point of view of business services. The innovation refers to novelties in the field of concepts, approaches, methods, processes, structures, behaviours, attitudes, and cultures as well as technologies and skills and knowledge used in the organisation. In turn, innovativeness is understood as the propensity and ability to create new and to improve the existing products, new technologies, and organisations as well as systems of management and motivation [20, p. 30]. It is an effect of combination or synthesis of knowledge into original, important, valuable new products, processes or services. To have innovativeness yielding effects it must, first of all, result in a considerable change, not necessarily connected with emergence of something completely new, but it may have a form of a number of important improvements (of the product, process or services) compared with the previous achievements [21, p. 757].

The relationship of innovativeness of business services with competitiveness of SMEs making use of them has its source in the identification of phenomena and tendencies characterising contemporary competition. It motivates organisations to improve the managerial processes and to seek for such solutions in the process of management which will provide the enterprise with advantage over other ones: better, more up-to-date solutions. These solutions may be created by specialised entities rendering business services. The need to compete demands from SMEs possession of features enabling achievement of success in rivalry, defined as competitiveness. The content of the notion of competitiveness is perceived through the prism of one or a combination of few of the following factors: achieved benefits (effects), offering customers the distinguishable products, and winning the rivalry with competitors or an effective implementation of enterprise's goals [22, p. 42]. Hence, competitiveness means the ability to be innovative and flexible, manifesting itself in achievement of competitive advantage enabling winning and achieving benefits in the market with an ever growing intensity of competition, what allows surviving and acting in the competitive environment.

Article objectives and research methods

An aim of the article is to carry out an analysis of the scale of use of business services by enterprises belonging to the SME sector in Poland, to assess innovativeness of these services and their impact on

competitiveness of the entities using them. For the purpose of achievement of the said aim, the authors ask a few research questions:

- What is the scale of the use by SMEs of business services?
- What business services do SMEs use most often?
- How do SME managers assess up-to-datedness and innovativeness of business services?
- What is the impact of innovative business services being used by SMEs on their competitiveness?

The aim achievement is possible owing to the analysis of findings of the surveys carried out among managers managing the operating in Poland enterprises of the SME sector. The surveys were carried out at the turn of 2015 within the NCN project No. 2013/09/B/HS4/02733, entitled “Innovativeness of business services in raising competitiveness of enterprises – the model approach”. The surveys covered the country-wide sample of 505 enterprises using business services. The sample was set up by the layer and quota method, taking into account the three criteria of layer sampling: the location of the firm’s headquarters (voivodship), the type of activity being carried out (production, trade, services), and the size of the enterprise measured with the number of employees (small, medium, and large entities). In the sample, the most numerous were medium-sized enterprises (39.4 %), lower numbers of employees were specific for small (31.3 %) and large entities (29.3 %). From the point of view of the main area of activities, there prevailed manufacturing entities whose share accounted for 39.8 %. 31.1 % of the firms surveyed represented services, and 29.1 % were trade enterprises. Altogether the survey included 357 small (up to 49 employees) and medium-sized enterprises (hiring from 50 to 249 people), constituting the basis for analyses in the article.

The measurements were carried out by the method of face-to-face interviews with representatives of senior management, CEOs. The subject matter of surveys was, *inter alia*, problems of the scale and scope of the use of business services, assessment thereof in the context of quality and innovativeness, identification of benefits gained owing to the use of business services, including their impact on competitiveness of SMEs. The article takes into consideration the analysis of data by way of statistically significant indices of the structure and measures of correlation between the described variables and the size of enterprises surveyed (the Chi-square test and the Cramer’s V coefficient).

Presentation of main materials – research results

Definitely the most commonly used business services (by way of the use of outsourcing) by SMEs are telecommunication services – they are used by all the entities surveyed. Other business services are used more seldom. Most often it relates to accounting and tax consultancy services, those connected with software, legal and advertising services (by more than 40 %) (Table 2). The most seldom the entities in question use research services both in the context of R&D and market and public opinion research (by less than 18 %). Quite big (reaching even more than 20 p.p.) are oscillations of the scale of use of business services between small and medium enterprises. Besides the mentioned telecommunication services, among the remaining nine categories, in the case of seven there is noted greater interest of medium entities, while in two – small.

Table 2

The scope of use of business services by SME (in %)

Services	Small enterprises	Medium enterprises
Telecommunication	100.0 %	100.0 %
Related to software	46.8 %	69.3 %
In the field of information	33.5 %	53.3 %
Legal	45.6 %	67.3 %
Accounting /tax consultancy	84.2 %	72.4 %
Advices related to management/consulting	16.5 %	31.2 %
In the field of R&D	8.9 %	18.1 %
Advertising	51.9 %	50.3 %
Market and public opinion research	8.9 %	15.1 %
Related to employment	24.1 %	36.7 %

Source: own research, 2014/2015.

Innovativeness of business services is general evaluated positively. Such an opinion is declared by almost 54 % of medium-sized entities and more than 43 % of small ones. There is twice less critical scores (around 23 %). It is proper to pay attention to the fact that there are clearly more often (difference of 10.3 p.p.) indicated difficulties with assessment of innovativeness business services by entities hiring less than 50 people (Table 3). The analysis of relationship between evaluations of innovativeness of business services and the size of enterprises with the use of the Chi-square test did not reveal occurrence of such relationship (the value of the Chi-square test significance at the level of 0.143 exceeded the assumed critical value $p = 0.05$).

Table 3

Overall assessment of innovativeness of business services used by SMEs (in %)

Specification	Small enterprises	Medium enterprises
I do not know, difficult to say	25.9 %	15.6 %
Not innovative at all	2.5 %	1.5 %
Rather not innovative enough	20.3 %	21.6 %
Rather innovative	44.3 %	53.8 %
Highly innovative	7.0 %	7.5 %

Source: own research, 2014/2015.

The assessment of innovativeness of individual business services indicates a lesser diversity of statements made by small and medium entities than in the case of their use (Table 4). The differences are usually a few percentage points. Only in the case of services related to employment this index is higher in the case of medium-sized enterprises by as many as 20 p.p. In general, medium-sized entities best assess innovativeness of services related to software, management and consulting, R&D as well as in the field of information (altogether more than 80 % of “rather innovative” and “highly innovative” indications). In the case of small firms, there was highest assessed innovativeness of services in the field of R&D, related to software, in the field of information and telecommunication services; however, in no case the index did not exceed 80 %. In the case of legal services, there was noted the only case of higher scores for innovativeness assigned by small entities than medium ones. The application of the Chi-square test showed the existence of relationships between the assessment of innovativeness of the services in question and the size of the evaluating it enterprise in the case of services related to software, in the field of information, legal, accounting and tax consultancy services, those related to management and consulting as well as employment (significances of the Chi-square test at the level not exceeding the critical value of $p = 0.05$). However, the calculated for these services values of the Cramer’s V coefficient reached low figures (within 0.191–0.289), what means low relationship.

Table 4

Assessment of innovativeness of individual business services used by SME (by %)*

Services	Small enterprises	Medium enterprises
Telecommunication	70.9 %	79.9 %
Related to software	74.4 %	86.2 %
In the field of information	71.7 %	82.1 %
Legal	63.9 %	57.4 %
Accounting /tax consultancy	60.9 %	65.3 %
Advices related to management/consulting	56.8 %	83.9 %
In the field of R&D	78.6 %	83.4 %
Advertising	69.5 %	77.0 %
Market and public opinion research	64.3 %	63.3 %
Related to employment	55.3 %	75.3 %

* The index illustrating the sum of responses “Rather innovative” and “Highly innovative”.

Source: own research, 2014/2015.

Cooperation with the entities rendering business services may yield enterprises many benefits. Positive effects of such an activity are perceived by more than 35 % of the entities surveyed. More often is so in the case of medium entities (39.2 %) than small (31.0 %). Among those benefits, an important role is played by raising competitiveness. Occurrence of this effect is perceived by 79.9 % of medium-sized enterprises (of which 12.1 % define this impact as definite) and 65.2 % of small firms (of which 8.2 % declare the definite impact). Therefore, there is again apparent a little bit better perception of business services among bigger entities (Table 5). This is confirmed by the Chi-square test's results. Its significance reached the level below the assumed critical value $p = 0.05$, what indicates the existence of a relationship between the assessment of the impact of innovativeness of business services on competitiveness of the enterprises using them. However, the strength of that relationship is low – the Cramer's V coefficient achieved the value of 0.148.

Table 5

Overall assessment of the impact of innovativeness of the used business services on raising SME's competitiveness (in %)

Specification	Small enterprises	Medium enterprises
Definitely does not impact	5.7 %	6.0 %
Rather does not impact	29.1 %	17.1 %
Rather impacts	57.0 %	64.8 %
Definitely impacts	8.2 %	12.1 %

Source: own research, 2014/2015.

Evaluating opinions of representatives of the enterprises surveyed on the strength of that impact broken down to individual categories of business services, we should emphasise that almost in all (except for R&D services and market and public opinion research services assessed small firms), the “rather great” or “definitely great” impact is declared by more than half of SMEs (Table 6). More often (in the case of each category of business services) such opinions are specific for medium enterprises than small ones. Representatives of medium firms mostly appreciate the strength of impact on competitiveness of advertising services (73.4 %), information (72.4 %) and IT ones (70.4 %). The most seldom – below 60 % – they indicate the services related to market and public opinion research, R&D services, and related to employment. In the case of small firms, opinions are approximate – most often there is noticed a crucial impact on competitiveness of advertising services (72.1 %). Surprising is attribution of a low importance to research services whose application should contribute to improvement of activities and competitive position. Based on the computed Chi-square test, there is noticed the existence of such relationships between the assessment of the impact of the services analysed on competitiveness of the enterprises using them and the size of those enterprises in the three cases: legal services, accounting and tax advice services as well as those related to management and consulting. The significance of the Chi-square test did not exceed in those cases the critical significance $p=0.05$. As in the case of earlier identified relationships, the strength of this relationship is also low (the Cramer's V coefficient at the level of 0.166-0.216).

Table 6

Assessment of the impact of innovativeness of individual business services on raising competitiveness of the SMEs using them (in %)*

Services	Small enterprises	Medium enterprises
Telecommunication	56.3 %	63.8 %
Related to software	58.8 %	70.4 %
In the field of information	60.1 %	72.4 %
Legal	50.0 %	63.8 %
Accounting /tax consultancy	53.2 %	62.4 %
Advices related to management/consulting	51.9 %	61.3 %
In the field of R&D	48.1 %	57.8 %
Advertising	72.1 %	73.4 %
Market and public opinion research	46.8 %	50.7 %
Related to employment	52.5 %	57.7 %

* The index illustrating the sum of responses “Rather great impact” and “Very great impact”.

Source: own research, 2014.

Conclusions and perspectives for further research

The presented considerations show the crucial role of innovation in business services. Using them, enterprises see in modern business services a tool for raising competitiveness. This concerns all the categories of enterprises, both large and small and medium. However, the operating in Poland SMEs do not fully use the offer of business services. They use them selectively, reaching primarily for telecommunication, accounting, IT or advertising services, which – apart from the latter – in a relatively low degree build competitive advantage. Definitely more seldom they use more specialised services such as R&D, market and public opinion research or consulting (therefore, those which may best contribute to improvement of their competitive position), what is an effect of not always proper conviction of SME managers of usefulness of such services or the emerging barrier related to their financial capacities. The business services addressed to SMEs are characterised with a high level of innovativeness. This stems from their nature (knowledge saturation) and competition among firms rendering them. There is mostly appreciated innovativeness of business services of the technical nature (telecommunication, IT, information, R&D), the least often it concerns legal and accounting services. The basic factor determining innovativeness of business services is a high level of competency of employees rendering them, to a bit lower degree it is decided by modern methods of provision of such services as well as access to funds supporting proinnovative activity.

The surveys also show the relationship between the use by SMEs of innovative business services and their competitiveness. This is so important that Polish SMEs, though assess their competitiveness quite well, they see the possibilities to raise it [23, p. 454–458]. Considering the effects of the use of innovative business services, every third SME declares gaining from it great or very great benefits. Managers mention both the factors, which affect competitiveness, such as reduction of operating costs, gaining new customers, improving relationships with clients or improvement of the firm's image, and indicate directly the growth of competitiveness. Being directly asked of the importance of the use of innovative business services to competitiveness, they mostly declare that it is great or very great.

The presented research findings are diversified in view of the size of enterprises surveyed. Higher indices concerning purchase of business services and their assessment are more often attributable to medium enterprises; small ones usually use business services more seldom and they assess them somewhat worse. The declared opinions are also influenced by location of SMEs. Higher activity in purchasing business services is specific to the SMEs operating in the regions with the highest dynamics of the socioeconomic development, where there are located research centres and there is well developed background of the business infrastructure. They are also more prone to assign innovative business services with greater importance. The situation looks worse in less developed regions. Assessment of innovativeness of business services is more critical there, there is more often indicated lack of opportunities to use them and their lower impact on one's competitive position.

These considerations provide the basis for forecasting a further development of business services. Financial resources may become a barrier. On the one hand, it may concern business firms, becoming a restraint for implementation of innovative solutions [24, p. 1004]; on the other hand, it may limit the demand generated by their customers due to high costs of the use of such services. Polish SMEs relatively often declare reduction of outlays on business services, justifying it with their worse financial condition or a negative assessment of quality of those services.

From the cognitive point of view it would be interesting to deepen research related to the barriers for creating innovation in business services as well as the opportunities and constraints of their implementation in the SME sector. The presented results have only showed a fragmentary picture of the vast scope of problems. It would be reasonable to broaden the scale of research, on the one hand, through an increase of the size of the sample in order to gain an opportunity to carry out a branch analysis taking into account various sections of SME activities, while, on the other hand, to deepen the substantial contents taking into considerations the disaggregation of innovative solutions in order to separate various types of innovation as well as to raise the problems of assessment of effectiveness of implementation of innovative

solutions in business services, both from the point of view of methodology (ways and measures) of such an assessment and measurement of the real effects of activity displayed by SMEs in this respect.

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