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SUSTAINABLE COOPERATION MANAGEMENT - INSIGHTS FROM A SELECTED COMPANY^{*}

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Abstract. The issue of cooperation is one of the fundamental elements of the human and biological nature of the world. It creates new connections, strengthens, and repeats the current ones, and defines the conditions for the functioning, remuneration and punishment of individual participants in the cooperation environment. Cooperation management is one of the basic approaches to well-sustained and functioning relationships in a business environment where competitiveness and sustainability in a given environment represent an increase in benefits, fitness in a relationship and other activities beneficial to the partnership. This article aims to point out significant theoretical and practical starting points considering the sustainability of cooperation activities. Within the article's content, a comprehensive content analysis is elaborated, analysing the theoretical concepts of individual elements of cooperation. The essential part of the article also identifies practical starting points from the study of cooperation in the selected company. During the discussion, several recommendations are developed for creating sustainable cooperation management. One of the presented results is the application of a "win-win" strategy, in which the partners agree on the mutual ratio of costs and distribution of revenues within the joint activity.

Keywords: cooperation elements; cooperation management; strategic management; sustainable business; effective cooperation

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1. Introduction

Effective cooperation between organisations and its management is a well-established practical and scientific topic. Scientific studies (please see literature review in the next chapter) focused on states, regions, or surveys on big, middle, small companies, or clusters, etc. offer key findings: effective cooperation and its management are critical tools for corporate competitiveness; cooperation strategy is a relevant and often used choice; effective

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cooperation, such as clusters, have positive externalities on the environment in which they operate (Bublienė et al, 2019; El Idrissi et al., 2020).

Our research has thoroughly examined cooperation relations and their management in a single company. We chose a well-established, middle-sized company in B2B IT and energy sector. IT and energy are sectors with a high impact on the Slovak economy and society. Within this research, we focused on identifying the company's primary cooperation relations, management, effectiveness, and implications for market competitiveness and corporate sustainability.

Cooperation is currently one of the most widely used approaches in a competitive market. Companies from different industries meet and create specific values for the customer and each other in providing and enhancing quality, problem-solving, sustainable innovation, shared resources, and other areas.

This topic is one of the central topics for sustainable solutions. If a company wants to succeed in the domestic and global markets, it needs to know and use the basic rules of cooperation management. This way of managing will help the company achieve a higher sustainable benefit for the customer, more sustainable long-term relationships with partners, new partnerships in the domestic and global environment, and many other benefits.

If we transform this idea into a business environment, the company should be managed to withstand environmental changes. Kotler and John (2009) point to a disciplined approach to identify the sources of changes, predicting vulnerabilities and opportunities to generate critical and appropriate responses to guarantee that businesses continue to exist successfully and succeed in achieving business sustainability.

Creating and maintaining cooperative relationships is based on some aspects of cooperation. These elements from different areas of cooperation research can be used in the field of cooperation management. If the aspects of cooperation are mutually present among the cooperating entities, then the relationship between these entities can be called cooperation. Cooperation should use cooperation management but also consider the added value of cooperation and the synergy effects that may arise from it. The individual elements of the cooperation also create the dynamics of the relationship of the elements in the given environment. These elements may occur at the beginning of the relationship and during it. The initial cooperation elements for this environment are: evaluation, similarity, experience, competitiveness, culture, rules, mutual interactions (power, aggression, punishment, associative learning, altruism, and reciprocity), the structure of human social behaviour, and synergistic effect.

The aim of surveying the selected company was to identify the level of use of the elements of cooperation. Examining the perception of cooperation through the identification of key partners of the company, identification of the degree of satisfaction of the company with current partners, identification of the main benefits resulting from cooperation, identification of criteria (trust, intensive communication, etc.) for effective cooperation and their level and identification of problem areas of cooperation. We focussed on analysis of cooperation of a selected company IPESOFIT (a description of the selected company is provided below in this paper).

The reason for such approach understanding that cooperation and the cooperation environment are both knowledge and strategy, increasing social development and progress in particular areas. Nowadays, internal cooperation, i.e. cooperation among individual departments and employees in the company, needs to be improved. This mutually beneficial behaviour must cross the company's boundaries in such a way that the companies cooperate and, by doing so, increase their market value in the future. Cooperation can bring the company improvement in various areas. Specifically, these are, for example, research and development of new products, sharing of production capacities, and merging even the greatest rivals in the industry to increase its competitiveness, i.e. by gaining a foothold among others or the most prominent competitors.

2. Literature review

A comprehensive theoretical definition of cooperation creates a comprehensive view of cooperation. Knowledge about cooperation is essential for understanding its complexity and possible use in the business environment. They make a basis for assessing appropriate cooperation in market conditions, guaranteeing the cooperating subjects a higher chance to become more competitive, meet the set goals, and bring a specific synergistic effect to the relationship.

Cooperation, like competition, is one of the essential tools that influence the development and create changes in the current dynamic environment. The basis for the proper functioning and creation of links in the system, i.e. in a dynamic market environment, is their management, which can plan, organise and manage the individual activities of enterprises, not only within the enterprise but also between external cooperating or competing enterprises (Griffin, 1990; Kaplan and Northon, 2006; Kotabe and Hensen, 2010; Hannah and Eisenhardt, 2018; Dinning et al., 2022). Cooperation is one of the tools for solving problems in the current environment, where the system as a whole mutually operating elements is managed in such a way that it achieves the set goals – cooperation management.

The goal of every cooperation is a particular benefit for one cooperating party, for both parties, or for the entire community (Mierlo and Kleingeld, 2010; Kotler and Kotler, 2012; Lozano et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2019). A specific benefit is expected from the invested resources, costs for fulfilling the purpose and invested effort, and a loss or only a return of the subsidised costs. The changing market conditions, actors, capital investments, political situations and many other factors make the cooperation relationship a dynamic system defined for a certain period within the established boundaries.

It is essential to search for the most suitable partners through specific criteria. Criteria for searching for a cooperation partner may include: knowledge of the partner; the mission of the partner and its culture; similar goals; competence of the partner; the economic situation of the partner; quality of products and solutions; market position; response to customer input; coordination of joint projects; competitive struggle (Martin and Eisehardt, 2003; Corning, 2006; Hewstone and Stroebe, 2006; Vodáček and Vodáčková, 2009). Determining these and other criteria (depending on the subject of the cooperation and the environment in question) should lead to creating a particular strategy and management, which is necessary to achieve synergistic effects in the cooperation environment.

All these insights create a basis for strategic management in cooperation. It is essential to realise that cooperation and a cooperation environment are not only knowledge and strategy but also increasing social development and progress in particular areas. This mutually beneficial behaviour must cross the company's boundaries so that the companies will cooperate and increase their market value in the future. Recommendations for the management of cooperation:

- To create a cooperation environment, it is necessary to establish a cooperation balance between the costs of maintaining and building a relationship and the benefits of the relationship (Ulrich, 2011; Raihani et al., 2012; Yang and Zhang, 2019). Castañer and Oliveira stated that certain “goals” of cooperating partners are the main units of comprehensive situation analysis: “1) private altruistic goals; 2) private selfish—sometimes even opportunistic, that is, to the detriment of the other partner—goals and; 3) common or collective goals.” (Castañer and Oliveira, 2020).
- Establishing rules and norms for the relationship is essential, that is, to create an organisation of individual relationships and their boundaries. This environment will achieve higher benefits than an environment with no such rules (Lozano et al., 2013; Safarzynska, 2013; Szolnoki and Danku, 2018).
- Partners of cooperation relations should find data about their partner at the beginning of the relationship. A look at the history of the partner, his past interactions in the environment, and reactions in past

relationships will point to the similarity of the partner to his state of resources and intentions (influence on the long-term cooperation relationship) (Nowak et al., 2010; Rivas, 2013; Ulrich, 2011; Wu et al., 2017).

- Quantify potential and current relationships from which valuable information can be obtained for assessing competitiveness in the given environment (Bubeliny et al., 2021; Komine, 2014; Safarzynska, 2013; Santos and Zamberlan, 2015).
- Constantly updating information about the partner's past, relationships, and reactions is vital for managing relationships and their strategies and maintaining a cooperative environment (learning dynamics of knowing, checking and evaluating) (Melis and Seeman, 2010; Nowak et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2010; Deng and Zhang, 2021). According to Santos (2021, p.47) “the absence of interaction processes, such as information exchange and interaction coordination, and the absence of top management alliance's endorsement and participation prevents joint value creation. When competition and cooperation are both high, balanced coopeitition positively affects joint value creation. Strong cooperation is a mandatory condition for the joint value creation”.
- To create a synergy in which the connection of common goals of a related or purposeful relationship in the market will create a competitive position (Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Wei, 2010; Damodaran, 2005; Vodáček a Vodáčková, 2009; Liu et al., 2018)
- Trust can also be defined as the subject's expectation that future behaviour will be within the limits of shared values or moral ideas. The basis for trust can also be predetermined internal rules, boundaries, strategies, conditions and rules of cooperation. Trust can also manifest by accepting other environments and strategies of individual subjects. Trust between partners is a crucial factor for stable social systems, e.g. firms, economic clusters, business partners' relations, etc. (Helbing et al., 2010; Rivas, 2013; Wang and Redmiles, 2016; Amaral, et al. 2019). Therefore, we consider cooperation a competitive opponent, e.g., in biology, the rule of unification in case of threat applies. The competitive struggle creates a dynamic environment where entities update their strategies every moment (Wang et al., 2010; Berger, 2011; Rivas, 2013).
- An internal view of culture shows how individual members behave and react to stimuli from the external environment. Culture is often associated with certain symbols and rules created by a given system. Organisations with an internal culture focused on effective cooperation with customers (external environment) could be more innovative, stable, and sustainable (Gächter et al., 2010; Henrich and Henrich, 2006; Zhou et al., 2021). A corporate culture with a high level of internal knowledge transfer have also strong and mutually beneficial partnerships. Internal corporate processes with substantial overlap in cooperation management with partners could significantly strengthen the company's competitiveness and sustainability (Girdzijauskaitė et al., 2019).

Businesses in the given environment are affected by various factors, which can be external (competition, customers, suppliers, development of science and research, etc.) or internal (strengths and weaknesses of the business, mission, goals, etc.) in nature. The company needs to be prepared for the future, which is characterised by unknown circumstances. Still, from the point of view of current changes in business, it is necessary to anticipate future development, potential areas of growth and the direction of the company's needs.

Cooperation and concept of sustainability. According to the three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, and social), we found that effective cooperation management can positively influence mainly the economic and social ones. The environmental dimension is influenced only partially. A company under investigation, IPESoft, is trying to be perceived as a company with a serious interest in its ecological environment. All these activities (beneficial, promotional, supportive, etc.) are focused primarily on its employees. There is (nowadays) no need to communicate them towards society, communities, or customers.

We define sustainability within these cases as a concept which provides strategic, long-term relevance of the company's business or satisfaction of customers and long-term and mutually beneficial relations with partners.

Hugé et al. (2015, p. 5737) state that "it is critical to focus on an adaptable and flexible sustainability assessment procedure, including alignment with organisational objectives and openness concerning various interpretations of sustainability". Effective management of cooperation between partners, their trust, and perception of benefits sharing as fair and strongly positive affect the company's ability to be competitive (from a long-term perspective). Kim et al. (2018, p. 3716) define the connection between cooperation and the concept of sustainability as follows "sustainability implies the extent to which one partner continuously sustains and strengthens its relationship with a partner, based on commitment and long-term orientation." They also conclude that "inter-firm cooperation involves transparent, fair, and mutual relationships between parties. Inter-firm cooperative relationships become collaborative or truly cooperative based on trust, commitment, and long-term orientation"; so they are overall sustainable.

The sustainable economic concept must be understood critically. There are significant barriers to "endless" growth. (Aras and Growther, 2008; Davidson, 2011; Sharma, 2020) We comprehend the sustainable business conception from the point of view of Aras and Growther (2008, p. 436): "Sustainability implies that society must use no more of a resource than can be regenerated". We also agree that corporate culture critically influences a company's sustainable behaviour and business sustainability. They developed a broader concept of sustainability dimensions (Aras and Growther, 2008): (1) societal influence, (2) environmental impact, (3) organisational culture and (4) finance.

Considering "societal influence", IPESOF developed strong relations with its main stakeholders. They are vital partners with their customers and with the University of Žilina. They are also partners with competitors in promoting IT as an attractive field of study and in supporting technical education in the region. As part of these activities, partnerships with regional and city governments were also created.

Considering "environmental impact", the company supports its employees' ecological education and behaviour. Considering "organisational culture", the company strongly supports fairness and friendliness among customers and partners. It is an essential part of their corporate culture. Considering "finance", the company's investments in a strong customer and partnership-oriented corporate culture and ineffective long-term partnerships have proven essential for its strategic competitiveness. According Aras and Growther (2008, p. 460) "it is possible to state though that a firm which has a complete understanding of both sustainability and corporate governance will address these issues more completely". We also conclude that this kind of sustainable cooperation management provides relevant innovations (within the company). Staub et al. (2016) stated in their research, that product and process innovations affect sustainable corporate performance positively and have a significant relationship.

The development of theoretical statements requires the generalisation of practices of functioning companies. We selected a corporation with well-established cooperation relations and partnerships to identify if cooperation relations are managed effectively judging from the point of view of a) the company's competitiveness, b) partners' satisfaction (beneficial mutual relations) c) overall sustainability of the company's business.

2.1 Elements supporting cooperation

The choice of cooperation partner also depends on the willingness to cooperate or according to previous results of cooperation. Collaboration is more stable over time when choosing according to the desire to cooperate. Gaining information on cooperation entities is based on experience, which can be direct (gaining my own experience) and indirect by an individual through gathering information about past behaviour, interactions, and updating reputation. Trust between the cooperation partners is pivotal; it is abstracted through experience (Berger, 2011; West et al., 2011; Raihani et al., 2012; Rivas, 2013). Trust between cooperation partners is essential for its consolidation and growth.

Achieving goals is much easier if people engage in mutually beneficial relationships. In this sense, the cooperation maximises the group's results as a whole: a) The application of the win-win strategy; b) the creation of competitiveness, that is, to win over a stronger rival or a stronger enemy. (Nowak et al., 2010; West et al., 2011) To achieve these goals, it is necessary to establish the rules and conditions of cooperation to achieve a balance in collaboration. Adherence to the rules is essential concerning future cooperation activities (Lozano et al., 2013).

Many cases highlight the importance of the cultural environment, and the culture in a given cooperation environment should be internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous. Cooperating organisations, therefore, create their own culture for the partnership (Henrich and Henrich, 2006; Gächter et al., 2010). Competitiveness is understood as a stronger enemy and increases cooperation between weaker competitors. It is about bringing together competitors to achieve a particular goal. This is where the individual partnerships in which values are created take place. These values are essential for gaining a competitive advantage in the environment in which individuals operate (Berger, 2011; Jensen, 2010; Rand et al., 2011; Rivas, 2013). Regarding natural reciprocity, which can lead to cooperation, for example, in competing entities, it is possible to use this knowledge to create cooperation and gain suitable vital partners (Helbing et al., 2010; Raihani et al., 2012).

Relationships are evaluated not only in terms of cost, altruism, and reciprocity but also for the development and interaction with other elements that make up the cooperation environment. The sanctioning mechanism (punishment) can drive competition and bring better results if supervised. Trust and decency should be the basis, but it is clear from a person's biological nature that individuals fail pretty often, but the group should have the tools, procedures and methods to fail less or not at all (Helbing et al., 2010; Raihani et al., 2012; Ulrich, 2011; West et al., 2011; Lozano et al., 2013; Parks et al., 2013).

Establishing a balance of cooperation is crucial. Rational players choose from the possibility of finding a cooperating player rather than a turncoat. Basic cooperation decisions include cheating as a good advantage if the cost of the cooperation is higher than the benefits gained (Boyd and Lorderbaum, 1987); self-control and spatial heterogeneity (Hamilton's rule); cooperation depends on the reward ratio (Hawk-Dove model); and the application of a "Nash Strategy", where no partner can improve their situation just by changing their own (Gintis and Bowles, 2004; Wang et al., 2010; Rivas, 2013).

The size of the attraction can cause a change of partner. Depending on the benefits of attractiveness, it encourages comparison of the current relationship and benefits with a more attractive partner (Hewstone and Stroebe, 2006; Rivas, 2013). Similar to altruistic relationships, genetically related or similar partners can be misused. That is why these altruistic relationships with a partner in a given cooperation are why they change their partner (Safarzynska, 2013; Komine, 2014). Misuse of cooperation and trust of partners in their favour only to obtain the necessary information or resources that would not otherwise be obtained—also, establishing a partnership with a particular company only to raise awareness or improve market position, not with the real intention of cooperation and a mutually beneficial relationship. On the other hand, there may also be a misuse of the sanction mechanism and the dominant position of key cooperation members for their benefit (Nowak et al., 2010; West et al., 2011). The emergence of a conflict of interest of individual entities during a cooperation relationship occurs when the control mechanism in a cooperation relationship is misunderstood and unaccepted or in poorly formulated cooperation conditions.

Other constraints that significantly affect cooperation include (Wang et al., 2010; Berger, 2011; Lozano et al., 2013; Raihani et al., 2012; Rivas, 2013): high investment in the relationship, too much time spent on developing new products, low costs of sanctions, low fines, changes in the external environment (a political and legal environment that may adversely affect cooperation), discrediting partners, failure to achieve set goals, incorrectly chosen strategy, low level of trust and others.

2.2 State of the market actions in cooperation

The success of any company in cooperation is based on its strategic management. A company that needs an efficient and effective strategy and strategic management cannot be competitive nowadays. Every business strategy is unique work. From this point of view, synergy is based on the functioning of cooperating companies' strategies. In a cooperative environment, they only harmonise their actions for the emergence of synergetic effects. The corporate advantage of cooperation offers a significant competitive position. Kanter (1994) presents corporate alliances as a living system, evolving gradually within its capabilities. The research team went through more than 500 interviews in 37 companies in 11 countries, some ties were more than 20 years old, and others were just the current response to the environment. They identified three primary aspects of business cooperation (Kanter, 1994): a) cooperation connections represent a living system that is evolving and offering better opportunities for the future; b) engaging in alliances is more fruitful than exchanging resources; c) a dense network of interpersonal relationships and internal infrastructure improves learning. If company managers wish to create a cooperation strategy, they need to analyse the cooperation potential of the company, create a shared vision with partners and determine the orientation of cooperation; to build cooperation relationships based on common goals. For success, however, it is necessary to use elements of project management and ensure an environment that will be supported by effective communication, working with information and building partnerships: strategy and planning, business process review, changes in organisational structure, changes in ideas, efficient work with data, cooperation database, sharing information with employees and partners of the company (Kotler and John, 2009; Vodáček and Vodáčková, 2009; Kotabe and Helsen, 2010).

2. Materials and methods

The essential knowledge base on cooperation is broad-spectrum and exists in various fields. This article provides a basis for cooperation from specific theoretical and practical perspectives. The information was gained primarily from the scientific research articles mentioned in the references and the books, which were supported by detailed studies and research by the authors. In this article, the research in a selected company within the cooperation was presented as well.

After examining the individual articles and creating a "knowledge base" for modelling the cooperation relationship, we can assume that cooperation is integral to all areas, whether a business, living or non-living environment. It is pivotal to acknowledge that cooperation and the cooperation environment are not just knowledge and strategy but significantly increasing social development and progress in particular areas.

Based on a comprehensive theoretical analysis of cooperation and its forms, elements, and the formation of cooperation management, it is necessary to link this knowledge to a natural business environment directly. This knowledge was used in comprehensive research at selected company IPESOF.

The following methodology was used for research purposes. Comprehensive content analysis identified elements that support the cooperation environment and the ones that prevent cooperation. The research was carried out using the method of sociological inquiry in the form of questionnaires, followed by data verification in the form of semi-structured interviews. A survey of cooperation and cooperation relations was conducted at IPESOF. Logical argumentation, induction, and deduction of information across all research and the processing of its results.

Expert interviews

The basis was a semi-structured questionnaire with open questions. Detailed and comprehensive answers were provided by the managers of the company's main products (in the organisational structure included directly under

the CEO). There are four managers. The CEO also filled out the same questionnaire. Each completed questionnaire was a detailed and comprehensive document with specific information.

Subsequently, after processing the conclusions from the answers, we conducted interviews with managers and the CEO, where we found out more details and clarifications. We added the results from the interviews as more detailed information to the insights from the inquiry.

The overall results can be presented as comprehensive information about the company's state in chapter 3.

The questions dealt thematically with the process of creating cooperation, their management and elements that significantly affect the competitiveness and sustainability of the company's business:

- Communication with partners
- Potential for cooperation
- conditions of the cooperation relationship
- Contingency plan
- Three main cooperation domains:
 1. Main elements of cooperation with partners
 2. Internal cooperation
 3. Elements that prevent cooperation
- Main cooperation elements of IPESOT:
 - Cultural environment
 - Rules and conditions of cooperation
 - Control and sanction mechanism
 - Trust
 - Competitiveness
 - Number of members in the cooperation environment
 - Marketing concept

The problem is a growing failure or unsuccessfulness of cooperation interactions in the business environment within the defined conditions and expectations of cooperation. Strategic alliances are one of the most common ways of cooperating, where two or more business entities cooperate based on specified conditions and certain obligations. However, most of these alliances fail, which is why the cooperation approach is one of the fundamental areas of our research. Cooperation must be broken down into the essential elements that affect a given case's success or failure.

The objective is to apply appropriate elements of cooperation in the company's internal management to prevent unsuccessful cooperation interactions by 30%. The article identifies these elements in the selected environment and defines general recommendations. The main results include the attractiveness of the cooperation partner and the combination of resources necessary for starting an effective cooperation relationship.

This research makes it crucial to form general recommendations instrumental for other companies. The purpose is to strengthen cooperation in the business environment while creating a mutually beneficial environment. The cooperation environment is the basis for joint success in the frequent changes in the global climate that interconnect national markets. The course of cooperation depends on the initial setting of the partnership (goals, combination of resources) and changes from the external environment (actors of the external environment). Termination of cooperation means not only the assessment (evaluation) of the partnership but also the creation of a point of experience that builds the reputation and reputation of the actor.

IPESOT represents a unique business environment in which the cooperation approach has proven, but it also prevents cooperation with "grey" companies. According to our research, grey companies represent companies

with inconsistent behaviour, defensive culture, the occurrence of turncoats, the absence of a win-win strategy and an in-efficient combination of resources. Grey companies represent a risky choice when choosing a cooperation partner in the cooperation environment. The research also points to a business environment in which all these elements (elements that support and prevent cooperation) tend to have certain specific behaviours and results.

3. Results

The versatile aspects identified in the following texts encourage the development of cooperation and its implementation in the business environment. One of the starting points worth mentioning is that cooperation is based on the natural inequality of individuals and entities, which is reflected in the effective use of these inequalities and the creation of higher fitness for the partnership. (We consider fitness in this section a healthy competitive advantage). An essential element is inputting short-term (important) and long-term (experience) conditions.

The current society, market organisation, opportunities and future create a dynamic environment in which each individual, company, organisation, and group must form alliances in cooperation to manage current conditions better and gain benefits for future development and progress. Cooperation and its various forms are currently one of the most widely used approaches in an increasingly globalised market, where companies from different industries meet and together create specific values for the customer as well as for each other in the process of providing and improving quality, problem-solving, innovation, common resources, and others.

3.3 Research results from IPESOFIT

By analysing cooperation, cooperating actors, cooperation relations, and cooperation environment, we identified the main starting points for collaboration in the business environment based on theoretical sources. We subsequently observed these in the specific IPESOFIT environment. IPESOFIT is a successful Slovak IT company with domestic and international customers and partners. They provide comprehensive IT solutions for energy and industrial companies: e.g. IPESOFIT D2000® a robust SCADA system as an industrial multiplatform automation solution. IPESOFIT have more than 100 employees and has been active on the market since 1993.

Selected elements of cooperation with partners describe a relationship focused on collaboration and predetermined a thriving environment for achieving goals, ways of interaction and communication, and the potential development of cooperation. Cooperation is described by the elements on which cooperation relationships are built. The latest information identifies the elements that prevent and harm the opportunities for cooperation.

After interviewing responsible managers, we can present commented results:

Cooperation partners come from customers, project partners, customers of individual solutions and tailor-made solutions. They can be divided into three areas according to the current intensity of cooperation: 1) high intensity of cooperation, 2) medium intensity of cooperation, 3) low intensity of cooperation. Establish rules of communication and relationship values to avoid a decrease in relationship potential and trust in the partner, even with highly effective communication. The ratio of trust and effectiveness of communication creates three groups of partners: 1) trust = efficiency; 2) trust < efficiency; 3) trust > efficiency.

Communication. The two main communication channels include e-mail communication and telephone communication. They make up 80% of the total communication. Less, but also used are communications in the form of a personal meeting, and a common IS such as a Helpdesk for individual solutions. The most effective, but

also the most expensive, is communication in the form of a personal interview. This type will define the relationships, objectives, interactions and rules of the partnership more precisely and on a higher level.

The **potential for cooperation** with current partners is relatively high, with 7.2 out of 10 possible points. The **motives for cooperation** include the expansion of the customer portfolio, particular demand - tailor-made solutions, cooperation in joint projects, and increased profits and sales. The benefits of the partnership include expanding market potential, improving marketing sales (better segment knowledge, expanding sales), increasing market sales, creating references to the company, developing science and technology (evolution of know-how), and increasing efficiency and quality of cooperation. Change after the cooperation establishment.

The partnership brought the most considerable improvements in higher profits, raised market shares and research development. On the contrary, it brought the lowest enhancements in cost reduction, a more quality work environment and education. The work with information and the continuity of individual processes significantly improved.

The **conditions of the cooperation relationship** include financial, contractual - production, contractual - delivery and contractual - after-sales requirements. These conditions are highly demanding. With their satisfaction with their fulfilment, the complexity is always the same, and in some cases, 1-2 degrees lower—criteria for effective cooperation with partners. The examined criteria include mutual trust, benefits of collaboration, compliance with contractual conditions, level of communication, common IS, level of use of cooperation resources and flexibility of the partner. The criteria for the benefit of cooperation and the level of communication have the potential to improve their performance. Satisfaction with the fulfilment of the examined criteria is 74.28%. The criteria are therefore met to a greater extent, and relationships can be considered stable for cooperation activities.

The following activities are used to **develop relationships with individual partners**: teambuilding activities; corporate events; creating common values, providing benefits without sanction, and the possibility of loaned employees.

The **contingency plan** represents a procedure in the event of a decline in the cooperation relationship and the emergence of several inconveniences. The company does not have such a plan because if the cooperation with a partner failed, the company would not get into a significant crisis. The company states that the failure of one cooperation relationship with a customer is not liquidating for the company, as it has a broad portfolio of its partners (customers, suppliers, etc.)

The following table describes three main cooperation domains of IPESOFT: 1) main elements of cooperation with partners, 2) internal cooperation and 3) elements that prevent cooperation. Selected elements of cooperation with partners describe collaborative relationships and predetermine a thriving environment for achieving common goals, for better communication and with potential for further development. Internal cooperation is described by the elements on which the cooperative relationships between departments are based. The elements that prevent, hinder and damage cooperation are determined as the last (Table 1).

Table 1. Three main cooperation domains of IPESOF

Main elements of cooperation with partners	Internal cooperation	Elements that prevent cooperation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interdependence of partners (hardware, software) – “Win-win” strategy between partners – Collaboration on mutual commercial projects – Synergetic relations with partners – Complementary relations with partners (ability to address complex commerce projects with complementary expertise and products) – Consensual relations – Seeking for compromises – Marketing support – Collaborative products development (innovations) – All partners are certified experts in their fields of expertise – Prompt reaction to customers' needs – Pricing flexibility considering margins and discounts – Mutual trust – Deep knowledge of partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cooperation on software solutions – Looking for a partnership that complies with internal unwritten rules and conditions (localisation, reputation, loyalty, economic situation, etc.) – Compliance with formal rules within partnerships with large companies – Control mechanism within projects (including approval of entry into the project) – Maintaining relations with partners, workshops – Creating “tailor-made” solutions for the customers – Obtaining funds for the growth and existence of the company (economic, professional, communication and others) – Entry into new markets, network partnerships – Marketing support – comparison with the competition – Advantages of cooperation: turnover, references – Establishing partnerships to obtain new business opportunities and new customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Only customer preferences decide (no possibility of own ideas) – Different philosophies and cultures of customer and partner companies – The need to adapt – Decision-making is limited by the budget, the final price of the product – Price sensitivity on the part of the customer or partner. Also, inhibiting the development of the solution. – Insufficient allocation of resources by the partner – Insufficient/inappropriate competencies of the partner – Restrictive conditions from the customer (e.g. the entire development of the solution must be done by only one company) – Partners or customers do not understand the relationship as a “win-win” strategy – Worse reputation of a partner or customer – Worse financial or organisational situation with a partner or customer – Lower quality of products or solutions from partners (understood according to the state of the market)

Source: own elaboration

Finding a partnership that meets internal “unwritten rules” and conditions such as location, reputation, loyalty, economic situation etc. IPESOF always starts mutually beneficial cooperation (strategy: “win-win”) and maintains a good reputation and positive reviews on the market. In the first place, it takes care of the customer's needs, which is why it would only be able to cooperate with a company that meets the criteria for cooperation (capital resources, product quality, market references, culture, and company vision). IPESOF would not work with an “unequal” (different) potential partner. Both partners contribute to the relationship with their resources (hardware-software), from which they create shared solutions for the customer. The effect of a “win-win” strategy: a strategy in which the partners agree on a cost-benefit ratio of 50:50 also corresponds to the setting up a control mechanism within the projects.

IPESOF considers the partner's reputation when establishing a relationship and during cooperation. Evaluating the partner's reputation and the experience gained from cooperation directly influences future collaboration possibilities. Active cooperation prevails, given that in most cases in IPESOF these are long-term projects for the customer; it is necessary to adapt operationally to the current situation. Therefore, the conditions of cooperation also need to be adjusted. However, the established contractual requirements are mostly fixed—the changes mainly concern project management (internal dynamics of cooperation) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Main cooperation elements in IPESOT

Elements	Explanations
Cultural environment	Within the corporate culture, employees follow the IPESOFTE Code of Ethics. It is an official company document of strategic importance, which describes the basic set of standards and rules for all stakeholders and appeals to the behaviour of employees towards the external environment, i.e. specific behaviour towards customers and partners as well as behaviour within the company.
Determining the rules and conditions of cooperation	According to IPESOFTE, effective project management is based on: "win-win" strategies, contractual conditions of cooperation, and division of project tasks, which creates engagement in a mutually beneficial relationship.
Control and sanction mechanism	IPESOFTE bases its partnerships on trust, a proven approach to effective collaboration. The control mechanism takes place mainly at the level of compliance with the contractual conditions.
Trust	As IPESOFTE bases all partnerships on trust, this is the driving force behind the growth of cooperation, or more precisely, it will follow the rules and put the same effort into a joint project. Otherwise, the relationship would not be established.
Competitiveness	Cooperation with a partner makes it possible to enter a new market. Development of product properties with partners is an activity at the customer, where the project implementation takes place; it is a mutual complementarity and finding an effective solution for the customer, corresponding to a quick response to customer feedback.
Number of members in the cooperation environment	There are no turncoats in IPESOFTE. The reason is the number of cooperating subjects (each of the cooperating members wants to fulfil their tasks on the project, and the maximum number is three due to mutually beneficial relationships and projects).
Marketing concept	The concept of relationship management is the most widely used in IPESOFTE. This concept is also the most effective form of communication with the customer. The advantage is personal contact, formally at business meetings, negotiations, and conferences and less formally at IPESOFTE workshops and "events" of other organisers.

Source: own elaboration

Limitations of cooperation in IPESOFTE

- Failure to achieve set goals: With a comprehensive solution, the hardware partner may not secure the hardware, and the customer may not be able to pay for it—differentiated strategic objectives in cooperation.
- Wrongly chosen strategy: own philosophy and culture of the companies, changes in views on cooperation may hinder its creation or continuation, e.g., failure to identify with the win-win strategy that underpins every single cooperation relationship at IPESOFTE. The position of partners in the market and the competitiveness of individual partners increase if they are strategically interconnected.
- Poorly understood conditions of cooperation set at the beginning of the relationship.
- Low level of trust: customer preferences are decisive, and the strength of the competition is driven by its brand, position, marketing, and other alliances that influence customer choice.
- The emergence of conflicts of interest occurs when organisational structures overlap and their organisation, size, complexity, and rules of conduct differ. Too formal partnerships with large companies slow down the project and hinder the development of the solution (compliance).

- Linking of information with partners. IPESoft needs a sufficiently efficient linking of information. Linking information is intended to help strengthen a healthy and strong relationship, where both parties know their strengths and weaknesses, expectations, and threats from the environment. It has a partial link between the company's policy and strategy. It has information on accounting status, values, visions, goals, and culture that is partially linked or unrelated. Changes in the external environment, initial legislative restrictions on the establishment of cooperation relations,
- The financial complexity of the cooperation relationship from its inception to its termination,
- The results do not match the effort (benefits of the relationship < costs per relationship).

4. Discussion and conclusion

The word cooperation first appears in every company at the internal level. Because only if all parts of the "internal mosaic" fit together and each article cooperates with the other can we refer to the internal cooperation, i.e. the engine that drives the company forward towards the external environment.

4.1 General cooperation strategy with a focus on business sustainability

According to the close connection between corporate sustainability and effective cooperation management, we provide our strategic point of view. Elements of cooperation management from the literature and the subsequent research in natural conditions were to define a functioning system of cooperation management based on selected elements. These parameters include trust, the theory of stronger competitors - competitiveness, partner evaluation, cooperation benefits, and partners' interdependence.

Trust: The initial impulse to the relationship is created by trust in evaluating the partner's credibility. Trust can also be based on compliance with pre-established internal rules, involvement in the strategy, and compliance with the regulations and conditions of cooperation. Trust is valued throughout the relationship, not just at the beginning. Trust is also assessed in terms of the importance of the partner for the cooperation relationship or the position in the environment.

More robust competitor theory: On a global scale, there is always a competitive struggle, i.e. a struggle for the customer and over-market share. Thus, cooperating companies create partnerships that give them a competitive advantage and more effective and beneficial cooperation. Combining competition within defined limits and set goals is a manifestation of a cooperation relationship from which the partners benefit.

Partner evaluation: Partner evaluation is the primary interaction for a functioning cooperation management system. It is based on the assumption that if the evaluation of a partner in the defined criteria is positive, then such a partner is further accepted and vice versa. Defined stages can vary from relationship to relationship, for example, evaluation of entry into a relationship, current relationship - relationship interactions, potential relationship - future and necessary. The criteria for each relationship are reputation, possible resources and others. The evaluation of the partner needs to be understood in a broader range of a) the benefits that can be gained (present); (b) expected benefits (future); (c) activity of members (interest in cooperation); (d) current needs and objectives; (e) mission, values, culture; (f) information obtained gradually from the relationship (positive, negative, responsible performance, activity).

The benefit of cooperation: The goal of each business activity was a particular benefit for one party, for both parties or the whole community. More significant benefits are always expected from the effort and the resources put into the relationship. From the expected benefit, we can give a few examples of common cooperation relationships: a) a comprehensive solution for the customer, (b) establishing itself on a foreign market, (c) a

positive reference; awareness, d) higher market share; e) connecting to find a suitable partner; (f) resource efficiency; (g) interconnection intensity; (h) raising other areas (education, joint purchasing and marketing).

Benefits of joint marketing: The element is focused on several marketing directions: recommendations, awareness and promotion. Positive suggestions can gain new customers/members, enter new markets, and strengthen the name / particular branding. The goal effect is to contribute to the competitiveness of the cooperation relationship through joint interactions in marketing areas.

Interdependence of partners: Defined in four areas: a) access to information, (b) resources invested; c) education; d) product development. The partners' dependence in terms of their interconnection in cooperation is evident in all re-searched practical and theoretical areas. From a practical point of view, these are joint activities that create added value for the relationship for all participants.

The system of cooperation management defined in this way has a higher chance of becoming more competitive in the market conditions and meeting its goals.

4.2 General process steps of cooperation towards sustainable business

Process: *Product research and development.* The current market is more focused on adapting to customer requirements, essentially offering customers a "tailor-made" product. In a broader context, product research and development could also be understood as creating the required solutions (products and services). Therefore, cooperation is necessary to develop a mutually beneficial working relationship between the customer and the company. The advantage of this relationship is that the company tries to satisfy its customer.

On the other hand, a significant disadvantage is that the customer often needs to learn exactly what they want or know how to specify it correctly. Their operation area is unique, so the cooperation becomes closer. This increases the product's cost and extends the product's research and development deadlines.

Simplifying the internal process of product development and creation can bring the customer a flexible solution according to his specific requirements. To meet these needs in the required quality and time interval, it is necessary to correctly specify the customer's needs and analyse the company's capabilities.

Process: *Work for an organisation.* It is also necessary to think at the managerial level. Every manager should plan, organise, recruit and lead people and supervise and strive to create an environment where people can be successful. The organisation of work and the team are pivotal. Its basis is the corporate organisational structure. Suppose the corporate organisational structure is well designed and each employee is sufficiently informed about their competencies in the company (especially about the job description, responsibilities and powers). In that case, it is all the easier to form the organisational structure of the project team, which may vary depending on the current situation in individual departments.

Process: *Management and supervision.* The manager's role is to continue to develop team cooperation between the employees in the individual departments, but primarily to ensure that there is regular communication on the part of the management regarding the current state of the project and the fulfilment of its goals. The level of employee awareness should also be increased through regular meetings. Employees should be able to evaluate the state of their work simultaneously, as well as a kind of motivation for employees to become more interested in fulfilling the given goal.

Approach to employees. It is necessary to let people know that they are needed and respected in the company. Greater employee engagement can eliminate uncertainty and improve internal culture and cooperation. Because if

management is the art of leading people, then it is necessary to think of people at first as they are the main actors in the cooperation.

And finally, it is the need for a check. For each project, regularly: resources, performance, and time. However, checking is relatively simple if the previous actions are set up correctly. It is essential to set goals so their fulfilment can be checked and entrust the person responsible for checking.

Process: *Getting feedback*. Generally, feedback can be identified as information referring to previous activity results. But also as a system connection, in which part of the output is often returned to the input to control or maintain that performance. Gaining feedback is a process. The results obtained from this process can be incorporated into other processes or form their basis. Among the processes based on the feedback results is the continuous improvement process.

4.3. Novelty and practical value of the obtained results

After examining theoretical knowledge about cooperation and sustainability and the literature review, we can observe a need for more relevant research cases from the point of view of a single market entity, a corporation. We were able to observe well-developed cooperation relations or partnerships of IPESOF. Intensive research of IPESOF's cooperation management proved that common principles are relevant for this company's general competitiveness- Now we can conclude that all main theoretical principles of effective cooperation management were present in the observed case: 1) Developing and management of mutually beneficial relations between partners; 2) The individual parties must understand the distribution of benefits as fair; 2) Focusing on long-term relations with partners and building of mutual trust; 3) Friendly and rational approach to overcoming possible problems or conflicts We were able to identify and observe all these general cooperation management principles. According to our survey, they are valid, dynamic, and integral parts of IPESOF's strategy and daily operative tasks. The main general benefit of our findings is that cooperation management principles can powerfully and positively influence a company's competitiveness and sustainability. Research point of view from a single company provides practical information about effective cooperation management in connection with the company's market sustainability. Considering the research gap: a) We identify that observed cooperation relations provide towards the company's competitiveness; b) Main partnerships are managed and developed regarding the satisfaction of the partners - partnerships are mutually beneficial; c) Observed system of cooperation management is effective and significantly strengthen the business sustainability of the observed company as well as its partners.

Our research has two main limitations which must be taken into consideration. First, we have focused our primary survey on the single market entity. This was compensated by a deductive approach – from common scientific knowledge about cooperation management principles to a single company. Secondly, the company is situated in the Slovak Republic. Therefore, the results are more valid for Central European conditions than for the rest of the world. Although this is partially compensated by the fact that the company is active in the European Union market, they have several vital customers from the EU and Asia. So partial generalisation for these markets could be valid.

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