

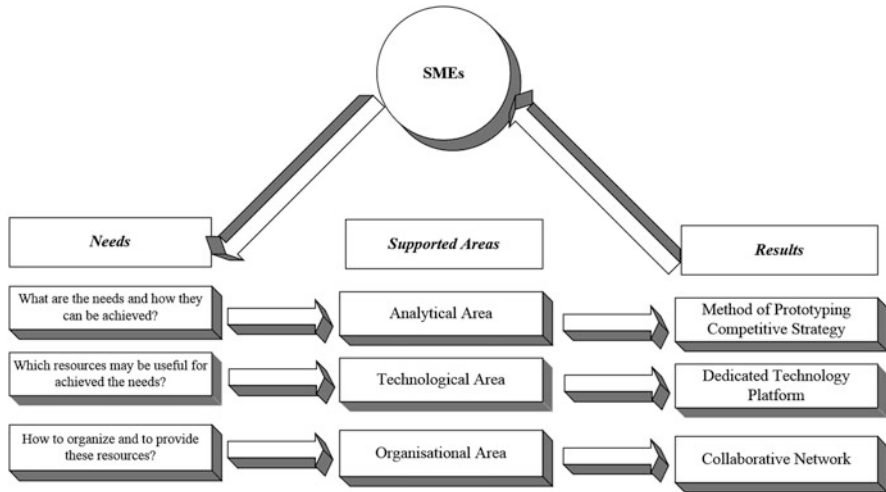
# Preface

The market for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) worldwide plays a key role in shaping and developing the economy. Performed research shows that the good condition of SMEs affects the state of the overall economy—both locally and globally. Additionally increasing market volatility and phenomena such as reindustrialization of the cities, Industry 4.0, or B4B activity create the need to be better and adapt faster to changes in the market. From this perspective more than ever it is reasonable to effectively support the development of SMEs and improve their competitiveness.

The effectiveness of competing is determined by the ability of the entity to continuously improve through the implementation of innovative changes leading to the achievement of designated purposes (such as increasing profits, reducing the number of leaving customers, raising the quality of products and services). The ability to properly select such changes will bring the expected effects and is determined primarily by market awareness and theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of innovation management. The vast majority of SMEs do not have such knowledge and do not have access to it, which justifies the preparation of support programs for them. The enhancing of SMEs' competitiveness takes place on several areas:

- The substantive—by launching dedicated courses and training
- The economical—by providing sources of financing innovation
- The technological—by lowering the cost of purchase and installation of technological tools

In each of these areas, there are different possibilities for support in the range of abilities and various local and national initiatives or the European and governmental programs. However, as indicated by studies, their availability is varied and insufficient, because most of the SMEs' managers still operate intuitively, focusing on short-term purposes, without the ability to forward plan and predict its effects. In order to achieve the expected efficacy, an approach should be proposed in which



**Fig. 1** The approach of competitiveness supporting (*source: own research*)

these three main areas (i.e., analytical, technological, and organizational) of competitiveness support are operating independently, which means that for a trader to take advantage of them, they must be aware of these (Fig. 1):

- What are needs and how can they be achieved?
- Which resources (i.e., technologies, methods, tools) may be useful for achieving these needs?
- What are the ways of organizing and providing these resources?

Against the above there is a need to integrate the areas supporting the competitiveness of SMEs in one complete approach (Fig. 1). Such approaches provide:

- Effective method of prototyping competitive strategy
- Implemented on a dedicated technology platform
- Being economically and organizationally available for SMEs

The proposed approach indicates the need for using the latest achievements of science and technology, while maintaining its organizational and economic availability for SMEs. This in turn implies the need for cooperation of many SMEs to increase their competitiveness potential and the apportionment of liability and the cost of implementation.

SMEs' cooperation cannot be limited only to the sharing of costs. It is also necessary to share the experience, skills, and elaborated patterns of conduct in those areas that are strengths of the company and in return to expect similar support in these areas is the company's weak point. Such a mutually supporting group is called the Benchmarking Collaborative Network (BCN). The monograph is dedicated to its characteristics, organization, and functioning.

Chapter 1 presents the current methods to support the competitiveness of enterprises and their constraints from the perspective of SMEs. Through the content of this chapter, we have sought to answer the questions, what are the possibilities of supporting the competitiveness of SMEs, and why does the typical SME use these methods very rarely? Typically the financial constraints of small entities are considered as causes of all problems. However, research shows that although they are important, they are not only and often not the most important limitations of SMEs' functioning.

Chapter 2 presents emerging science and business trends and new development directions, which are promising due to the effectiveness of supporting the competitiveness of enterprises. Some of these methods, such as benchmarking and Business Intelligence, are known and have been used for a long time. Usually, this, however, requires such a large commitment of organizational capacity, human, technical, and financial, that its scope of application in SMEs is small. Other methods, such as cooptation and crowdsourcing, still require scientific and practical research in the area of their usefulness for SMEs. Thus, the content of Chap. 2 supports the search for answers to the question, what new methods, techniques, and technologies can and should be addressed in order to promote the competitiveness of SMEs? Certainly, Chap. 2 does not provide a complete answer to these questions, but focuses around these areas of science and knowledge, which have found their use in the proposed concept "Benchmarking Collaborative Network."

BCN concept has been presented in detail in Chaps. 3–5, starting from the method of competitiveness analysis (Chap. 3), through its use in the group of SMEs (Chap. 4), to ensuring its proper implementation through the coordination of the activities in the group (Chap. 5). BCN is described in three areas:

- The analytical—responding to the question of which analytical methods support the development of SME competitiveness strategy, taking into account the shortcomings of the knowledge and skills of their users?
- The technological—responding to the question of how to ensure the availability of such technology and tools of analysis and reporting which are the best for implementing the objectives of the analytical perspective?
- The organizational—corresponding to the question of how to ensure the possibility of achieving the objectives of the analytical and technological perspective and achieve high efficiency in the case of SMEs' limitations?

In summary, the BCN conception, starting from the model and the method of the competitive strategy, also proposes specific methods to implement these solutions in the situation of limitations in knowledge, skills, financial resources, and human resources. This does not mean that the BCN conception proposes unrealistic solutions. Its use is associated with acceptance of collective action, cooperation, and acceptance of responsibility for the results of this cooperation. It is also associated with specific financial burdens which, however, are significantly smaller than in functioning alone. Usability of BCNs has been verified in research groups of

SMEs dental clinics' functioning in a highly competitive and dynamic market. This verification gave as many answers as asking the next questions. Therefore, the proposal presented in Chaps. 3–5 is also an invitation to a discussion of the benefits and risks posed by collaboration between companies, especially being SMEs.

A summary of these elements is in Chap. 6. It also shows the wider context of the application of BCN, which, although designed for SMEs, does not preclude the use of other groups. Hence, BCN can and should be treated not as a closed solution, but as an open conception with many opportunities for practical application.

Warsaw, Poland  
January 2015

Katarzyna Rostek



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-16735-0>

Benchmarking Collaborative Networks

A Key to SME Competitiveness

Rostek, K.

2015, XIX, 169 p. 55 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-16735-0