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Abstract

Growing popularity of information and communication technologies has a significant impact on the way how enterprises are conducting their purchase processes and make them less time and resource consuming, as well as environmentally aware due to the paperless communication. For quite a long period of time, mostly big enterprises have benefited from these solutions and attention of most researchers has been focused on them.

The aim of this paper is to examine how small and medium-sized enterprises use Internet in their purchase processes (12 actions itemized in the purchase process were analysed). The available Internet tools included homepages of suppliers, company blogs, social networks, B2B e-commerce websites, B2B e-marketplaces, e-catalogues, e-requests, etc. The matter of the sources of information about suppliers was also raised.

The author conducted a survey among 126 small and medium-sized enterprises from the Lower Silesia Region. It was aimed at learning their preferences as to how to use the Internet in the purchasing process, at evaluating the usage rate of individual solutions and at identifying the types of products bought via the Internet.

Results of the research proved that Polish SMEs are familiarized with Internet tools that can be applied in the purchasing process, although these solutions are not very common, especially in small enterprises. A further research should be based on the interviews to identify deeply the reasons that prevent enterprises from using available solutions. Moreover, the author would like to verify whether there are some industries less amenable to using the new opportunities.

Keywords: SME, purchase process, Internet tools

Introduction

Use of the information and communication technology (ICT) in purchasing process is not a new idea born during the recent years only. As early as 50 years ago, Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) was applied, the solution that made it possible to exchange business documents between various computer systems with use of established message formats. However, the traditional EDI was an expensive solution and, in consequence, was used mostly by large, well-funded companies having many suppliers. Emergence of the World Wide Web and a drop in prices of personal computers resulted in common and comprehensive application of the ICT in enterprises. Nowadays, it strongly influences many aspects of a company operation and one of the processes clearly modified by these changes is the procurement process. The Web offers numerous solutions that facilitate and speed-

up the actions related to purchases in the enterprises. It makes it possible not only to search for potential suppliers, establishing contacts with them, exchange of information and also, more and more often, execution of the purchase itself and making the payment.

Small and medium-sized enterprises significantly affect economies of many countries (Sila & Dobni, 2012). They significantly contribute to the GDP, generate the majority of employment (Morais et al., 2011) and influence economic growth not only at the local or regional levels, but at the national level as well. The SMEs appreciate importance of the supply management in the enterprise and are aware of the relation between correct execution of the purchasing process and the results reached by the company. However, because of numerous restrictions present in this size companies, they are often described as “normative” or “conservative” buyers. This concerns also adoption of the solutions related to using the ICT in purchases – many publications indicate that SMEs are lagging in implementing modern solutions in their businesses.

The issues related to using the Internet at purchasing process in the SMEs do not take too much place in the literature. Attention of most researchers is focused on big enterprises, which usually apply modern solutions supporting the procurement processes. This publication concerns employment of the Internet in purchasing process by SMEs, is aimed at determination of goals and the application level, as well as at identification of possible differences occurring in this area by enterprises of individual sizes.

Therefore, the goal the author set for this article is: firstly, to identify the available Internet tools, that can be appropriable in purchasing process of SMEs, both as a source of information and as place of transaction, and secondly, to explore the ways they are used. These included the homepages of suppliers, company blogs, social networks, B2B e-commerce websites, B2B e-marketplaces, e-catalogues, e-requests, etc. The author conducted a survey among 126 small and medium-sized enterprises from the Lower Silesia Region. It aimed at learning their preferences as to how to use particular tools in purchasing process and the usage rate of individual solutions.

Review of the subject literature

Clear differences are observed between the SMEs and large companies as regards the levels of using the ICT solutions (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2019). Researchers indicate several types of barriers hampering acceptance of these solutions by the enterprises (Levy & Powell, 2005). These barriers can be divided to the external ones (related e.g. to legal, cultural or technological aspects) and the internal ones (having their sources in the organisation itself). In the case of the SME companies, the latter is above all limited level of financial and human resources and also insufficient knowledge about available possibilities and missing support from the management (resulting from insufficient time and underestimation of the opportunities offered by these solutions (Cox et al., 2001), (Kapurubandara & Lawson, 2006).

These factors affect also adoption and use of the e-commerce solutions by the SME companies (Morais et al., 2011). However, it is worth to note that some aspects of operation of this size enterprises can next contribute to easier implementation of the e-commerce related solutions. They include, first of all, closer contacts with

customers, better skills to adapt to new situations and ability to implement changes faster.

Companies use the e-commerce solutions to different degrees. Sila and Dobni (Sila & Dobni, 2012) distinguished three usage patterns of e-commerce in SME: E-Limiteds, E-Leaders, and E-Laggards, taking into consideration the following three groups of factors: technological, organizational, as well as inter-organizational and environmental factors.

Because of limited resources and sometimes insufficient knowledge about purchasing and supply management, the SMEs less often treat this activity as a strategic one (Ellegaard, 2006). Results of Paik (Paik et al., 2009) show however that the persons making purchases realize a strong influence of the purchased products and services on the company results. They also believe that market position of their company is highly dependent on the way, how their procurement is executed. The companies emphasized also the problems of finding new suppliers to replace those currently collaborating, which can mean that they may have insufficient purchasing leverage.

Even if there are no significant differences in the access level to the Web between different-size enterprises, there are differences between them in their way of using the Internet in purchases. However, the profits identified in researches are similar and the following can be mentioned among them: quick access to information, easier communication with the current suppliers, its lower cost, less paper work, easier and faster searching for new suppliers (Moon, 2005), (Stankovska, 2016). Sometimes, financial benefits connected with lower purchase costs are mentioned (Stratopoulos & Dehning, 2000), but the authors claim that the advantage is rather short-lasting, since the competing companies usually implement a similar technology in a few years.

The e-procurement is the process that, according to van Weele (2010) “..includes web technology-based purchasing solutions aimed at simplifying commercial transactions within and between organizations and information technology solutions for ordering, logistics and handling systems as well as for payment systems”. Even if elements of this process are more and more often executed by companies, they are not so common in the SME sector as among large companies. Chan and Lee (2003) developed a model of behaviour of small and medium-sized companies connected with adoption of the electronic procurement solutions. They found that the factors like the value of e-procurement adoption, power of the e-procurement, trust on a supplier, trust on the IT and power of suppliers, decisively affect adoption of these solutions. The same authors pay attention to the role of intermediary institutions (like B2B e- marketplaces) in promoting the purchasing solutions using the Internet and in building confidence to this type solutions. In addition, the government institutions should conduct a wide-scale educative action and implement the necessary legal regulations (Chan & Lee, 2003), (Prafat, 2017).

The sector of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises represents the prevailing majority of enterprises in Poland – as many as 99.8% of them (according to 2018 data of Polish Agency for Enterprise Development). The most numerous group, 96.5%, are 2 million of microenterprises. The fractions in the structure of Polish companies are: 2.6% (53.8 thousands) for small enterprises and 0.7% (15.3 thousands) for medium-sized enterprises (PARP, 2019). Moreover, in 2017, the

SME sector made nearly a half (49.8%) of the GDP and was the workplace for 68.3% of total employees in the business sector.

The high importance attached by the SMEs to the purchase area is confirmed by the results obtained in 2012 by Dorożyński and Urbaniak (2013), who examined the factors that facilitate or hamper running a business on a sample of 171 small and medium-sized enterprises from the Lodz Metropolitan Area. In the opinion of the companies, “cooperation with suppliers and subcontractors” appeared the most significant factor from among 30 of those examined and was rated 5.5 in the 7-degree scale (standard deviation 1.43 and coefficient of variability 26%) (Dorożyński & Urbaniak, 2013).

Procurement is also indicated as the most important area of the knowledge partnership on the grounds of results of the examinations carried-out within 2010-2012 on the sample of 247 SMEs representing both the regional, national and international ranges (Adamik & Flaszewska, 2013). The actions aimed at the knowledge partnership in the procurement area are carried-out by 69.7% of the companies operating in the regional market and by 56.9% of those with the national range. The examined enterprises gathered the knowledge about their closer and further environment utilizing mostly professional press/literature and the Internet (61.8% and 52.2%, respectively).

Supply purchasing in the enterprises

According to Lysons and Farrington (2005), the term “supply purchasing” means the function responsible for “acquisition of equipment, materials, components (semi-products), parts and services by buying, leasing or in another legal way in order to use them for production or to resale them”.

Purchases in the enterprise market are made in the three situations: new purchase, renewed purchase and modified one. Each of these options is connected with a different way of action and, in consequence, emphasis is put on the other ones from the described below stages of the purchasing process. The purchasing process of an enterprise can be divided to several stages, whose description and number is different depending on the source. The most often quoted one is the Buy-Phases model, presented by Robinson (Robinson et al., 1967), comprising of the following eight decision stages:

1. Need recognition – awareness of the problem, need or a potential benefit gives a pulse to begin the purchasing process;
2. General need description – determination of the features that the product or service identified at the previous stage should have and the approximate demand;
3. Definition of technical and qualitative specification – the need is precisely described and the request for quotation can be prepared;
4. Supplier search – on the grounds of own market analyses and possible external opinions, the enterprise can identify the manufacturers, which should be considered at sending-out the requests for quotation;
5. Proposal solicitation – requests for quotation are sent to the selected suppliers, their answers are analysed and possible counter proposals are prepared;
6. Evaluation of proposals and selection of suppliers – final quotations are evaluated considering the previously elaborated evaluation criteria. Finally, one or a

number of proposals is selected and, possibly, negotiations with the suppliers are carried-out. The stage is finalized with conclusion of a contract.

7. Specification of the order routine – detailed conditions of the transaction are agreed (qualitative parameters, delivery terms, warranties, claim procedures, etc.);

8. Performance evaluation and feedback – the purchased products are verified from the viewpoint of fulfilling the previously determined need. Information on cooperation with the supplier are also collected to be used for its future evaluation.

Internet as the information source and place of purchases

The problems related to incomplete information or its insufficient reliability are the elements most often (36.9% and 32.2% of indications) mentioned by the B2B buyers in 2018, as causes of delays in accomplishment of their purchases (ShowPad Report, 2018). At the same time, nearly 60% of the buyers admit that they often experienced the situation when they did not receive any response to the question related to the purchase (Time Trade Report, 2018). The more and more common use of Internet and various types of ICT tools contributes to increasing accessibility of electronic information sources in companies and to their increasing importance. The greatest advantages of using the Internet in the supply market search are: access to comprehensive data resources not restricted by spatial and temporal barriers, saving of time, convenience and low cost of data acquisition [Sobczyk].

The Internet is also the place of searching the information about the suppliers for possible collaboration and their products. This enables the buyer to collect the most important information quickly and independently, as well as to be better prepared for negotiations with sales representatives of the potential supplier or even for the purchase. Among new information sources, the following can be distinguished:

- The B2B e-commerce websites. They are online stores acting on the B2B market, whose offer is designed only for the logged-in customers. Here, it is possible that the products can be searched not in the standard way only, by their names, but also in the advanced way by bar codes, manufacturers' names or their attributes (in some sectors, the offered products are described by numerous technical parameters). The service can also include the information about substitutes, as well as photographs and engineering drawings. A useful function can be a comparison website considering numerous criteria that makes it possible to select the product best fitted to the customer's needs.
- The B2B e-marketplaces. These solutions present the offers of numerous suppliers and were created in order to automate the purchase and sale process. They make it possible to find the required products, as well as to conclude the transaction and to settle it. These services are also a perfect place for searching the information about potential suppliers of goods or services, entering into communication with them and being informed about details of co-operation with individual suppliers (delivery and payment terms). This is provided by catalogues containing current offers and by advanced searching and communicating tools (Radzikowska, 2014).
- Company blogs. In addition to the product information, the suppliers' websites more and more often include the sections named "blog" or "knowledge base", where reports, webinars, case studies, novelties, customers' opinions and experts' advices concerning the offered products or services are placed. These contents are oriented

to the potential customers and are aimed at increasing reliability of the company, creating its image as an expert in its field and at distinguishing it against the competitors (Szamrowski & Pawlewicz, 2013). An additional advantage is the possibility to reach the future customers for free, the more that publishing the blog gives higher position of the company website in the Google browser results.

- Answers to the inquiries sent-out by the customer. There are three basic kinds of these inquiries: Request for information (RFI), Request for proposal (RFP) and Request for quotation (RFQ). Selection of a specific inquiry or the sequence of using the inquiries depends on the knowledge that the potential buyer has about the product and the suppliers' market. In the case of the RFI, the buyer needs a general information and expects from the suppliers the information about their market position, financial position, products and their parameters. In reply to the RFP, the customer expects that the potential supplier suggests how to solve the specific problems. A reply to the RFQ should include a declaration whether the exactly specified requirements can be met (in order to compare offers coming from many suppliers). The inquiries (in particular the RFI) can be the preliminary steps in preparation of purchase auctions or be used to obtain some knowledge about the market. They are more and more often sent in the electronic form by e-mail or via trading platforms that usually make it possible to assess the responses automatically on the grounds of the previously defined criteria.

- Social networks. To search products and suppliers or to seek an opinion, the buyers in the B2B markets more and more often use various social networks. Both in the LinkedIn and in the Facebook thematic groups, one can search for information about solutions and recommendations, exchange experiences or verify reliability of potential suppliers (Sitarska, 2019).

Employees of purchase departments more and more often expect obtaining, through the Web and with no necessity to contact a sale agent, not only general marketing data, but also comprehensive information about products and purchase terms (e.g. technical details or legal aspects), that is the knowledge necessary at the final stage of the purchase process. This approach is well-grounded the more that many B2B products and services can be acknowledged as standard solutions. If the buyers' information needs can be completely fulfilled thanks to the information presented in the electronic form, this can suggest that implementation of a trading platform should be considered in order to utilize its advantages (including lower selling costs and savings of the salesmen time to utilize them where the personal contact is really necessary). It should be stressed that the buyers in the B2B market readily transfer their habits, experiences and inclinations from the private life to the professional area and as many as 75% of them think that using B2B e-commerce websites is more convenient than purchases at the trade representatives (Bielobradek, 2018).

However, this does not mean complete withdrawal from contacts with the seller's agent – lack of such need was indicated by merely 30% the surveyed B2B buyers. As many as 70% of them still need an agent's help at some purchase stage or when it concerns complex and complicated products, of that 38% higher appreciate contacts with the sale rep than independent searching the information and 32% prefer a combination of these two information sources (ShowPad Report, 2018).

Information sources in the purchase process

The actions aimed at a supplier selection can be classified to the tactical ones, however, the selection alone and its consequences are of a great meaning for the company. Staff of the departments responsible for purchases can have insufficient knowledge and understanding of the market (especially regarding a new purchase), so they should search for many various sources of information about the potential suppliers. Monczka (Monczka et al., 2011) indicates both traditional and modern sources of this information:

- personal contacts,
- participation in fairs, exhibitions and other specialised events,
- professional papers, catalogues and brochures,
- opinions and advices obtained from independent experts or institutions (e.g. from chambers of commerce or commercial counsellors),
- opinions issued by other companies (recommendations concerning a specific supplier or their absence),
- Internet,
- catalogues (databases) available in electronic version.

Polish authors additionally indicate the following sources of the knowledge about potential suppliers and their offers: suppliers' offers sent independently or in reply to the requests sent-out or published in periodicals, websites of companies, stock exchange news, experience acquired by buyers, tenders and telephone directories (like Panorama Firm) (Urbaniak, 2013).

It results from the research carried-out by Urbaniak (2013) on a group of over 130 Polish small and medium-sized enterprises that the most common source of information about suppliers were fairs and exhibitions, suppliers' websites, recommendations of other companies and commercial representatives (Fig. 1). Each of these sources was used by 67.4% to 71.2% of the examined companies. The lowest interest (18.2%) was shown to chambers of commerce or chambers of commerce and industry. However, when small and medium-sized enterprises are analysed separately, the results are different. This is especially visible for small enterprises, where most popular appear recommendation of other companies (77.6%) and then the suppliers' websites and fairs or exhibitions (67.2% each). As relates to medium-sized enterprises searching for information about suppliers, they used most frequently fairs and exhibitions (74.3%) and then the information obtained from commercial representatives and websites (73.0% and 71.6%, respectively).

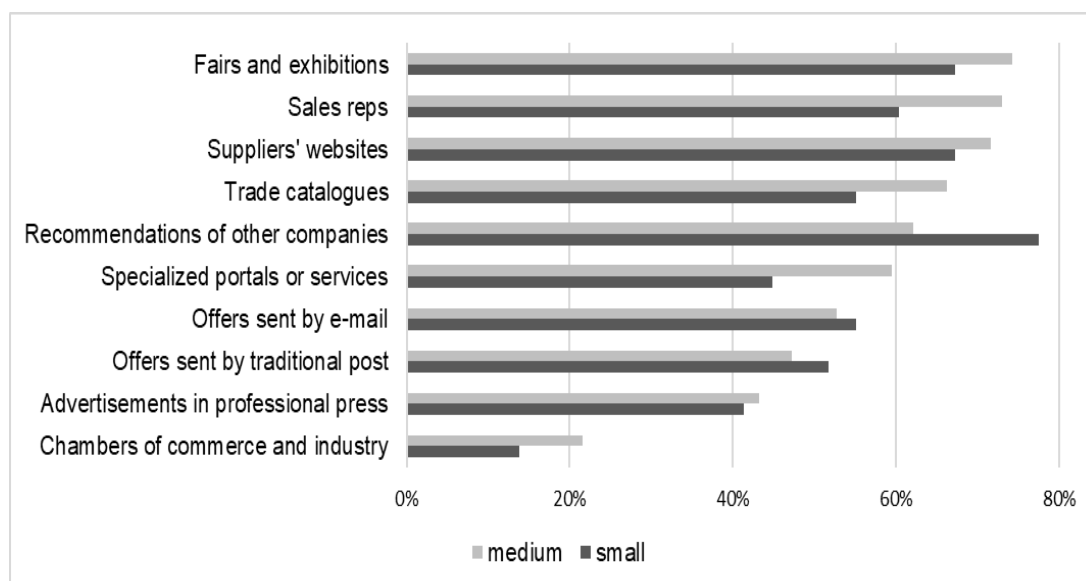


Fig. 1. Sources of information about suppliers used by small and medium-sized enterprises
Own presentation based on (Urbaniak, 2013)

Research methodology

In order to evaluate the use of Internet as a source of information in purchasing process, a study was conducted among small and medium enterprises from the Lower Silesia Region. This research was a part of more extensive research works carried-out by the author, related to purchases in small and medium-sized Polish enterprises. The research tool was the questionnaire form and the CAWI survey technic was used. Discussed will be that part of the questionnaire only, whose results are used in this paper. The main hypothesis was

- to identify the sources used by the enterprises searching for suppliers;
- to ascertain, whether the SME companies use the Internet in the purchasing process;
- to determine the level of using the Internet on individual stages of the purchasing process;
- to identify the type of products that are frequently bought via the Internet;
- to examine possible differences in actions between small and medium-sized enterprises.

The mentioned part of a questionnaire consisted of seven questions, most of them close-ended, with nominal or ordinal scale. Moreover, the respondent's particulars part included five questions concerning the enterprise size (like in the previously discussed research, the only division criterion was number of employees: small enterprises employed 10 to 49 persons and medium-sized ones employed 50 to 249 persons), industry, business line, etc. After verifying the questionnaire in a pilot survey and introducing necessary changes, the main survey was conducted. 144 questionnaires were obtained, of which 126 really concerned small and medium-sized enterprises and were correctly completed.

Discussion and results

90 small and 36 medium-sized enterprises took part in the research. They conducted trading, manufacturing and service activities (more than one answer was often indicated). Small enterprises operated first of all in local and regional markets, and medium ones – in regional and national markets. The enterprises that operated in the market longer than for five years represented nearly three-fourths of medium-sized enterprises (72.3%) and over a half of small enterprises (52.3%).

In the question concerning sources on information about suppliers, the cafeteria of responses was significantly extended in relation to the proposal of Monczka (Monczka et al., 2011). First of all, new sources related to use of the Internet in this area were added. When searching for suppliers, the examined companies use various sources, what is shown in Fig. 2. The source most often used by the examined enterprises appeared their sale services, traditional recommendations of other companies, as well as fairs and exhibitions. Results are different depending on size of a company. Small enterprises use mostly recommendations (63.3%), sale services (53.3%), fairs and exhibitions (44.4%), but medium-sized enterprises search for information in sale services (72.2%), in fairs and exhibitions (69.4%), in electronic trade catalogues (58.3%), but use also recommendations of other companies and information from commercial representatives (55.6% each). Among the analysed companies, the lowest interest was shown to the information coming from chambers of commerce and industry. Sending-out requests for offers by traditional post was rarely practised and offers were also rarely obtained this way. Small enterprises sporadically (5.6%) searched for information on trade B2B platforms and every fifth medium-sized enterprise searched for information this way.

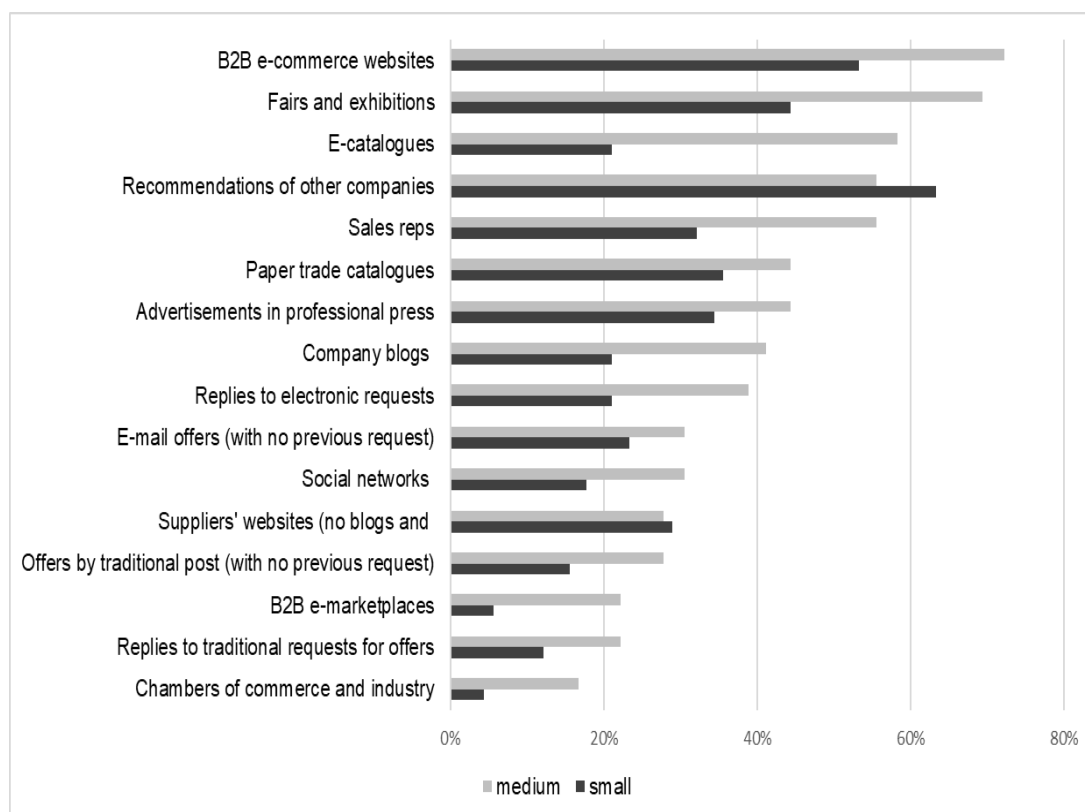


Fig. 2. Extensive sources of information about suppliers used by small and medium-sized enterprises

Source: own work

All the companies taking part in the survey confirmed use of the Internet in the purchasing process. In the questions related to purchases, the previously described stages of the Robinson's Buy-Phases model were used. The actions executed just after the purchase were also added, namely payment, exchange of trade documents, warranty and complaint handling, as well as keeping contacts with the suppliers. The examined companies used the Internet in all their actions related to purchases, which is shown in Fig. 3. In individual actions being subjects of questions, over a half (at least 54.5%) of the examined companies used the Internet often or very often. Most often, it was used at payments and at the initial stage of the purchasing process, that is at searching for the product. In both these actions, the Internet was used often or very often by over 90% of the examined companies (93.9% and 90.9%, respectively). The actions most rarely executed with use of the Internet was searching for opinions about the specific supplier and establishing conditions of the contract. It results from discussions with representatives of purchase departments that the contract negotiation is the action carried out (depending on the contract) usually during a telephone call or a personal talk and still confirmed by paper documents. Almost each of the actions was more often performed with use of the Internet by medium-sized enterprises and the only exception was searching for opinions about suppliers. The reason can be less widespread contacts of small enterprises and their smaller market research abilities.

As for searching for an opinion, there are no services strictly designed for the supplier evaluation in the B2B market, especially in the case of direct purchases

(related to production). The buyers can possibly ask for opinions about suppliers or warn against collaboration with some of them by means of social networks.



Fig. 3. Frequency of using the Internet at individual stages of procurement process by small and medium-sized enterprises

Source: own work

Depending on sizes of the examined companies, there are differences between levels of using the Internet in individual actions related to purchasing. For small and medium-sized companies, average scores showing frequency of using the Internet for each of the actions were calculated (0 points were attributed to the answer “never” and 4 points were attributed to the answer “very often”). The results shown in Fig. 4 indicate that small enterprises less frequently use the Internet in 11 of 12 analysed actions. The largest difference in results between small and medium-sized enterprises appeared in the case of “placing orders” and was equal to 0.91 points. An advantage of medium-sized enterprises was also big in the case of the final stage of the purchasing process, i.e. searching the product and establishing contacts with the supplier. In both cases, the difference was equal to 0.75 points.

In the actions related to execution of the purchasing process, all the examined companies use the e-mail, the Web browser and the online banking. In the case of online shopping, B2B e-commerce websites are mostly used, where 84.2% of medium-sized and 47.4% of small enterprises do their purchases. The B2B e-marketplaces are used much less frequently, by 19.4% of medium-sized and 1.1% of small enterprises only. Use of these platforms is generally payable, so it may be the reason, moreover companies can be afraid of their insufficient skills or have no knowledge about the benefits that can be reached by use of such a solution.

A significant part of the examined companies buys also products (first of all indirect ones) on open trading platforms like Allegro.pl, Amazon or AliExpress. This concerns mostly small enterprises (53.4%), but also a part (23.7%) of those medium-

sized. This markets make it possible to recognise product prices and to find new suppliers for cooperation also outside the platform. A small percentage of the companies purchased also in online shops.

Among the products bought by small and medium-sized enterprises through the Web, there are first of all: equipment and appliances related to the business operation, office supplies and computer hardware (Fig. 5). The differences appear in popularity of these purchases. Most of medium-sized companies buy this way their business-related equipment/appliances and office supplies (83.3% each), as well as computer hardware (72.2%). In the case of small companies, nearly the same part buys online computer hardware (71.1%), but the other results are much lower at 53.3% for business-related equipment/appliances and 46.7% for office supplies.

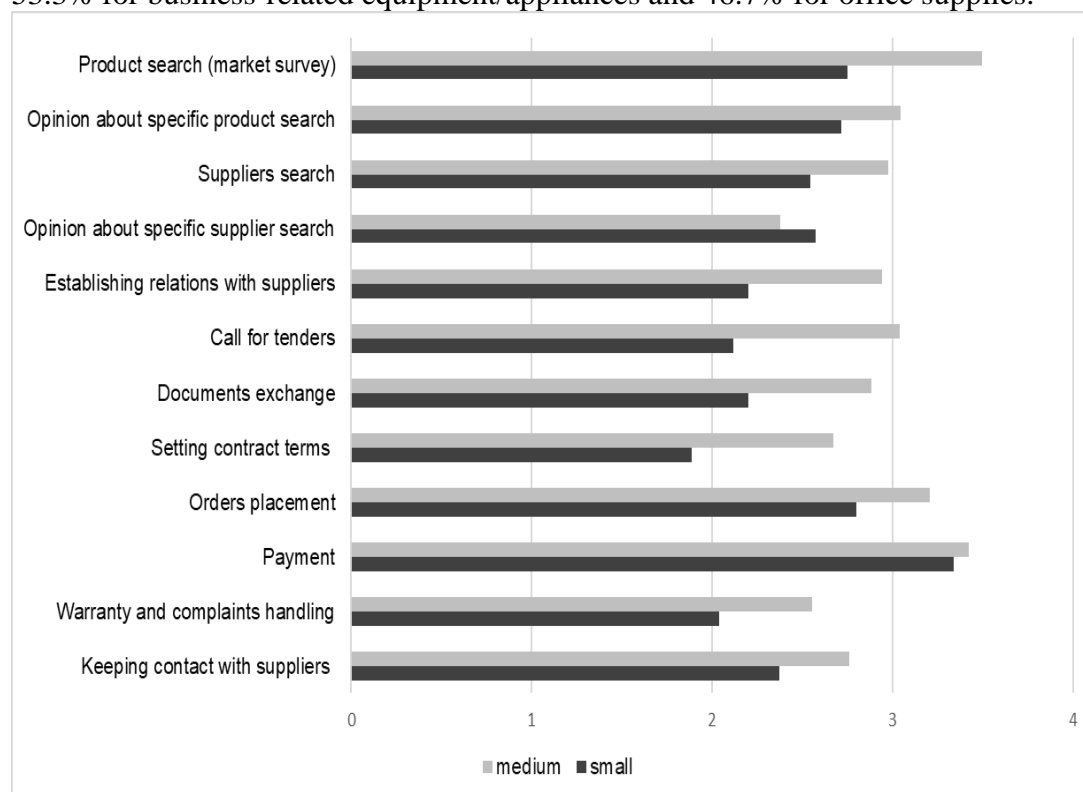


Fig. 4. Differences in using the Internet at individual stages of procurement process between small and medium-sized enterprises

Source: own work

Small and medium-sized enterprises were significantly different with regard to the range of goods purchased through the Internet. Percentage of medium-sized enterprises that clearly more often bought office supplies, business-related equipment and appliances, as well as groceries, was at least 30% higher than for small enterprises. This can result from small volume of purchases, which does not stimulate them to resign usage of traditional wholesalers.

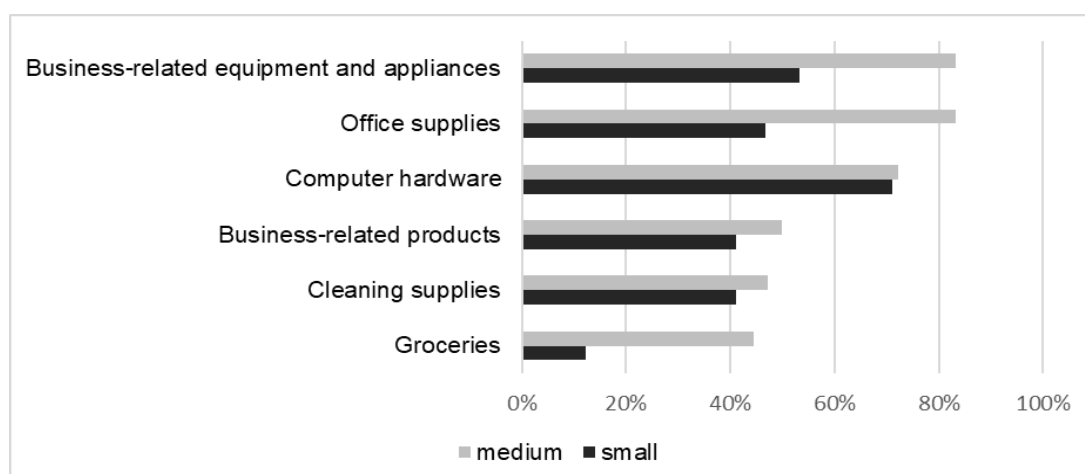


Fig. 5. Percentages of small and medium-sized enterprises using the Internet in purchases of individual product types

Source: own work

The following aspects were indicated as the greatest advantage of online shopping: convenience (72.7%), possibility to reach a great number of suppliers (66.7%) and possibility to obtain lower prices for goods and services (61.2%).

Results of the questionnaire survey showed that they more and more often searched for information about suppliers by means of ICT solutions. The most popular were B2B e-commerce websites of individual suppliers and e-catalogues. Percentages of the enterprises using individual solutions were different between small and medium-sized organizations. In comparison to the Urbaniak results, increasing interest in using the information that can be obtained by Internet is visible. However, the examined companies use modern solutions not in place but in addition to those traditional and do not resign the information acquired during fairs and exhibitions, from commercial representatives or by advertisements in professional press (that is also more and more often in electronic form).

Conclusion

Low purchase costs of computer hardware and open access to the Internet (in 2018, 95.6% of Polish companies used the Internet) compose one of two most important causes of growth of electronic purchases in enterprises. The other cause is popularization of the idea of electronic purchases in companies, which became possible due to common knowledge of online shops and auction services acting on B2C market. In spite of indisputable advantages of online purchases (convenience, promptness of reaching the seller, savings resulting from both usually lower price and the transaction costs themselves), there exists a great discrepancy in using this type solutions by different size enterprises. According to the data published by the Statistics Poland, in 2017 percentage of Polish enterprises placing orders by the Web was 33.6%. Even if these actions concerned 2/3 of big enterprises, the percentages among small and medium-sized enterprises were much smaller, amounting to ca. 43.6% for medium-sized enterprises and ca. 29.8% only for small ones (Statistics Poland, 2018). Central Office of Statistics publishes two values: percentage of the companies purchasing through websites and mobile applications and percentage of

the companies purchasing with use of Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). However, these numbers can not be totalled, since the two groups are not disjoint sets.

This paper concerns using the Internet not only in execution of purchases, but in the entire process connected with purchases of small and medium-sized enterprises – starting from market researches (searching for both the products meeting specific requirements and, in the next step, their suppliers), establishing contacts with the suppliers by acquiring their offers, negotiations and concluding contracts, up to making payments for completed deliveries. Another question raised in the work is analysis of sources of information about suppliers, used by companies from the SME sector, with the special emphasis on application of online sources.

This study is focused on the impact of Internet tools on purchasing process of small and medium-sized enterprises. The information sources used by these enterprises were examined, with a particular emphasis to various types of online sources. Moreover, it was determined, how often the analysed organisations use the Internet in individual actions connected with execution of the purchasing process. Results of the questionnaire survey carried out among 126 small and medium-sized enterprises show that Polish SMEs are familiar with Internet tools that can be applied in purchasing process, however, these solutions are not very common. Moreover there is a noticeable difference between small and medium enterprises. The conclusion arising from the research is the enterprises should aim at more and more comprehensive usage of the possibilities offered by ICT, by improving their supply management routines. By using these solutions and properly performing the tasks in the sourcing and procurement areas, they can increase their ability to compete with bigger market players, as well as improve their performance and efficiency.

Further research could identify the reasons that prevent enterprises from using the available solutions. Moreover, the author would like to verify whether there are some industries less amenable to the new opportunities and conduct the interviews in depth in such companies.

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