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BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC BEFORE AND AFTER THE INTEGRATION INTO THE EU

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Abstract

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The paper is a particular contribution to study of changes in the business environment, which were induced by the Integration of the Czech Republic to the European Union. It includes the opportunities and threats of the Czech Republic and strengths and weaknesses of businesses, which managers of small and medium – sized enterprises identified in 2001 – it meant before the Integration and in 2004 – after the Integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union. 34% of managers from analyzed businesses identified this integration of the Czech Republic into the EU as an opportunity in 2001 and 77% of managers from analyzed businesses in 2004. A change can be seen in the focusing of managers towards the increase of business competitiveness in the different conditions in the internal environment. The paper is a part of solution of the research plan of the FBE MUAF in Brno, no. MSM 6215648904.

external and internal environment, opportunities a threats, strengths and weaknesses, management

Business environment includes many factors, conditions, principles, and rules, which are critical for rise, competitiveness, success, and development of businesses and by means of them also for development of the national economy and the living standard. Particular components of the environment influence rise and operation of businesses either positively – they create premises for businesses´ development; or negatively – they threaten the existence of businesses.

The influences (factors, components) are usually classified according to the source as international, national, industry (branch), and regional – these factors form the external environment; and as business – these factors form the internal environment. The task of managers is to monitor development and changes of the external environment and to react to them with changes and adaptation of the internal business environment. From this point of view opportunities and threats are the most important components of the external environment.

The opportunity is defined as the area of consumption and interests of buyers, in which high probability exists, that with the satisfaction of customers' needs the business realizes a profit. It is a situation in the external environment which provides market whose needs aren't satisfied. The business has basically three possibilities how to take advantage of the opportunity: 1. Supply of something, which is in shortage on the market, 2. Supply of existing product or service in a new way, 3. Supply of new product or service.

The threats are situations in the external environment which affect the business negatively, for example decrease of consumption, growth of energy prices, etc. The threats can in eventually lead to the crisis or to the liquidation of business.

Opportunities and threats are variable. The same situation can be an opportunity in one period and a threat in another period and the other way around. And a situation which is an opportunity for one business can be a threat for another business because each business has different and specific internal environment, it has specific strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are company's advantages which provide its long-term development and which cannot be imitable and threatened by competitors in a short time.

The aim of this paper is to find out opinions of managers of small and medium – sized businesses on opportunities and threats of external environment and on strengths and weaknesses of internal environment before and after the integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The basic sources of information were 50 SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses which were achieved in the 4th Quarter of 2001 – it is a period before the integration of the CR into the EU and 70 SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses which were achieved in the 4th Quarter of 2004 – it is a period after the integration of the CR into the EU.

According to the recommendations of the European Union and to the statistical evidence used in the Czech Republic small and medium – sized businesses are designated businesses with less than 250 employees.

From the point of view of businesses´ branch and according to the branch classification of the economic activities used in the statistical audit in the Czech Republic, 16% of businesses from the searched set worked in agriculture, 42% of businesses from the searched set worked in industrial branches, 6% of businesses worked in construction, and 36% of businesses worked in trade and services in 2001. The searched set of businesses, which were the subject of SWOT analyses in 2004, included 3% of businesses in agriculture, 47% of businesses in industrial branches, 1% of businesses in construction, and 50% of businesses in trade and services.

SWOT analyses elaborated workers (owners or employees), who executed managerial functions in the businesses at the time of the research. They had a task, from point of view of manager of business, to identify the most important general opportunities and threats of the external environment and also the most important strengths and weaknesses of the internal environment – it meant in business where they worked.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the development of the national economy of the Czech Republic the period from 2001 to 2003 is characterized as the period of completion of preparations for the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU. Transformation of the central planned economy to the market economy was also finished in those years. In 2001 for the first time the level of economy measured by GDP exceeded its level from 1990. The growth rate of the Czech Republic accelerated, the rate of inflation decreased (from 2001 to 2003 rate of inflation increased only by 2.2%), and the rate of exchange of the CZK against the EUR strengthened by more than 10% and the rate of exchange of the CZK against the USD strengthened by more than 25% (Year-book HN, 2004).

The growth of the unemployment rate was a negative feature. The unemployment rate increased from 8.9% in 2001 (461 923 registered applicants) to 10.3% in 2003 (542 420 registered applicants).

The number of registered businesses increased by 13% from 2001 to 2003 (from 2 050 770 in 2001 to 2 325 997 in 2003). According to the Czech statistical office (2004) 256 321 of new businesses were registered and 75 887 fell down during the mentioned three years. The number of private businesses under foreign control went up from 99 762 in 2001 to 108 960 in 2003 – it is a growth of 9.2%. Businesses under foreign control intensified domestic competitive environment and attract foreign customers easier at the same time. Many Czech businessmen saw in the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU opportunities and on the contrary saw others threats.

Opportunities, which managers mentioned in their SWOT analyses, were divided into eight groups – see Table I.

In 2001 58% of managers from the suspense file saw most opportunities in improving the economic situation of the country, it means first of all in the domestic environment. Only 34% of managers presupposed that their businesses will be able to compete also on foreign markets and consider the integration into the EU as an opportunity.

Other research at that time also confirmed the perception of foreign markets as an opportunity (Fassmann, 2001). According to these research businessmen expected simplification of customs administration, easier access to capital, increased flow of foreign technologies, and stabilisation of domestic external environment after the integration into the EU. In this connection managers expected especially the acceptance of principle about protection of inferior contractor, which is used in the EU- countries and the Czech Republic should have included this principle into the Czech law. Inferior contractor is not only an employee in relation to his employer and a consumer in relation to a producer or a buyer but also a small entrepreneur in relation to his supplier with big bargaining power, which the inferior contractor can misuse as well as creditor against debtor.

Small and medium – sized businesses competed mainly on the domestic market before the integration of the CR into the EU. This fact was evidently a reason, why 26% of managers identified as a third most frequent area of opportunities unoccupied market and weak competition in location of place of business.

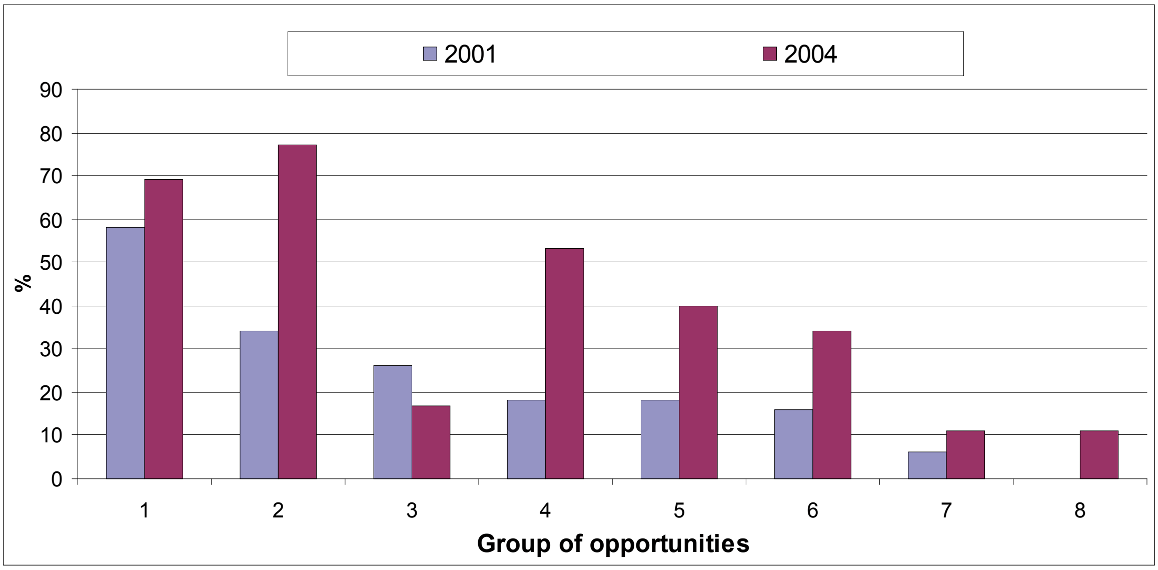
I: *Most often mentioned opportunities and frequency of their presence in SWOT analyses in 2001 and in 2004*

Group of opportunity	**Presence frequency in % in year**	
	2001	**2004**
1. Improving economic situation of the country, growth of demand	58	69
2. Integration of the CR into the EU, international cooperation, cancelling of customs barriers, more available foreign markets	34	77
3. Unoccupied market, weak competition in location of place of business	26	17
4. Technical and technological development in buyers´ industries and growth of demand for innovated products	18	53
5. Subsidy of small and medium – sized businesses	18	40
6. Changes in lifestyle of inhabitants and following changes in demand	16	34
7. Geographical location of business	6	11
8. Changes in the rate of exchange	-	11

Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

Found data show us, that government supports business insufficiently (www.businessinfo.cz) because only 18% of managers saw an opportunity in the subsidy of small and medium – sized businesses.

Comparison of frequency of managers´ opinions on particular opportunities in 2001 and 2004 is presented in the following Figure 1.



1: *Relative frequency of managers´ opinions on opportunities before the integration (2001) and after the integration (2004) of the Czech Republic into the EU*
Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

Compared to 2001 when only 34% of managers saw the opportunity in the integration of the CR into the EU (group of opportunities 2), more than double (77%) of managers shared this view later, in 2004. Managers saw fewer opportunities in 2004 than in 2001 only in one group of opportunities. It was unoccupied market, weak competition in location of business’s place of business (group of opportunities 3). This reaction can be the result of the development and the intensification of regional competitive firms and also requirement of businesses to penetrate new markets.

We can see a positive tendency in the managers´ opinions on the presence of opportunities in 2004. In all groups of opportunities except regional opportunities, managers identified more and in most groups even double the number of opportunities.

11% of managers identified opportunity changes in the rate of exchange of the CZK against the EUR and the USD in 2004 compared to 2001. This opportunity wasn't identified in 2001.

All threats, which followed on SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses, were summarized into six groups for conditions before the integration of the CR into the EU and into eight groups for conditions after the integration of the CR into the EU (see Table II.)

II: *Most often mentioned threats and frequency of their presence in SWOT analyses in 2001 and in 2004*

Group of threats	**Presence frequency in % in year**	
	2001	**2004**
1. Threat of new competitors from the EU	88	54
2. Bargaining power, growth of demands, and repeated payments lack of discipline and insolvency of buyers	74	31
3. Bargaining power and unreliability of suppliers	32	7
4. Government interventions into business	30	46
5. Technical development and threats of substitute products	12	27
6. Competition and rivalry in the industry	10	64
7. Growth of inputs´ prices and difficult availability of credits	-	46
8. Standards of the EU	-	33

Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

In 2001 the most frequent threat (88%) of managers of small and medium – sized businesses was the entry of new competitors from the EU into the Czech Republic. The research from this period (Fassmann, 2001) presented that small and medium – sized businesses were afraid in this connection of loss of price competitiveness, higher quality of foreign products, higher consumer protection, and higher requirements on business ethics, management and strategic management.

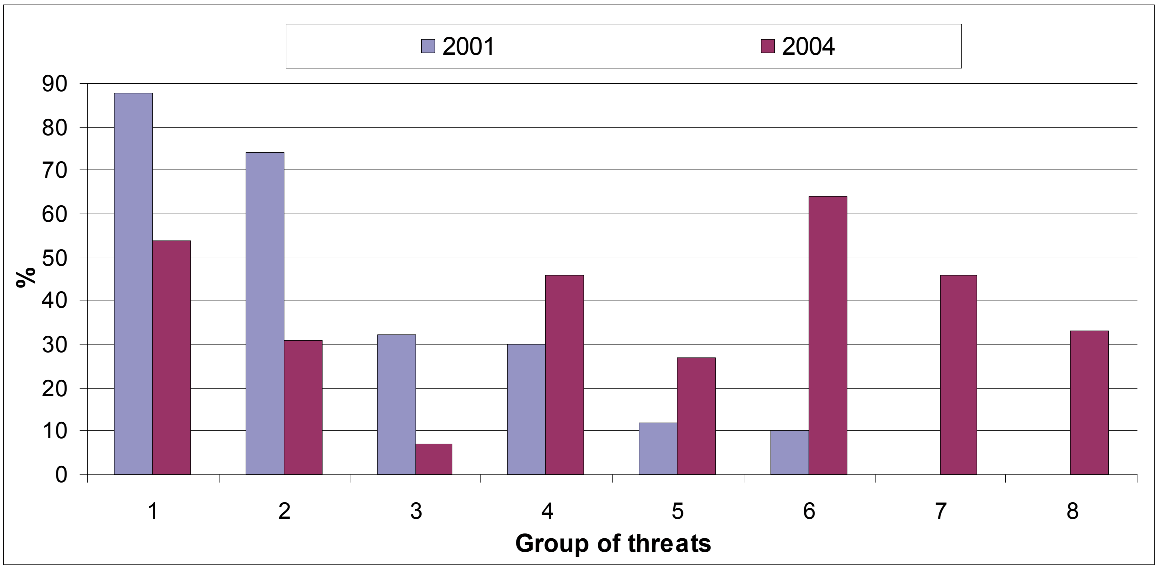
The second most often identified group of threats (in 2001 threats from this group were identified in 74% of cases) was bargaining power, growth of demands, and repeated payments lack of discipline (delayed payments of buyers) and insolvency of buyers.

32% of managers presented as a threat bargaining power and unreliability of suppliers, 30% of managers presented as a threat government interventions into business. On the other hand only 10% of managers were afraid of competition in the industry and only 12% of managers consider technical development and possible new substitute products being a threat.

Comparison of frequency of managers´ opinions on particular threats in 2001 and 2004 is presented in the following Figure 2.

Changes in the identification of threats appeared in 2004 compared to 2001 as well as in the identification of opportunities. The first three groups in the sequence of the most often characterized threats in 2001, managers consider as threats less often in 2004. Their relative frequency in 2004 compared to 2001 fell down from 88% to 54% in threats of the entry of new competitors from the EU in the CR (group of threats 1); from 32% to 7% in bargaining power of suppliers (group of threats 3). Bargaining power of buyers in connection with lack of discipline regarding payments, i.e. delayed payments of buyers (group of threats 2) are considered as an important barrier to development of business not only in the CR but also in all countries of the EU. According to the European firm Justitia (Fridrich, 2004), which surveyed payments morale in 9 thousand European businesses in the past two years, two-thirds of them considered delayed payments as the biggest problem of own development. Delayed payments slow down the circulation of goods and the economic growth in the final stage as well. According to the quoted firm, delayed payments are the result of the excessive protection of unhealthy businesses and of the slow work of courts and executors. The Czech Republic belongs to the worst countries in the EU from this point of view. For example delay in payments against invoice is one week in average in Denmark or in Finland, but the common period in the Czech Republic e.g. in construction is 3–4 months.

It also follows from the results of SWOT analyses that three groups of threats, which were marked as less important in 2001 (group of threats 4, 5, and 6), were considered more important in 2004. 46% of managers shared this view in government interventions into business in 2004 (against 30% in 2001);



2: *Relative frequency of managers´ opinions on threats before the integration (2001) and after the integration (2004) of the Czech Republic into the EU*
Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

27% of managers shared this view in technical development and threats of substitute products in 2004 (against 12% in 2001); and 64% of managers shared this view in competition in the industry in 2004 (against 10% in 2001).

In 2004 managers also defined new before unidentified threats – growth of inputs´ prices and difficult availability of credits (group of threats 7) in 46% of cases and standards of the EU (group of threats 8) in 33% of cases. The analysts from the Czech financial institutions also identify problems with gaining of credits. They mention that firms didn't have any possibility to borrow funds for their development and it was the main difficulty of Czech businesses and it was also the result of Czech government's mistake, which privatized banks late and which supported financial market insufficiently (Kaláb, 2004).

The standards of the EU came to the real threat for many businesses, especially hygienic and ecological standards. Their implementation often required implementing of new capital-intensive technology. According to available sources (Kaláb, 2005), more than 300 businesses of food industry didn't realize the hygienic standards of the EU and closed down. The intensive pressure on the implementation of the EU standards continues in the area of ecological standards. According to the EU directive and in sequence on this directive also according to the Czech law 739, of domestic businesses, which work with more than 1500 facilities (possible contaminators of living environment), have to obtain a certificate, which confirms that the firm uses the best available technologies and that doesn't contaminate the living environment in excess. The certificate is necessary to obtain by 2007. This standard has been in operation in the Czech Republic since 2003 but only a quarter of businesses applied for the certification. (Kaláb, 2005).

There were changes in the managers´ opinions on the identification and the importance of components of the internal environment in the analyzed period 2001–2004, similarly like in case of opportunities and threats.

Changes in the identification and the evaluation of businesses´ strengths are presented in the Table III.

The most frequently mentioned groups of strengths of small and medium – sized businesses in 2001 were innovating and improving product quality (according to 80% of managers). Tradition of brand, goodwill, and with it related stable position on the market were on the second place (74% of cases). 52% of managers in 2001 mentioned that the strength of their business is focusing on customer. High-quality and specialization of workers were marked as the strength in 38% of cases, high-quality of management in 28% of cases, and marketing and sales only in 14% of cases.

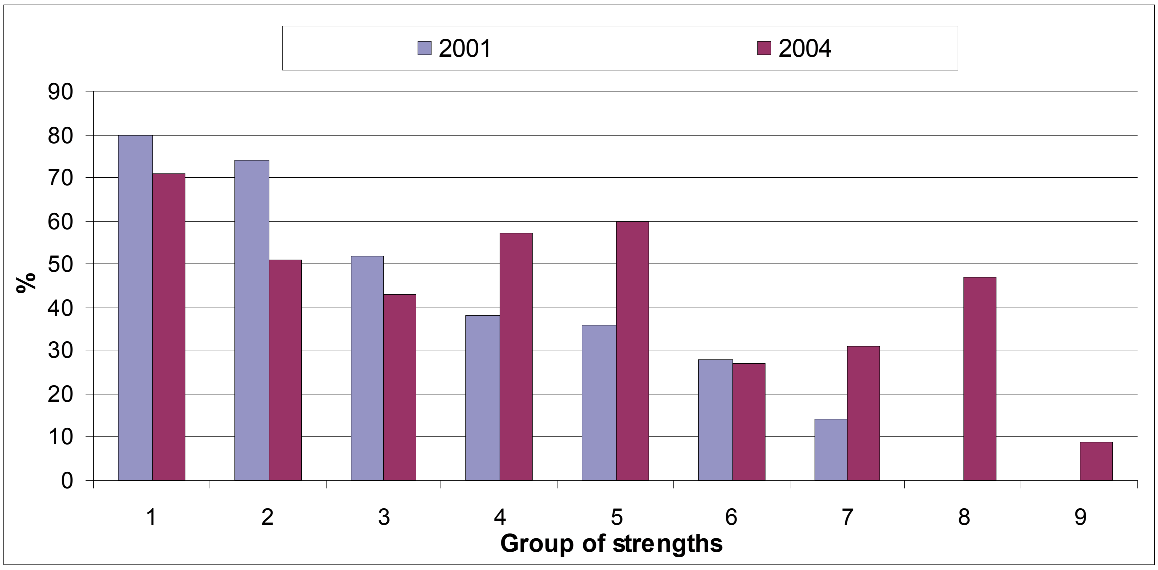
These data largely correspond to results of the research of managers´ competence, which International Institute for Management Development in Lausanne did in 68 countries in 2003. This research ranked the Czech managers on the 39th place. According to this research, Czech managers focus mainly on management of operative problems and underestimate the importance of formulation of long–term objectives and strategies; first of all they focus on products and only afterwards they think about who will be their customers; they are often stressed because they decide about everything and solve all problems by themselves; they react slowly and insufficiently to changes of the external environment (www.cma.cz, 2003).

Comparison of relative frequency of managers´ opinions on particular strengths in 2001 and 2004 is presented in the following Figure 3.

III*: Most often mentioned strengths and frequency of their presence in SWOT analyses in 2001 and in 2004*

Group of strengths	**Presence frequency in % in year**	
	2001	**2004**
1. Consecutive innovating and improving product quality	80	71
2. Tradition of brand, goodwill, and stable position on the market	74	51
3. Flexibility and fast meeting customers requirements and needs	52	43
4. High-quality and specialization of workers	38	57
5. Diversification of product and after-sales service	36	60
6. Simple infrastructure and high-quality of management	28	27
7. Marketing and sale	14	31
8. Productivity of labour, low costs and prices, economic self- sufficiency	-	47
9. Foreign capital in business	-	9

Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations



3: *Relative frequency of managers´ opinions on strengths before the integration (2001) and after the integration (2004) of the Czech Republic into the EU*
Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

Number of businesses, which presented their most frequent strength innovating and product quality (group of strengths 1), was by 9% lower in 2004 than in 2001, whereas a part of this strength was stressed certification ISO in half of cases in 2004. Tradition, goodwill, and stable position on the market (group of strengths 2) were identified as strengths at 51% of businesses in 2004 against 74% in 2001, flexibility and fast meeting customers' requirements (group of strengths 3) at 43% of businesses in 2004 against 52% in 2001. The relative frequency decrease of these three groups of strengths in 2004 was evidently resulting of more critical and more objective managers´ evaluation of their businesses.

This fact probably also increased misgivings of managers from the stronger competitors after the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU and made managers focus on improving product quality and high-quality of management because human resources presented as a strength of their business (group of strengths 4) 38% of managers in 2001 and 58% of managers in 2004.

The improving of the internal environment can be also seen in some other groups of strengths. The number of businesses whose strength was diversification of product and after-sales service increased markedly in 2004 (from 36% in 2001 to 60% in 2004). The number of businesses whose strength was marketing and sale doubled in 2004 (from 14% to 31%), but this area is still underestimated despite of improving their importance in 2004. Neither the data resulting management was presented as the strength only in 27% of businesses (group of strength 6) is positive.

The focus of businesses on improving of the productivity of labour and low costs is positive feature in 2004 because this strength wasn't presented in a single case in 2001. 47% of managers consider it as the strength in 2004.

The strength foreign capital in business appeared at 9% of businesses first in 2004. This sustains results of the analysis of the Czech statistical office (Kaláb, 2004) according to them domestic businesses under foreign-capital control not only have higher productivity of labour but their big competitive advantage is an easier access to foreign markets.

Positive developmental trends can be observed in changes of relative frequency of businesses´ weaknesses (see Table IV)

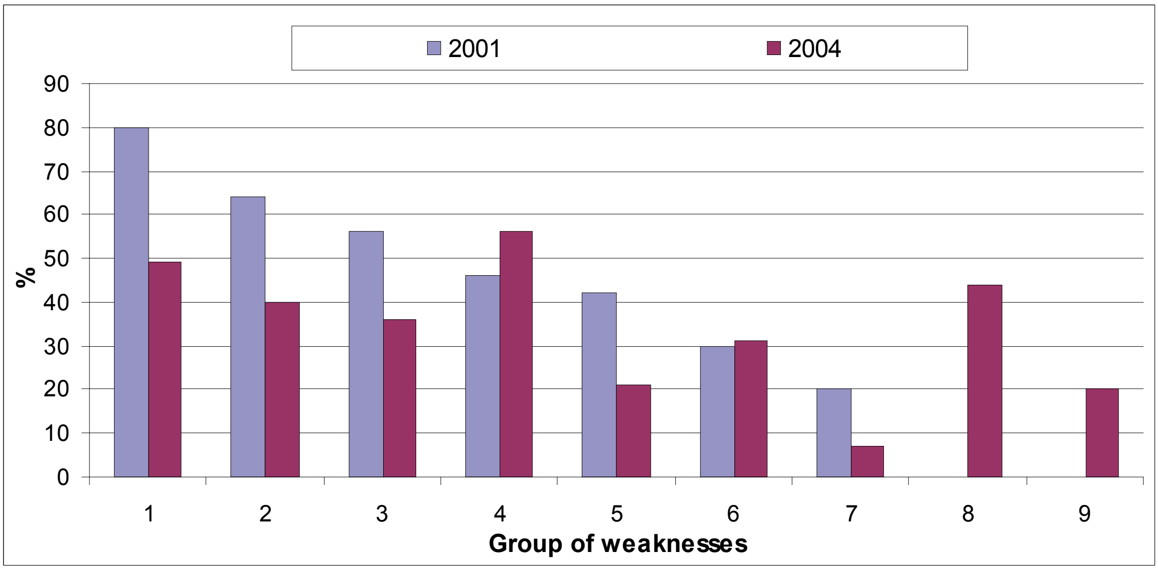
IV*: Most often mentioned weaknesses and frequency of their presence in SWOT analyses in 2001 and in 2004*

Group of weaknesses	**Presence frequency in % in year**	
	2001	**2004**
1. Obsolete technology, insufficient production capacity, low product quality	80	49
2. Management, absence of communication, autocratic style	64	40
3. Human resources, low qualification, ignorance of languages, fluctuation of manpower	56	36
4. Insufficient advertising and promotion	46	56
5. Lack of funds	42	21
6. Insufficient knowledge of market and slow reactionto market changes, long delivery time, passing of delivery schedules	30	31
7. Process of sales and dealing with customers	20	7
8. Bad work organisation, low productivity of labour, high costs and prices	-	44
9. Low wages and weak motivation of employees	-	20

Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

The most frequent weakness of small and medium – sized businesses in 2001 was obsolete technology, insufficient production capacity and low products´ quality (group of weaknesses 1). 80% of managers characterized it as the weakness. The second most important weakness was management, absence of communication between managers and subordinates or autocratic style. 64% of managers associate themselves with this opinion. The third most important weakness in 56% of cases was human resources. Following these it was found insufficient advertising and promotion (46% of cases), lack of funds (42% of cases), insufficient knowledge of market and slow reaction to market changes, long delivery time (30% of cases) – they are the characteristics which make a business a shaky supplier.

Comparison of relative frequency of managers´ opinions on particular weaknesses in 2001 and 2004 is presented in the following Figure 4.



4: *Relative frequency of managers´ opinions on weaknesses before the integration (2001) and after the integration (2004) of the Czech Republic into the EU*
Source: Results of SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses; own calculations

The comparison of the frequency of the follow-up groups of weaknesses at the small and medium – sized businesses and their development before and after the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU has a positive tendency. The frequency of five groups of weaknesses fell off in 2004 in comparison to 2001; it indicates that the situation in the businesses improved. Obsolete technology was the weakness at 80% of businesses in 2001 and only at 49% of businesses in 2004 (group of weaknesses 1). The weakness management identified 64% of managers in 2001 and only 40% of managers in 2004 (group of weaknesses 2) and the weakness human resources and their low qualification identified 56% of managers in 2001 and only 36% of managers in 2004 (group of weaknesses 3).

We can also see an improvement in the fall in the number of businesses which had shortage of funds (group of weaknesses 5) and in the improvement of businesses in process of sales and dealing with customers (group of weaknesses 7).

The underrating of the advertising and promotion always persists. This area is often considered too expensive and needless in practice. It was marked as the weakness at 46% of businesses in 2001 and at 56% of businesses in 2004.

Despite of the above-mentioned positive trends problems in work organisation, low productivity of labour, and high costs and prices were identified in the weaknesses in 2004 (in 44% of cases). The consequence of low productivity of labour is low wages and weak motivation of employees to higher efficiency and work quality. 20% of managers identified low wages as weakness in 2004. These opinions correspond to the results of the before mentioned research, which the Czech statistical office published in 2004 (Kaláb, 2004). According to it the main problems of the Czech firms are lack of funds, ineffective management system, and insufficient marketing abroad. The weak results of the Czech businesses are among others the consequence of high level of employment, weak focus on the work productivity and exploitation of working hours. Compared to them the Czech businesses with foreign capital interest employ only a third of workers, bring 47% of total revenues, 52% of total gross profit, and 70% of excess of foreign trade of the Czech Republic.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to find out changes in the competitive environment in the Czech Republic before and after the integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union from the point of view of managers of small and medium – sized businesses and their reactions to these changes.

The basic sources of information were 50 SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses from 2001 and 70 SWOT analyses of small and medium – sized businesses from 2004. The changes of the competitive environment are described with opportunities and threats, the reactions of businesses with strengths and weaknesses.

The results sustain that most of managers were afraid of the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU. It was a threat for 88% of managers and an opportunity only for 39% of managers in 2001 and in addition the most of managers (58%) considered the economic development of the Czech Republic and the growth of demand at the domestic market to be the main opportunity connected with the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU. On the other hand 54% of mangers marked the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU as a threat and 77% of managers as an opportunity in 2004. In the same year 33% of managers identified the threat the implementation of the legal, hygienic, ecological, and other standards of the EU in the Czech law.

In case of the internal environment 80% of managers identified the strength consecutive innovating and improving product quality in 2001. From this arising tradition of brand, goodwill, and stable position on the market 74% of managers marked as the strength. The most frequent strength in 2004 also was innovating and improving product quality (71% of cases) and then diversification of product and after-sales service (60%) followed. The most frequent weaknesses in 2001 were obsolete technology, insufficient production capacity, low product quality (80% of cases) and also management (64%). The most frequent weakness in 2004 was insufficient advertising and promotion (56%) and also obsolete technology (49%).

From the point of view of methodology the paper brings untraditional view of the changes in the competitive environment in the period before and after the integration of the Czech Republic into the EU. And the results also correspond to opinions and results published by other authors.

SOUHRN

Podnikatelské prostředí v ČR před a po vstupu do EU

Práce je dílčím příspěvkem ke studiu změn podnikatelského prostředí vyvolaných vstupem České republiky do Evropské unie. Obsahuje příležitosti a hrozby České republiky a silné a slabé stránky podnikatelských subjektů identifikované manažery malých a středních podniků v roce 2001, tj. před a v roce 2004, tj. po vstupu ČR do EU. V roce 2001 označilo vstup ČR do EU jako příležitost 34 % a v roce 2004 77 % manažerů sledovaných souborů. Ve vnitřním prostředí je patrný posun v orientaci manažerů na posilováni konkurenceschopnosti podniků ve změněných podmínkách.

Příspěvek je součástí řešení druhého směru výzkumného záměru č. MSM 6215648904 „Hlavní tendence ve vývoji konkurenčního prostředí v podmínkách integračních a globalizačních procesů a adaptace podnikatelských subjektů na nové podmínky integrovaného trhu“, řešeného na PEF MZLU v Brně.

vnější a vnitřní prostředí, příležitosti a hrozby, silné a slabé stránky, management

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