

MAGDALENA DOLATA

**The sources of
competitive advantage
from the perspective of
project management
– results of empirical
studies**

1. Introduction

In the times of expanding markets and globalization, competitiveness becomes one of the basic regulators of today's economy. One of the ways of the organizations responding to the challenges set by the surroundings is creating higher values for purchasers in comparison to its competitors. In order to do that, every organization which wants to achieve competitive advantage should conduct the analysis of its potential through, for instance, defining the factors which constitute the most important sources of competitive advantage (Krzyżanowska, 2011; Mielcarek, 2016). The analyses of the modern competition model and modern management concepts indicate that a special role in the process of building competitive advantage of the organization is assigned to managing the process of defining, creating, communicating and providing values to the organization's shareholders. This means that organizations base the creation of competitive advantage on the elements which in source literature are described as sources of competitive advantage. Sources of competitive advantage

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are understood as the traits of organization and its surroundings whose proper use may lead to achieving competitive advantage. They can have an external or internal character with regard to the entity which builds its competitive advantage. The external character is reflected in the market approach, in which the stress is placed on the organization's surroundings as a source of the created competitive advantage which enables achieving profit. On the other hand, the internal approach, referred to as the resource one, presents the organization's resources as a development and success factor (Pokorska and Maleszyk, 2006).

As a consequence, organizations which function in the surroundings characterized by a high level of turbulences and the increasing intensity of competitiveness, and which strive to develop their competitive positions, are forced to constantly improve their activities. Imposing the pressure regarding continuous changes inside an organization and the dynamics of its surroundings translate to the growth in demand for the unique, one-off activities which require the use of knowledge and methods of project management. The ability to manage projects, due to the influence on the efficiency of functioning of an organization, can be recognized as a crucial factor of success in the process of management, which, at the same time, constitutes an important source of competitive advantage of an organization. The studies show that organizations are characterized by various degrees of knowledge and skills with regard to project management, which proves that they are at various levels of project maturity (Dolata, 2013).

The considerations presented above lead to the conclusion about a dual nature of project maturity, which can be treated both in the categories of determinants and measurements of the organization's ability to achieve competitive advantage. Adopting the above assumption means that the sources of competitive advantage of project management should be looked for among the variables which determine the effective implementation of projects to the greatest extent. Therefore, a question concerning the sources of competitive advantage in project management becomes a crucial one. Attempting at providing answers to such a research problem, the aim of the paper is entering the discussion concerning the sources of competitive advantage in project management by referring to its chosen aspects. The paper consists of two main parts. In the first one, the essence of competitiveness and competitive advantage in the project management process from the perspective of local government units in Poland was presented. In the second one, results of the research proceedings on the importance of tasks implemented in projects in basic local government units in Poland were discussed.

2. Competitiveness and competitive advantage in the light of local government units

In the times of expanding markets and globalization, competitiveness becomes one of the basic regulators of today's economy. Having reviewed source literature one should notice that the notion of competitiveness is understood as (Melnik and Yaskal, 2014; Siudek and Drabarczyk, 2015; Leśniewski 2015, Żbikowski, 2015; Tarasova et al. 2016; Kraszewska and Pujer 2017):

- the competition between the organization, groups or people interested in achieving the same aim,
- the process of development between different organizations in market economy,
- the arena, on which enterprises compete in a given economic sector,
- the organization's ability to produce continuous growth of the added value, further development, and the resulting increase of its well-being.

In the light of the above, one should notice that competitiveness is a process aiming at the development of an organization by providing receivers with the right goods or services of proper quality, in the right time and at a right place so that the needs of customers are satisfied and the set aims are achieved. In turn, organizations which want to achieve competitive advantage should be characterized by the ability to adapt to changing market conditions in which they function, flexibility and the strive for undertaking such business decisions which ensure achieving long-term competitive advantage. Therefore, one should note that competitiveness can be understood in two ways, as: a trait, attribute, outcome, result or process. This means that competitiveness is a relative category – striving for comparing one object with other objects due to the existence of various traits and referring to both private and state entities which function in global, international, national and local economies. In the theory of economic studies, there are many factors which influence competitiveness. A reason for this diversity is a necessity of referring the complicated nature of an organization to particular competitors, taking into consideration the surrounding's conditions. But there appears a question how this competitive advantage can be referred to the specificity of functioning of local government units in Poland? In source literature, the competitiveness of local government units has been defined under the notion of regional competitiveness. Regional competitiveness (Szymła, 2000, p. 61; Łażniewska and Gorynia, 2012; Twardowski, 2014; Grodzka, 2017; Kogut and Brożek, 2018; Januškaite and Užiene; 2018) – contrary to the competitiveness of enterprises – may mean an advantage over other regions due to the held material

resources and the existing intellectual potential. According to J. Bossak and W. Bieńkowski (2004, p. 452), regional competitiveness should be understood as the ability of local government units to attract capital, support measures and other resources necessary for functioning in order to satisfy the needs of stakeholders in the best possible way. In the definition formulated in such a way one may distinguish two main characteristic features of regional competitiveness, which were also taken into account in further attempts at formulating the definition of this notion by other authors:

- there is a necessity of ensuring proper conditions needed for the functioning of entities which take part in the competitiveness process,
- there is a necessity of competing for acquiring new capital in the form of EU subsidies or maintaining the current ones as well as acquiring new investors.

Competitiveness in the light of local government units is based on various factors. Depending on the values, potential and expenses intended for improving the competitiveness of a given commune, district or voivodeship, the intensity and the level of development between regions are shaped in different ways.

Undoubtedly, a basic category in the considerations concerning competitiveness is competitive advantage. The essence of competitive advantage, its sources, types and ways in which organizations build their competitive advantages constitute a basis of conducting effective competitive fight. In source literature, one may distinguish competitive advantage as (Obłój, 2001; Krzyżanowska, 2011; Porter, 2011; Magretta, 2014; Adamik, 2015; Bielski, 2016):

- the process of the enterprise reaching a better position than its competitors,
- the system of components of the competitive potential,
- the system of crucial competences, skills and resources.

The above considerations show that the definitions of competitive advantage are based exclusively on one of the above aspects, are not very precise and they limit the research perspective, giving full freedom with regard to defining determinants which decide about achieving competitive advantage. That is why the analysis becomes more subjective. In turn, this subjectivity significantly limits the possibility of comparing data on competitors from various studies. Therefore, one should stress that the mentioned traits of the notion of competitive advantage due to exposing and taking into account various significant elements of competitive advantage, should not be treated in the categories of alternatives but in the categories of mutually complementary characteristics.

Achieving competitive advantage among local government units is a natural and crucial factor in the process of obtaining various resources and means necessary for the implementation of the development aims of these entities and

the improvement of people's life quality. In the case of communes, achieving competitive advantage may take place within two ranges (Bajdak, 2013, p. 171):

- personal – resulting from the competitive position of the commune's resources (including human, social and intellectual capital), confirmed by the competitive advantages of economic entities from a given commune,
- material – connected with the activities of public authorities which appear in many roles: as one of the animators which provides public services, as a political entity supporting material competitiveness of a commune (horizontal strengthening of resources) and directly supporting particular organizations in a commune (namely, a public entity supporting personal competitiveness of the companies), but also as a public institution which competes with other authorities and institutions for different aims and interests.

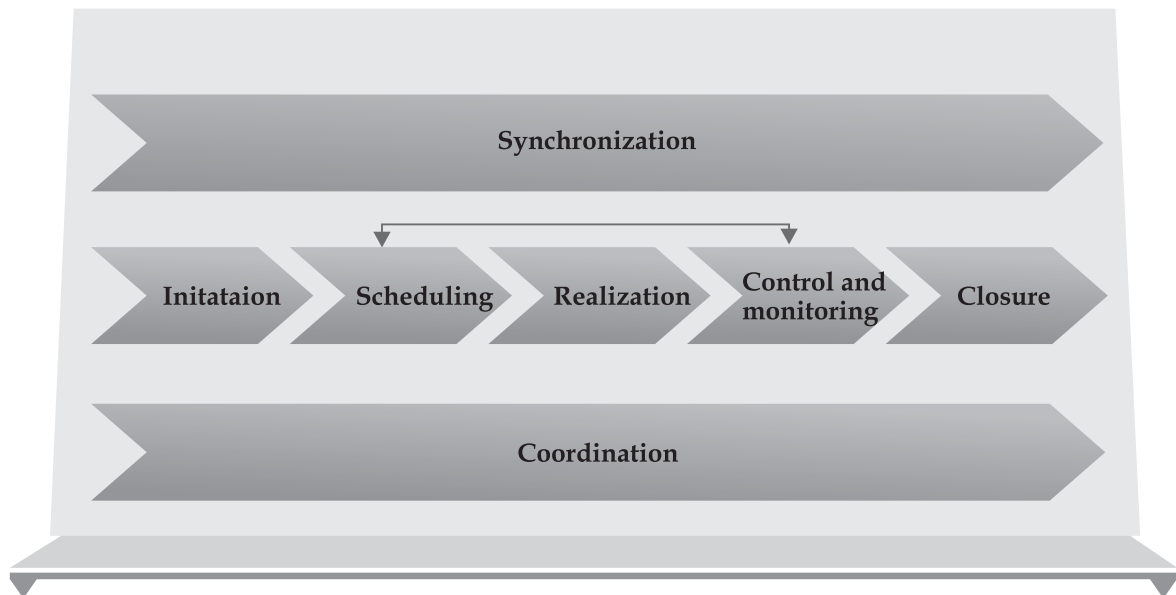


Figure 1. Interactions between the processes in project management

Source: own research on the basis of (PMBOK® Guide 2017)

The fact that nowadays local government units function in the surroundings which are characterized by a high level of variability and the increasing intensity of competitiveness is of special importance. In order to achieve the above aims, they have to strive for the improvement of its competitive position. Such a strive is reflected in the attempts at the implementation into the management

system of the methods and tools targeted at the increase of effectiveness of the organization's functioning, undertaken by the managers of organizations. Imposing the pressure regarding continuous changes inside an organization and the dynamics of surroundings translate to the growth in demand for the unique, one-off activities which require the use of knowledge and methods of project management. Achieving competitive advantage in local government units is facilitated by the management based on the assumptions and instruments of project orientation. Therefore, the aim of achieving the highest competitiveness is ensuring effective project management at every stage of the implementation of the project management process (see: diagram 1). While referring to project management in the process approach, coordination and synchronization of all projects implemented in an organization should be considered as crucial activities. According to the Project Management Institute's methodology, the project management process is oriented at the description, systematization and organization of the works conducted under the projects, while this process constitutes a range of interrelated tasks which appear, with various intensity, at particular stages of a project (PMI, 2017; Haffer, 2009). What is more, one should stress that only proper definition and ascribing importance to particular project tasks as well as assigning them to proper people responsible for their implementation has significant influence on ending the project successfully and achieving a higher level of project maturity in an organization (Henzel, 2007; Górecka, 2009). In the light of the above considerations, finding the answer to the question concerning which of the project tasks significantly influence achieving competitive advantage of an organization becomes valid.

3. Results of the research proceedings

3.1. Characterization of the research sample

The aim of this paper is the presentation of the results of studies which enable the evaluation of the importance of tasks implemented in projects in the context of the level of project maturity in an organization and the ability to achieve competitive advantage. The considerations presented in the paper concern the results of the conducted research proceedings, which took place in two stages. Both studies were conducted based on the same research methodology, and the same material and personal scopes. The first stage of the studies was conducted in 2013 and it concerned the years 2010-2012, the second stage - in 2018, and it concerned the years 2016-2018.

In the empirical part of the work, a two-stage procedure of the research proceedings, consisting of the pilot study and main research, was applied. In order to ensure the representativeness of the study, while designing the size of the sample of studied organizations in the main study, questionnaires were sent to 1900 basic local government units in Poland, which constitutes 77% of general population. Stratified random sampling was chosen as the main method of selection of population entities in the study connected with the division of basic local government units in Poland into separate subpopulations (strata) according to the criterion of the type of commune. The number of the studied entities under each of the three distinguished strata (urban communes, urban-rural communes, rural communes) was proportional to the number of these communes in the whole population.

As a result of the conducted procedure of research proceedings, at the first stage of the studies which refers to the years 2010-2012, the questionnaires from 598 entities were received. After their verification, 241 questionnaires were rejected due to the inconsistency of the given information. After taking into consideration 23 correctly completed questionnaires from the pilot study, the total number of questionnaires accepted for analysis under the first study amounted to 380 (fig. 1) and the return level was 20,5%. 37 questionnaires were received from urban communes, 111 from urban-rural communes and 232 from rural communes. At the second stage of studies concerning the years 2016-2018, questionnaires from 643 local government units in Poland were received. For the purposes of the study, 127 questionnaires were rejected since 34 units declared a lack of projects and project management and the remaining 93 questionnaires were rejected due to the appearance of a range of mutually exclusive answers. Therefore, the total number of questionnaires accepted for analysis under the second study amounted to 516 (chart 1), and the return level was 27%. Naturally, the achieved level of returns of questionnaires caused slight disruptions in the adopted research structure. The observed structural differences amounted to, on average, 3,3 percentage points and 6,7 percentage points in the second study, which means that such variations can be recognized as acceptable. The comparison of the structure of the obtained research sample with the actual structure of the studied population is presented in figure 1.

The structure of the research sample is slightly different than the structure of population. Therefore, the results achieved in the research proceedings enable forming general conclusions and they may constitute a basis (due to the sample size and distribution) for generalizing the obtained results with regard to the whole population of basic local government units in Poland.

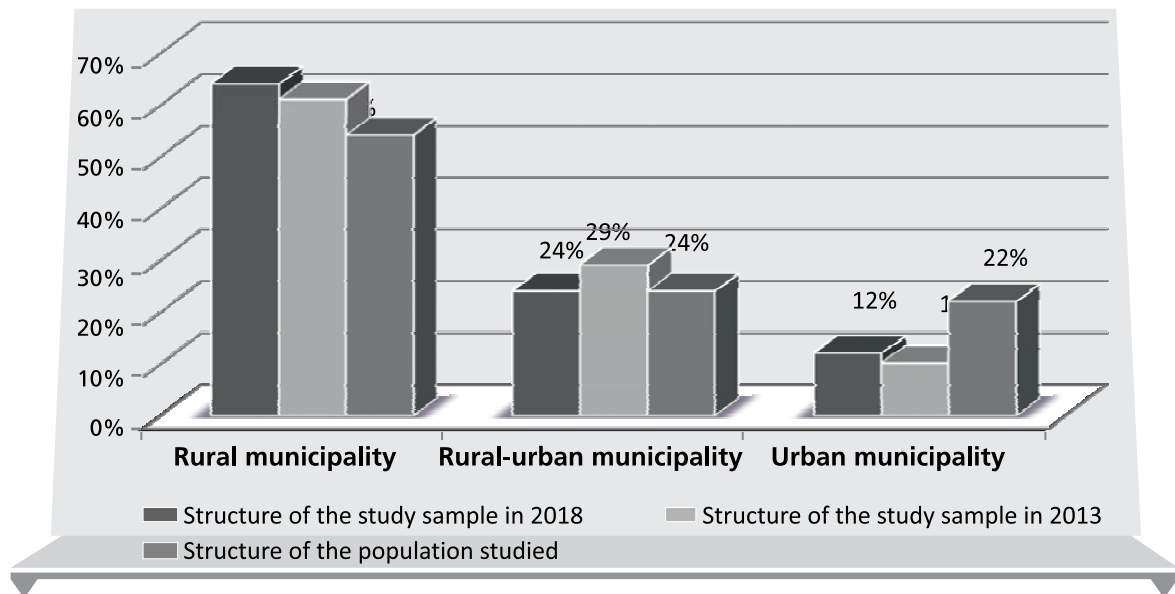


Figure 2. Structure of the studied population and the research sample according to the criterion of the type of commune (in %)

Source: own development based on empirical research

3.2. The importance of tasks implemented in projects of basic local government units in Poland in the light of the studies' results

In the research proceedings, respondents were asked to evaluate the level of intensity of eleven variables, which were chosen on the basis of source literature as tasks characteristic for the approach to project management in basic local government units in Poland. The research proceedings proved the importance of all the tasks pre-defined in the questionnaire, implemented in the project management process (see: tab. 1 and tab. 2). Still, it should be emphasized that the level of importance ascribed to them varies.

The received results showed that the most important project task for the respondents (15% and 18% of the maximum indication level)¹ is determining the budget of projects. The tasks of smaller importance include partial and final cost

¹ Each time the maximum indication level is mentioned, one should be aware that it refers to the evaluation of the power of the studied phenomenon, which constitutes a percentage of all answers which specify each of these powers separately, taking into account all variables.

calculation of project implementation (14% and 17% of the maximum indication level), specifying main aims of projects (14% and 14% of the maximum indication level) and current supervision of project implementation (12% and 13% of the maximum indication level). In order to explain the categorization of these tasks, they should be referred to the criteria which should be met in order to apply for the funding of the commune's activities from the funds of the European Union. Such an interpretation seems to be right, taking into account the fact that the possibility of applying for the subsidies from external funds, constituted the most important impulse to use project management, according to the respondents. The correctness of the above conclusions is proved by ascribing a big importance by even greater number of respondents, on average 2,25 percentage points of the maximum indication level.

Table 1. The importance of tasks implemented in projects of basic local government units in Poland in the years 2010-2012 (in %)

2016-2018	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
no influence	1%	0%	4%	25%	0%	1%	1%	3%	4%	5%	0%
low influence	2%	1%	5%	16%	1%	1%	0%	5%	12%	14%	2%
moderate influence	10%	9%	20%	33%	9%	14%	6%	24%	36%	31%	7%
high influence	31%	40%	43%	19%	36%	37%	33%	45%	36%	38%	32%
very high influence	56%	51%	28%	7%	53%	47%	60%	23%	12%	12%	59%

Source: own development based on empirical research

Table 2. The importance of tasks implemented in projects of basic local government units in Poland in the years 2016-2018 (in %)

2010-2012	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
no influence	1%	1%	9%	41%	1%	1%	2%	7%	11%	9%	1%
low influence	2%	3%	9%	18%	7%	24%	1%	9%	17%	19%	2%
moderate influence	15%	14%	25%	23%	34%	20%	8%	28%	38%	33%	10%
high influence	37%	40%	39%	15%	27%	30%	28%	40%	27%	28%	31%
very high influence	45%	42%	17%	3%	31%	25%	61%	16%	7%	11%	56%

Source: own development based on empirical research

Key:

1 - specifying main aims of projects; 2 - specifying schedules of projects; 3 - selecting participants of project teams (number and composition); 4 - specifying the amount and ways of remuneration of participants of project teams; 5 - current supervision of project implementation ;6 - negotiations under the implemented projects;7 - determining the budget of projects; 8 - specifying the scope of competences of participants of project teams; 9 - selecting methods and tools supporting the implementation of projects; 10 - coordination and synchronization of project activities; 11 - partial and final cost calculation of project implementation

The following tasks were considered least important by the respondents: specifying the amount and ways of remuneration of participants of project teams (1% and 2% of the maximum indication level), selecting and using the methods and techniques of project management as well as IT support tools (2% and 3% of the maximum indication level), coordination and synchronization of project activities (3% and 3% of the maximum indication level) and specifying the scope of competences of participants of project teams (5% and 6% of the maximum indication level). The obtained results are puzzling, because one could expect that these elements constitute the important sources of competitive advantage in project management, while respondents ascribed the lowest importance to them.

4. Conclusion

Summing up the above considerations concerning competitiveness and competitive advantage of basic local government units in Poland, one may state that source literature provides various definitions which aim at specifying the meaning of the above notions, under which we may name many factors which influence competitive advantage. In this paper, the selected aspects of project management which constitute a source of competitive advantage in project management of basic local government units in Poland were presented. Still, one should remember that individual measures do not fully reflect the actual level of competitive advantage so a multi-indicator analysis which would take into account both internal factors, dependent on the organization, and the external ones, which characterize its surroundings, is necessary. Competitive advantage in local government units in Poland is based on building values thanks to satisfying the needs of stakeholders. Therefore, the strongest position on the market will be achieved by the entities which focus on the project tasks which have the strongest correlation with the level of organization's project maturity. Only the organizations which have achieved the highest level of project maturity

in an organization can be considered as having achieved competitive advantage over other entities.

The degree of diversification of importance ascribed to particular tasks by the studied entities in the profile approach of project-mature and project-immature communes, presented in chart 2, seems to support the above remarks. One should notice that the greatest disproportions can be observed in the field of coordination and synchronization of activities in all projects (on average by 2,23). Other important tasks which are marginalized by project-immature communes include: specifying the scope of competences of participants of project teams (on average by 1,53), selecting methods and tools supporting the implementation of projects (on average by 1,01) and current supervision of project implementation (on average by 0,89).

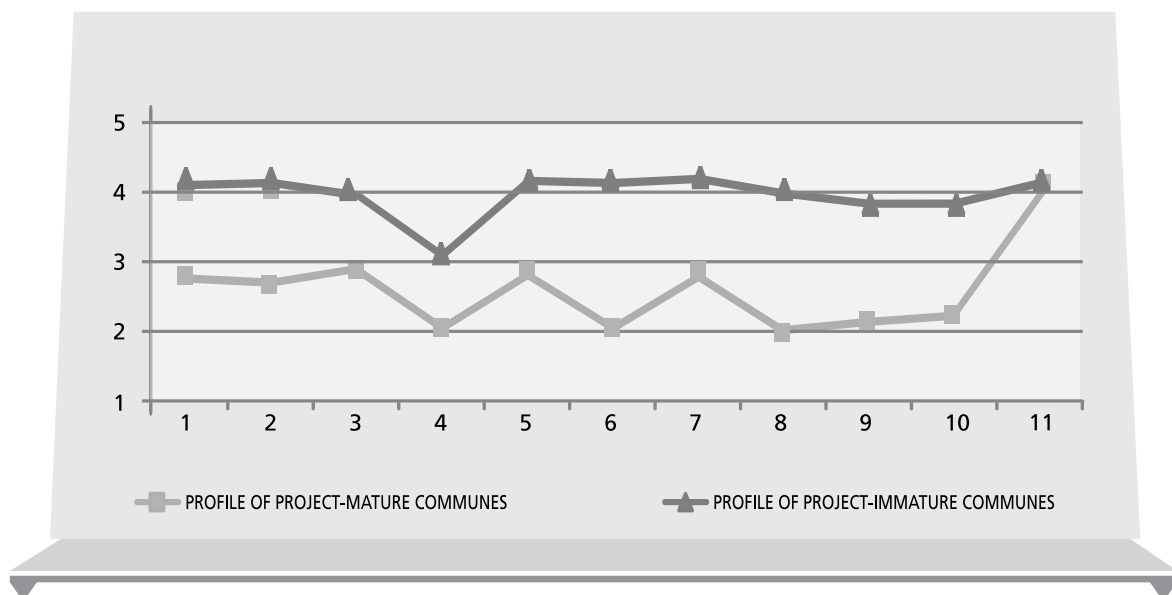


Figure 3. The importance of tasks implemented in projects of basic local government units in Poland according to the established commune profile (in %)

Source: own development based on empirical research

Legend: 1 – determining the budget of projects; 2 – partial and final cost calculation of project implementation; 3 – specifying crucial aims of projects; 4 – specifying the schedule of products; 5 – current supervision of project implementation ; 6 – coordination and synchronization of project activities; 7 – selection of participants of project teams (number and composition); 8 – specifying the scope of competences of participants of project teams; 9 – negotiations under project implementation, 10 – selecting methods and tools supporting the implementation of projects; 11 – specifying the amount and ways of remuneration of participants of project teams

By conducting the interpretation of the above results, one may conclude that there is a relation between the importance ascribed by the communes to particular project tasks and the level of project maturity. The conducted observations indicate that, according to the respondents, achieving competitive advantage in project management is influenced by both soft factors and hard project management. The data presented in chart 2 show that achieving competitive advantage in the field of project management requires, above all, synchronization and coordination of activities implemented in projects. Such an approach requires the creation of an ordered homogeneous approach to project management, which is possible, above all, as a result of implementing the standards which involve the methodology and techniques of project management. It enables increasing the effectiveness of project management and reducing the level of risk of project failure, as well as reducing the level of uncertainty of members of a project team, which further translates to the transition to a higher level of project maturity in an organization and, as a consequence, achieving competitive advantage.

Summary

The sources of competitive advantage from the perspective of project management - results of empirical studies

The aim of the paper is entering the discussion concerning the sources of competitive advantage in project management in basic local government units in Poland. The focus of the paper is placed on the selected elements of the sources of competitive advantage in basic local government units in Poland, namely tasks implemented in projects. The paper consists of two main parts. In the first part of the paper, a starting point was the presentation of the essence of competitiveness and competitive advantage in the process of project management from the perspective of local government units in Poland. In the second one, the results of the research proceedings concerning the importance of tasks implemented in projects in projects in basic local government units in Poland were discussed. The considerations presented in the paper refer to the results of the research proceedings, which took place in two stages. The first stage of the studies was conducted in 2013 and it concerned the years 2010-2012, the second stage - in 2018, and it concerned the years 2016-2018.

Keywords: *project maturity, project management, excellence in project management, competitive advantage in project management.*

Streszczenie

Źródła przewagi konkurencyjnej z perspektywy zarządzania projektami - wyniki badań empirycznych

Celem artykułu jest włączenie się w dyskusję dotyczącą źródeł przewagi konkurencyjnej w zarządzaniu projektami w podstawowych jednostkach samorządu terytorialnego w Polsce. W artykule skoncentrowano uwagę na wybranych elementach źródeł przewagi konkurencyjnej w podstawowych jednostkach samorządu terytorialnego w Polsce do jakich należą zadania realizowane w projektach. Artykuł składa się z dwóch zasadniczych części. W pierwszej części artykułu punktem wyjścia uczyniono przedstawienie istoty konkurencyjności i przewagi konkurencyjnej w procesie zarządzania projektami z perspektywy jednostek samorządu terytorialnego w Polsce. Natomiast w drugiej omówiono wyniki postępowania badawczego nad znaczeniem zadań realizowanych w projektach w podstawowych jednostkach samorządu terytorialnego w Polsce. Przedstawione w artykule rozważania odnoszą się do wyników przeprowadzonego postępowania badawczego, które przeprowadzone zostało w dwóch etapach. Pierwszą część badań przeprowadzono w 2013 roku i obejmowała ona lata 2010-2012, drugi etap badań zrealizowano w 2018 roku uwzględniając lata 2016-2018.

Słowa

kluczowe: *dojrzałość projektowa, zarządzanie projektami, doskonałość w zarządzaniu projektami, kluczowe czynniki sukcesu w zarządzaniu projektami.*

JEL

Classification: M,R

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