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## **Creativity – the ambiguity of definitions and practical consequences**

***Abstract.** Although the global market environment requires enterprises to be innovative, to offer innovative products and solutions that meet growing customer demands, creativity of businesses and their owners continues to attract research attention. Current challenges, for example COVID-19-related restrictions, call for increased creativity to ensure business survival. The author takes a look at how creativity is understood by theorists and practitioners alike in order to understand why business owners/managers fail to include creativity in the list of core competences necessary for innovation in the MSME sector. The study continues the research undertaken by the author regarding the owner-manager competency model of innovative enterprises. The discussion is based on a detailed review of the literature and results of an interview survey. The key finding is that the pragmatic approach owners/managers of MSMEs to their roles/functions and achievement of goals is more important than considering what competences are required at a given time.*

***Keywords:** competences, creativity, MSME, innovation, ambiguity*

### **1. Introduction**

The global economic environment is in no doubt experiencing volatile growth trends as a result of multiple social, political and technological trajectories of modern times. Consumerism, on the other hand, continues to exert pressure on businesses to satisfy their growing demands for quality products, services and/or solutions. Businesses, irrespective of their locations, thanks to borderless markets have to contend with the growing phenomenon – competitiveness and survival.

Innovation, by means of which businesses can offer innovative solutions is seen as the out-pouring of human ingenuity in turning available resources into tangible and desirable outputs for their potential consumers. Human ingenuity or thought patterns which when applied to material resources for innovation is the human creative mind. Indeed, management and organizational studies have emphasized the divide between creativity and innovation in both theory and practice [McAdam, McClelland 2002; Cropley, Kaufman, Cropley 2011]. However, there are sources, for example, Anderson, Potočnik, Zhou [2014], that see creativity as a necessary requirement of a competent manager who engages in innovation and hence should be treated together and not in isolation. This argument is also supported by others like U.E. Haner [2005]. Such contrasts of view-points regarding creativity do not only play out in research studies but also in practice. This dualism/dichotomy of views in scientific literature, the author contends can impact on how the issue of creativity is understood and attended to at organizational levels.

The aim of the study was to analyze these views to understand why business owners/ managers failed to include creativity in the list of core competences necessary for innovation in MSMEs. The paper is a continuation of researches undertaken by the author regarding owner-manager competency model of innovative enterprises. In using the comparative analysis, the author wishes to uncover similarities and differences between theoretical and practitioners' perspectives regarding creativity as a key component of managerial competences for innovation. First, the paper carries out a brief review of literature on creativity as a core component of competency of managers in order to successfully engage in innovation to ascertain divergences in approaches. Next, there is a presentation of an outcome the author's on-going doctoral dissertation titled "Owner-Manager's Competences as Determinants of Innovativeness of SMEs in Podkarpace Province". The research revealed that SME owners interviewed failed to list creativity as a core competence necessary for innovation. The discussion that follows juxtaposes creativity, defined from both perspectives, pointing out areas of similarity and possible discrepancies. Finally, the concluding paragraph with possible recommendations for further research to enrich studies in the area of creativity as a managerial competence for innovative drives.

The paper applies the critical literature review and interview survey methods to achieve the objectives of the study.

## **2. Creativity: divergent view-points**

While it cannot be denied that creativity permeates every aspects of human endeavour, its peculiarity in organizational management calls for detailed

understanding since it is only then its potentials can be fully harnessed for the benefits of enterprise development. Moreover, this would facilitate innovativeness, considered as the leeway for enterprise's achievement of competitive advantage in the global market. The existence of creativity favourable climate in enterprises is considered an incentive that enables the conversion of emerging opportunities into innovation [Roffe 1999; Krawczyk-Sokołowska, Pierścieniak, Caputa 2019], which is central to organizational performance. Edward de Bono [Serrat 2009] was more categorical in his words "creativity is the most important component of human capital of all, without which, there would be no progress....". Creativity is, however, commonly and variedly defined in subject literature, relying on varied perspectives, some of which are presented in this article.

Some of the commonly discussed definitions in subject literature are based on varied perspectives or approach, including person/individual, team/group, organizational, process, mixed product-ideas, integrative, and the innovation phase perspectives.

Both the integrative and innovation phase approaches to defining creativity look at the interplay between it and innovation, which should not be seen to be taking place simultaneously. While Haner [2005] emphasizes the complexity of the interaction, R. Luecke and R. Katz [2003], emphatically point to the invention stage as creativity. The invention stage embodies the idea generation and evaluation stages in the staged innovation development. This view-point is corroborated by definitions provided by N. Anderson, K. Potočnik, J. Zhou [2014] and D.H. Cropley, J.C. Kaufman, A.J. Cropley [2011].

J. Korkosz-Gębska [2014] definition of creativity as being the creation of useful and valuable products, services, ideas, procedures or ideas by entities engaged in cooperation reflects the mixed product-ideas approach.

Creativity is also viewed from the organizational/ process perspective in subject literature as the ability of an individual to think creatively, combining varied ideas/concepts in an original and unique way, based on varied assumptions or completely new perspective [Krawczyk-Sokołowska 2018].

Relying on the presentation so far, creativity can be assumed to be a thought path, involving seeking unique linkages between components that yield new valuable products or solutions that brings benefits to customers. E. Urbanowska-Sojkin [2018] adds that the creativity pathway can be accomplished individually from one's own initiative or in teams of formal or informal collaboration.

The person/individual approach, on the other hand, defines creativity as a mental and social process [Serrat 2009] useful in exploiting available social and intellectual capital to provide novel and desired outputs; or an expression of complex interactions existing between an individual, irrespective of their position, and their work environment [Anderson, Potočnik, Zhou 2014; Pierścieniak, Kos 2014]. The definition pictures interactions of the mental state directed at

other resources, including material, transforming them into finished products or solutions to meet the needs of customers. This in essence indicates that creativity, despite being a forerunner of innovation activities runs through the entire process of innovation creation. This bundling of two separate constructs, namely creativity being the production of new and useful ideas and/or products [Amabile 1988] can result in less focus being paid to understanding the immense role of creativity in enterprise innovativeness.

In discussing creativity from the individual's perspective, one should not lose focus on the fact that each individual in the workplace possesses and expresses distinctive personality and learning abilities [Udwadia 1990; Kaliszczak 2013]. Indeed, T.M. Amabile [1988] had earlier referred to this creativity as a cluster of personality and intellectual traits displayed by persons engaged in a creative process at whatever level of the organization and stage/phase of the innovation process. Since the individual and his mental state is susceptible to influences of external exigencies, it is to be expected that the quality of his creativeness and hence the awareness of his creative input could be affected by other factors.

Some of the commonly mentioned factors that may impact on the quality of one's creativity and by deduction on his assessment of his creative impacts on the innovative process are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Factors affecting the creative capabilities of the individual engaged in innovation

Factor	Description	Sources
Knowledge and abilities	Tacit and factual knowledge that steers one through the stages of resolving problems or accomplishing tasks.	Anderson, Potočník, Zhou 2014; Talandier 2015
Thinking styles	The cognitive/learning patterns that enables one to capture and explore new ideas, guiding them through to new products or solutions.	Krawczyk-Sokołowska 2018; Talandier 2015; Anderson, Potočník, Zhou 2014
Motivation	The individual intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to assigned tasks. The lack of motivation can inhibit the proliferation of skills.	Talandier 2015; Anderson,, Potočník, Zhou 2014
Goal orientation	Individual's goal orientations do affect his levels of motivation, hence the level of creativity. Learning orientation positively correlates with creativity	Hirst, Van Knippenberg, Zhou 2009; Anderson, Potočník, Zhou 2014
Traits	Personality features do exercise influence on attitudes to creativity, directly or indirectly	Anderson, Potočník, Zhou 2014; Baer 2010
Values	Personal values serve as guides and convictions for actions taken, especially when one has to make choices between emerging ideas/ solutions	Anderson, Potočník, Zhou 2014

Source: own elaboration based on literature study.

The creative capacity of any person, functioning as individual or in a group at any level of the organizational is subject to influences of varied factors, which may facilitate or inhibit creativity as well as its identification. It is also observable that although creativity is abundantly discussed in subject literature there is lack of a universally acceptable definition as it can, as a concept, be discussed from varied perspectives. Nonetheless, creativity from the literature perspective can be summarized as follows:

**Creativity is a cluster of personality and intellectual traits of the individual that enables the individual to exploit / or develop available opportunities, in form of tangible/intangible resources, transforming them into useful outputs to fulfil customer expectations.**

It is worth pointing out that creativity is not identifiable neither with a single stage of innovation development, nor a specific position in the organization. More importantly, an individual might be contributing a piece-meal of the creativity process. Can this observation constitute any difficulty in identifying the level of one's contribution to in-company creativity?

### 3. Research methods

Creativity is agreeably a key component of manager's competences put to use in their innovation drives. The paper aims to look at definitions of creativity, both from theoretical and practitioners' perspectives to ascertain similarities and/or discrepancies in these approaches. To achieve the objective, the critical literature analysis and an interview survey will be applied as research methods. The interview instrument will be administered to a randomly selected sample of owners of micro, small- and medium-scaled enterprises (MSMEs) engaged in innovation activities in Podkarpacie province.

The study was carried out in March-April 2020, using the interview survey method. Due to existing restrictions on human contacts as a result of the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, contacts with potential respondents was via audio with recording possibilities. The respondents were asked to expatiate on the possibilities of why "creativity" was not designated as a core competence by business owners engaged in innovation activities in Podkarpacie province, despite its prominence in academic literature. For reasons of clarity to enhance the ease of response the question was translated into Polish, the native language of the respondents. A multi-level translation technique was applied. Key findings are presented in Table 2, followed with a discussion.

Although 12 people were targeted for the interview only 6 finally agreed to share their knowledge on the subject matter. The males and females constituted

Table 2 An illustration of opinions expressed by respondents, codified and summarized

Respondents	Summary of views expressed
R1	Creativity is not limited to specific positions as it can be expected at various levels of the organization and at various phases of project execution. It is hence not uncommon that people may have difficulties identifying oneself with creativity.
R2	Many entrepreneurs find it difficult to designate their innovation as creative as many of such endeavours involves mere adaptation or outright copying of existing solutions.
R3	My industry sector is unequivocally identified with creativity. The quest to invent quick solutions that meet customer expectations is key to staying competitive in the sector.
R4	Looking from my own perspective, micro and small enterprise owners focus on resolving emergent issues, especially market sustainability rather than think in categories of types of competences.
R5	Creativity exists, though not tangible since it is mostly put to play in ideas generation, which may not translate to physical product. This could be a reason why some find it perplexing to deem their actions creative.
R6	That seems bizarre to me if entrepreneurs failed to list creativity as a key competence. As a sole-owner of a business creativity, especially in generating ideas and managing in difficult times is crucial in product development.

Source: own elaboration, based on research.

50% each of the sample population. Majority (over 83%) of those interviewed were aged 30-45 years. The interviewees are holders of university degrees, undertaking businesses in various sectors, including IT, production and marketing. While the males owned small business with tentacles spreading to international markets, the females were spread across micro and small businesses limited to the national market.

#### 4. Results and discussions

The aforementioned responses represent opinions expressed by the sampled group of owners of innovative enterprises, participants of the “Podkarpacie Nagroda Gospodarcza” (Podkarpacia Economic Award) contest. The responses do affirm their awareness of what “creativity” is as a body of knowledge and person/work-related trait. In order accomplish a key aim of the paper a comparison of elements contained in both perspectives are presented in Table 3.

Key issues worthy of attention in the responses are “invention” and “adaptive/adoptive”, “innovation” as well as “idea generation”, which some seem not to consider as acts of creativity contrary to perspectives presented in the literature

Table 3. Business owner v theorists' perspectives regarding creativity competency

Elements of creativity competence	
According to research findings	According to literature*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a key competence in innovation development;</li> <li>• expected at varied levels of the organization but not a necessity for owner-managers;</li> <li>• not easily identified with individual persons;</li> <li>• adaptive/ adoptive innovation not seen as results of creativity;</li> <li>• outbursts of creativity do not necessarily translate to tangible products;</li> <li>• not seen as a thought pattern due to pragmatic approaches to resolving issues;</li> <li>• useful in idea generation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a cluster of personality and intellectual traits;</li> <li>• results in the creation of valuable products, solutions, ideas, etc.,</li> <li>• identified with invention;</li> <li>• restricted to idea generation/formulation stage of innovation;</li> <li>• a thought path – a planned progressive action;</li> <li>• manifests itself in persons engaged in innovation, irrespective of the position</li> </ul>

\* Based on literature research.

Source: own elaboration, based on studies.

review. Their approach to the issue can therefore be considered pragmatic. The emerging question at this stage is if this pragmatism is reconcilable in management studies, where creativity is viewed as a planned or staged activity.

## 5. Conclusions

Creativity as a competence necessary for individuals engaging in innovation is accepted by both theorists and practitioners. A key difference in approach is that business owners or managers seem to assume that it is enough to have creative persons employed, thus restricting themselves to pure managerial activities. Another disparity of views is that parts of literature equate creativity with innovation process that results in novel products or solutions. The interview survey revealed that many SME business owners do not concord with this view as products of adaptive/adoptive innovation are not radical solutions and perhaps devoid of creativity. Could this be adjudged as a key reason why they failed to indicate “creativity” as a component of core competences for innovation? More, the interview revealed that since creativity may spread over various stages of the innovation development and might be contributed by several participating members of a team, it is difficult to identify it with a person, the business owner for example. Could this be another possible reason why business owners failed to include “creativity” in the list of competences deemed core for innovation in SME?

The paper has enriched the body of knowledge by throwing some light into existing discrepancies that exists between theorists and practitioners, regarding core competences for innovation. The findings open avenues for further research into understanding practitioners' perspectives regarding competences, especially creativity, for innovation.

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### **Kreatywność – niejednoznaczność definicji i praktyczne konsekwencje**

**Streszczenie.** *Globalne otoczenie gospodarcze doświadcza niestabilnych trendów wzrostu w wyniku wielu społecznych, politycznych i technologicznych ścieżek rozwoju współczesnego świata. Z drugiej strony konsumpcjonizm wywiera presję na firmy, aby zaspokoić ich rosnące zapotrzebowanie na produkty, usługi i/lub rozwiązania wysokiej jakości. Kreatywność jest uważana za kluczowy element kompetencji menedżera. Celem badania była analiza tych poglądów, aby zrozumieć, dlaczego właściciele czy menedżerowie firm nie zaliczyli kreatywności do grona kluczowych kompetencji niezbędnych do innowacji w mikro, małych i średnich przedsiębiorstwach. Artykuł jest kontynuacją badań podjętych przez autora dotyczących modelu kompetencji właściciela/menedżera innowacyjnych przedsiębiorstw. Jako metody badań wykorzystano przegląd literatury i badania ankietowe. Kluczowym odkryciem jest to, że pragmatyczne podejście właścicieli czy menedżerów mikro, małych i średnich przedsiębiorstw do ich funkcji i osiągania celów ma większe znaczenie niż rozważenie, które kompetencje są wymagane w danym momencie.*

**Słowa kluczowe:** *kompetencje, kreatywność, mikro, małe i średnie przedsiębiorstwa, innowacja, dwuznaczność*