STUDYING THE LIFECYCLE OF AN INTERNATIONAL GROUP: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE GROWTH PHASES OF ITS COMPANIES

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This paper proposes a discussion on the management practices and growth phase experienced by a number of companies, members of an international group, active in service industry in more than twenty countries spread on two continents (yet most of them in Europe). The authors' focus is on a set of four relatively young European small and medium-sized enterprises – (a Romanian company included), all of them reaching their lifecycle's growth stage.

Although based on existing models, the merit of this study is the specific investigation of a set of relatively small companies, members of the same international group, active in a single industry.

Keywords: Organization lifecycle, Growth phases, Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Management practices, International group of companies, Service industry.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore and identify some characteristics of the organizational lifecycle – and the growth phases, in particular – of the companies sharing common features as: membership of the same international group, active in the same industry; similar age and size – small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The case of the companies belonging to the same group would allow identifying and to define different types of management practices and entrepreneurial behaviour. In addition, the SMEs (start-ups included), as younger organizations, have apparently better chances to reveal their management practices and entrepreneurial behaviour along early stages of their organization lifecycle, more specifically, growth phases – as defined by Greiner [1-2]. The "entrepreneurial myth" [3] was revisited almost a decade later [4] and, as recently as 2014, the serial entrepreneur Peter Thiel emphasized the role of start-ups in "building the future" [5].

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Consequently, the remaining of the paper is structured as follows: literature survey on the organization lifecycle in general and growth stage in particular; research methodology; results and discussion; conclusions and managerial implications as well as limitations and further research paths to be explored.

2. Management practices and entrepreneurship elements along organizational lifecycle

The studies on entrepreneurship have expanded from the individual level to organization level: the growing literature on corporate entrepreneurship ([6] – [14]) extended the study of entrepreneurship at even larger companies.

Having the value innovation as core concept in their concept of Blue Ocean strategy, Kim and Mauborgne [15] changed the rigid classical strategic planning framework and move the focus on customer satisfaction, demand, and continuous innovation. Blue Ocean strategy is, actually, closer to marketing strategies as seen in Kotler's newer editions [16] rather than traditional strategic planning (which might still be appropriate for large companies). Whereas the research on success key-factors of large companies has offered significant results in seminal books – as Kaplan and Norton [17] or Collins ([18], [19]) – *the literature on small business remains rather limited*.

As far as small businesses (which are young firms as well), it is expected to be more entrepreneurial, more adaptable and flexible in chasing the opportunities identified by the entrepreneur, two-fold: because the founding entrepreneur is leading the company directly and, because of the size, they are easier managed. In their dynamics, more entrepreneurial and more successful a small business is, larger in size it grows; and, as Stevenson and Jarillo-Mossi [20] observed, while growing, the "seeds of destruction are sown" and the "transition from an entrepreneurial growth firm to a 'well-managed' business is often accompanied by a decreasing ability to identify and pursue opportunities" – in other words, to be less entrepreneurial. Exactly for this very reason, it is important to have a closer look with the researcher's eyes and tools to examine the *management practices of small companies along early stages of the its organization lifecycle*.

The concept of lifecycle was adopted by management authors in time, by analogy to the biological lifecycle ("from cradle to grave"), and adapted to several suitable cases as product lifecycle, project lifecycle, technology lifecycle, but also *industry lifecycle, business lifecycle and organization lifecycle*. According to most authors – from Churchill and Lewis [21] to Lester, Parnell and Carraher [22] and Lester and Parnell [23] – the organization lifecycle counts four or five stages bearing more-or-less similar names.

The topic has proved to be so attractive that occasionally several scholars conducted studies on the existing lifecycle models – as Hanks [24] has completed. The most common five-stage lifecycle includes: *Entrepreneurial stage*, Start-up or just Existence stage (it starts right after the organization's birth – organization's creation); *Survival* (sometimes associated with significant growth); *Maturity* or Success; *Renewal* (then associated with innovation, creativity and decentralized management); *Decline* (which, eventually, ends at organization's death – termination). Regardless the number of the stages, the general pattern of the organization evolution is the same, passing through periods of expansion – as shown by Mintzberg [25] and, at a point in time, termination – by Kimberly and Miles [26]. Zone [27] investigated the organization lifecycle in qualitative terms, considering three management dimensions (ethics, mode of functioning, procedures and regulations), while Greiner ([1], [2]) focused on the growth aspects of the organization lifecycle, considering five management practices (management focus, organizational structure, style of the top management – one of which is entrepreneurial, control system, management reward system).

Table 1 depicts the five phases of growth, each of them defined by evolution and revolution periods (generated by different types of crises): growth by creativity (limited and followed by a leadership crisis); growth by direction (followed by an autonomy crisis); growth by delegating (limited by control crisis); growth by coordination (limited by so-called 'red tape' bureaucratic crisis); growth and expansion by collaboration – which is using more flexible management structures.

Table 1

The chart of organization's management practices – by phases of growth (after [2])

Management practices	The five phases of growth (and the respective types of growth)				
	Phase 1	*Phase 2*	*Phase 3*	*Phase 4*	*Phase 5*
	Growth by creativity	Growth by direction	Growth by delegating	Growth by coordination	Growth & expansion by collaboration
Management focus	'Make & sell'	Operations efficiency	Market expansion	Organization consolidation	Problem solving & innovation
Organizational structure	Informal	Centralized & functional	Decentralized & geographical	Line staff & product groups	Matrix of teams
Style of the top management	*Individualistic & entrepreneurial*	Directive	Delegation	'Watchdog'	Participative
Control system	Market results	Standards & cost centres	Reports & profit centres	Investment centres & plans	Mutual goal setting
Management reward system	Ownership	Salary & merit increases	Individual bonus	Profit sharing & stock options	Team bonus

The 5-phase Greiner model is convenient from management standpoint, in case of growing companies – which is the most interesting instance to study (as all other companies are falling). In addition, it is expected that SMEs, young companies, to be more dynamic and more entrepreneurial. Therefore, the focus of the present study is on SMEs, the purpose being to identify their phase of growth (sense Greiner).

In practice it is not uncommon that several companies belong to the same group – even in the same industry. Definitely, the group companies are entrepreneurial, probably in a certain range – as shown by Şişu & Scarlat [28] – but not too much because they have to follow the same strategic line: the group strategy. However, the question stands still: *how identical are the companies of the group as far as their management practices and their growth stage?*

3. Research methodology

This study explores the management practices applied by a set of four companies, members of an international group with global activity – in order to identify the corresponding growth phases experienced. The group is one of the world's leading companies providing energy management services for greater energy efficiency in buildings. As internationalization is an entrepreneurial attribute of organizations – not only universities [29], an *international group of small businesses* was chosen to be the case to study.

A number of four companies, from four countries (Hungary, Italy, Romania and Spain), members of the international group, were selected to be surveyed, from a larger group of companies. The selection was restricted to European continent, considering companies legally registered in about same period (1995-1997) *i.e.* companies of reasonably similar age – in order to create premises – at a *later stage of the larger research project* from which this paper presents a part only – to compare companies reaching similar stage of their lifecycle (growth stage) and, possibly, to identify potential relationships between the growth phase and their entrepreneurial behaviour history over a period was about fifteen years (2004 – 2019) [28].

The company selection enjoys balanced representativeness – as geographic localization (Eastern to Western as well as Central and Southern sides of the continent); market size (larger, average and smaller populations – according to European standards) – as well as: well-established market economies and formerly communist countries; developed and emerging economies. As size, the focus was specifically on small and medium-size companies – according to the European standards by number of employees [30].

Noteworthy, these ceilings (small firms more than 10 and less than 50 employees; medium-sized enterprises between 50 and 250) apply to individual firms only. A firm that is part of a larger group may need to include staff headcount /turnover/balance sheet data from that group too. However, for the purpose of the current study, the categorisation is made by the individual firm's staff headcount only (*Table 2*).

Table 2

List of selected companies, by countries, age, and size

No. crt.	Country	Age [year established]	Size [no. employees]	Categorization by size
1	Hungary	1997	18	Small
2	Italy	1995	120	Medium
3	Romania	1995	80	Medium
4	Spain	1996	250	Medium

For confidentiality reasons, only the country of origin is mentioned but the names of the group and/or group members. All group members were registered as limited liability companies. As far as age of the company (the year it was legally registered), this is a matter of strategy tailored at the group's top management level.

The research is based on both secondary and primary research. The secondary research consisted mostly on literature survey but also group's and group members' documents (external sources). The primary research consisted of observation and mostly interviews with firms' country managers. For confidentiality reasons, only the country of origin is mentioned but the names of interviewed country managers. The interviews were conducted around the interview guide as specific instrument developed for this purpose (*Table 3*).

Table 3

The structure of the interview instrument (interview guide) – the section related to lifecycle

<table>
<tr><th>Section</th><th>Level I (main)</th><th colspan="2">Level II (detailed)</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">A</td><td rowspan="2">Identification data</td><td>1</td><td>Company</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Company manager</td></tr>
<tr><td>B</td><td colspan="3">…</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">C</td><td rowspan="2">Stage and phase of the organization lifecycle</td><td>5</td><td>Stage of the organization lifecycle</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>Phase of the growth stage</td></tr>
<tr><td>D</td><td colspan="3">…</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">E</td><td rowspan="2">Other: open commentaries about the company organization lifecycle (country and company specific)</td><td>11</td><td>About the stage of the organization lifecycle</td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td>About the phase of the growth stage</td></tr>
</table>

Because of the specificity of the interview matter – distance as well as overlapping fortunate period of summer holidays and unfortunate *coronavirus* pandemics crisis – the interviews were all-types (face-to-face, by e-mail and online), distributed in several chunks of time each, spread over a period of several months. As result of objective conditions, the interviews have progressed at different pace; in other words, the interview map was covered in various percentage from company to company. The data presented in this paper were collected over a period of four months (March – June 2020).

At the time of producing this paper (August 2020), the data processing is still in progress; nevertheless, the results – related to the management practices of the small and medium-sized companies as well as their growth phase – are shared in this paper.

4. Results and discussion

The results of the study are systematically presented, company by company, in such a manner to be comfortable to identify the specific management practices of the four companies of the group and, then, on these bases, the growth phase is assessed (correspondence – as shown in *Table 1*).

The decisions of picking the characteristic attribute/s of specific management practices are made by the country managers (the company executives). Maximum two items were allowed for picking. The results are presented in *Table 4*.

Analysing the results of interviews with the Hungarian company executive (*Table 4),* and comparing them with the Greiner model (*Table 1*), the conclusion is that Hungarian company is evolving from *Phase 1* (*Growth by creativity* – for three management practices: management focus, style of top management, control system) toward *Phase 2* (*Growth by direction* – for the other three: organizational structure, management reward system as well as style of top management).

Similarly, analysing the results of interviews with the Italian company executive (*Table 4*), and comparing them with the Greiner model, the conclusions on the phase of growth is that Italian company displays mostly features of the *Phase 2* (*Growing by direction* – for four management practices: management focus, organizational structure, style of top management, management reward system). Two management practices incline for Phase 1 (Growing by creativity – management focus and control system), while one management practice favours Phase 3 (Growth by delegating – control system too).

Table 4

The growth phases of the companies, by their management practices

– as assessed by their executives

Management practices	Country / companies			
	H company	*I company*	*R company*	*S company*
Management focus is on:	'Make & sell' ; then: *Phase 1*	'Make & sell' *as well as* operations efficiency then: *Phase 1 as well as Phase 2*	'Make & sell' *as well as* market expansion; then: *Phase 1 as well as Phase 3*	Operations efficiency *as well as* organization consolidation; then: *Phase 2 as well as Phase 4*
Organizational structure is:	Centralized & functional; then: *Phase 2*	Centralized & functional; then: *Phase 2*	Decentralized & geographical; then: *Phase 3*	'Line staff & product groups'; then: *Phase 4*
Style of the top management is:	Directive *as well as* individualistic & *entrepreneurial*; then: *Phase 2 as well as Phase 1*	Directive; then: *Phase 2*	Directive *as well as* participative; then: *Phase 2 as well as Phase 5*	'Watchdog' *as well as* participative; then: *Phase 5 as well as Phase 4*
Control system is based on:	Market results; then: *Phase 1*	Market results *as well as* reports & profit centres; then: *Phase 1 as well as Phase 3*	Market results *as well as* reports & profit centres; then: *Phase 1 as well as Phase 3*	Standards & cost centres; then: *Phase 2*
Management reward system is based on:	Salary & merit raises; then: *Phase 2*	Salary and merit raises; then: *Phase 2*	Individual bonus; then: *Phase 3*	Team bonus; then: *Phase 5*
Overall conclusion	*Phase 1→Phase 2*	*Phase 2*	*Phase 3*	*Phase 4*

Analysing the results of interviews with the Romanian company executive (*Table 4*), and comparing them with the Greiner model (*Table 1*), the conclusion is that Romanian company is definitely in *Phase 3* (*Growth by delegating* – for four management practices: management focus, organizational structure, control system, management reward system). However, three management practices are mixed: management focus also has a component of Phase 1 ("make & sell"); control system is also having a component of Phase 1 (market results); style of top management is divided between directive (feature associated to Phase 2) and participative (characteristic to Phase 5). This uncharacteristic split might require additional and deeper analysis. Reasonable assumptions are either too "pushy" transition from one phase to the next or innovative style of top management to try new management practices (uncharacteristic to the respective phase – as participative style of top management – yet a practice associated to phase 5). The interview notes point to the second possibility.

Analogously, analysing the results of interviews with the Spanish company executive (*Table 4*), and comparing them with the Greiner model, the conclusions on the phase of growth is that Spanish company displays mostly features of the *Phase 4* (*Growing by coordination* – for *three* management practices: management focus, organizational structure, style of top management). Two management practices incline for Phase 2 (management focus and control system), while other two would indicate Phase 5 (style of top management, management reward system). Quite strangely, no element of management practice is Phase 3-related.

To note that this "split" situation is not uncommon, for various reasons – from too much management creativity to lack of management skills. For young companies, the cause could be too high pace of development or, simply, the lack of management expertise and/or experience. In other cases, the reason resides in internal crises or external turbulences. On the other hand, the Greiner model should be referred to as an orientation tool, not as a rigid 'Bed of Procrustes'.

In our case, the differences between the four companies (positioning in four different phases of growth) are not justified by their age – because all are very similar form this standpoint (established 1995-1997), and are not young companies anymore. In addition, they belong to the same group, active in the same industry, following the same group strategy and benefitting of similar training programmes. Consequently, the differences might be the result of managers' different individual approach and/or local market influences and even different cultural prints.

Another aspect to be discussed is the apparent contradiction between the more advanced growth phase and entrepreneurial character. Actually, *it is not necessarily bad to be in a lower growth phase.* From the perspective of the entrepreneurial behaviour of the companies, the earlier growth phase, the more entrepreneurial the company is – in that sense of freedom to make decisions less limited by better-defined structures, standards and regulations (perceived by the entrepreneurial characters as rigid). The fact is underlined and reflected that the style of top management in the Phase 1 is called 'individualistic and *entrepreneurial*'.

Strictly in terms limited by our scope of work, the above results should also be put in relation with the results of the lifecycle analysis (*Table 5*) – which depicts the results of independently assessing the stage of the company lifecycle – by both company executives and authors. Comparing the assessments of the company executives and authors, it is important to notice that there is no bias in their appreciations (two coincidences and one variation on each side).

Table 5

Stage of the organization lifecycle – per countries / companies

No. crt.	Country / company	Estimated stage of the lifecycle		Comments
		by company	by authors	
1	H company	Survival	*Entrepreneurial stage*	Very low market share, low profitability.
2	I company	Maturity	Survival	Still very high potential for heat sub-metering, but market is stagnating
3	R company	Renewal	Renewal	Maturity of heat sub-metering. Second line of business, radio water meters, is growing (from 0)
4	S company	Maturity	Maturity	Very mature business for water and gas. Next stage will be renewal when heat sub-metering market will develop

There are several observations to be made as result of the crossed examination of results displaying lifecycle stage and growth phase.

(i) The companies in earlier growth phases – per Greiner model (Hungarian company progressing from phase 1 to phase 2, and Italy company in the phase 2 of growth) are in the early stages of their lifecycle as well: survival/entrepreneurial stage (Hungarian company) and survival/maturity stage (Italian company).

(ii) The companies in more advanced growth phases – per Greiner model (Romanian company in the phase 3 of growth, and Spanish company in the phase 4) are also in more mature stages of their lifecycle: renewal and maturity, respectively.

(iii) It is a positive marker (and confirmation of the research results) that companies in the more advanced stages of their lifecycle also show solid coincidence of the results of assessing the stage of the company lifecycle – by both company executives and authors.

5. Conclusions and managerial implications, limitations and further research

The objectives of this explorative study are fully matched: the management practices of the surveyed set of companies (members of the international group) as well as their growth phases and lifecycle stages were identified. The research was based on, and the results are in line with the significant literature in the area. Using a mix of research methods, the management practices, lifecycle stage and growth phases of the group companies were assessed qualitatively, yet objectively, observing the relevant experience in this area.

This study is only a segment of a larger PhD research project, which covers a considerable period of fifteen years (2004-2019), which revealed – in earlier stages – entrepreneurial features. The authors present the results of the current situation (2020) of the growth phase the companies have reached, from the perspective of their management practices. Thus, the prospective of more complex study of how the management practices and strategic changes, entrepreneurial behaviour and lifecycle stage or growth phase are all intertwined. This is actually the merit of this study: although based on existing models, it is exploring the relationships between strategic management and management practices, entrepreneurial behaviour and growth phase, by specific pilot investigation of a set of relatively small companies, members of the same international group, active in a single industry.

The management implications are significant: understanding and knowing the current strategy intertwining, the consequences of the future strategy changes decided by the group among the group firms as well as the limits of the group companies' freedom to act relatively independent yet within the borders of the group strategy – all are key-knowledge for prediction and wise decisions.

As part of larger research work-in-progress, there are inherent limitations as: number of the companies surveyed, only one group of companies, from a single one industry. They all represent promising research areas to be further explored – still focused on SMEs. Further identification of cultural prints, while assessing management practices and growth phase of country companies belonging to the same international group, is a reachable research objective for future studies.

The paper conclusions and implications are important for theorists as well as business owners, investors, and managers – helping them to make appropriate strategic decisions and adopt the best management practices. In addition, existing companies could improve the quality of their services, to better satisfy their customers.

Note: This paper is based on and continues the authors' previous research work: Scarlat and Şişu [31]; Şişu and Scarlat ([32], [33], [28]).

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