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Article

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RESPONSIBLE COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY OF SMES AND SPECIFIC VALUES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN TERMS OF THE EUROPEAN EXCELLENCE MODEL

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Abstract

The paper underlines part of the value of the research based on survey results conducted on SMEs in Romania, in 2007-2008, within the national research project IDEAS 856 "Increasing the competitiveness of SMEs in Romania by implementing a model evaluation and improvement of their performance in accordance with the European model of quality management." One of the research objectives was the assessment of the satisfaction degree of requirements relating to protection of human health and environmental protection by SMEs from Romania, including those in trade, in terms of an integrated approach to sustainable development values within the European Excellence Model as defined by the European Foundation for Quality Management - EFQM).

As a consequence of the study it appears that there is a correlation between the degree of meeting these requirements and mature quality management system of enterprises. Thus, it was found that for SMEs in trade, whose interests in implementing a quality management system is in its early stages, the degree of satisfaction of the requirements of society, from the perspective of an integrated approach to sustainable development values in the EFQM Excellence Model, is relatively low.

On the other hand, research carried out showed that data obtained by SMEs in trade in the process of evaluating and monitoring the impact on the environment are used mainly to establish corrective actions, following the complaints occurred, and less to define continuous improvement programs to meet these requirements.

Keywords: responsible commercial activity, sustainable development, demands of society, social responsibility, SMEs in trade, the EFQM excellence model

JEL Classification: M10

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Introduction

In the current economic context, marked by globalization, by the increasingly wide recognition of the interdependence between environment and development, increasingly widely shared is the view that the social responsibility of companies and the approach to sustainable development should become integral parts of economic concepts used by businesses in order to ensure the maintenance of balance between economic growth, stocks of natural resources and social progress.

Thus, it is estimated that companies should pursue systematic implementation of economic projects, social and environmental objectives derived from economic projects by: ensuring long-term economic performance, meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders, ensuring that the principles of sustainable development are respected (Olaru, M., et al., 2009a, Suditu C. et al., 2009). Achieving these objectives would result in creating value for each of the stakeholders: customers, shareholders, business partners, company staff, and for society at large.

In line with these concerns, the European Union strategy for sustainable development has been adapted to permanently growing requirements of the society, demands embodied in the regulations becoming more stringent. In this respect an important step was the adoption of EU directives and the "New Approach" on technical harmonization and standardization, which attaches great importance to the essential requirements for the protection of life, health and environmental protection.

The new EU strategy on Sustainable Development, adopted in 2009, is geared towards achieving long-term objectives of implementing environmental actions, the actions to counter the phenomenon of global poverty and start preparation for social inclusion (European Commission, 2009, p. 16).

Accordingly, in the case of SMEs, with a determinant role in the economic growth, an imminent the question is that of satisfying the requirements of society by these enterprises in terms of an integrated approach to sustainable development values (Olaru et al., 2009). Note that in services, these companies are dominant. Thus, in Romania 86% of existing SMEs operate in various services sectors (trade, construction, hotels and restaurants, transport and telecommunications, financial intermediation, real estate, health and social services, etc.) (Eurobarometer Team of the European Commission, 2008).

1. Considerations for commercial activity and social responsibility

In the business environment there are various opinions about the significance of sustainable development (Laine, M., 2005), based on three aspects, which form the basis of this concept: economic growth, ecological balance and social progress (Stigson, B., 2000), of which we mention the following:

- There is a certain tendency to promote the business interpretation of sustainable development, similar to the interpretation that the company can provide solutions to environmental problems. At this level we identify similarities to the weak nature of sustainable development.

- In terms of managers, the term refers primarily to the eco-efficiency (Bebbington, J., and Thomson, I., 1996; Springett, D., 2003 Laine, M., 2005, p. 399). Eco-efficiency means of synergy between environmental performances and economic performances create value for organization and community, resulting in a smaller negative impact (Stigson, B., 2000).
- Another approach is that the sustainable development can be achieved by creating open and competitive markets, properly contoured internationally (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2002 Laine, M., 2005, p. 399).
- The approach of this concept by the organization is made in terms of a commitment which can be made and respected (Springett, D., 2003 Laine, M., 2005, p. 399).

In close connection with the principles of sustainable development a particular importance is given to corporate social responsibility, internationally defined as specific models of management systems, implemented by a growing number of organizations. A number of companies prefer to integrate social responsibility management system with quality management systems, environmental ones and those relating to occupational health and safety, developed according to the international standards ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001 (Suditu, C. et al., 2009).

In these circumstances, it is believed that social responsibility of the company is important in ensuring long-term commercial advantage, making it easier to obtain the trust of customers and other stakeholders.

The term "responsible business" refers to ensuring the economic success of an organization by integrating social and environmental issues in its processes so the organization can adequately manage the impact of environmental processes and can help solve community problems on the whole. In other words, such work involves meeting customers' requirements but also satisfy the expectations of other stakeholders - staff organization, business partners, and the community as a whole.

Concerns about ensuring responsible business activities have become more serious, especially in a globalized economy and increasingly broad recognition of the interdependence between nature and society, which resulted in new requirements from customers, local communities, regulatory authorities, banks, financiers and insurance providers. In the new conditions, more and more organizations are interested to improve the operation, so that it can contribute to the general good of the community.

2. Specific values for sustainable development in terms of EFQM Excellence Model

Generally speaking, values that promote and support sustainable development are: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and taking on the responsibility of managing economic and social development globally (Shepherd, D., A. et al., 2009).

In the business environment attention is paid to the manner in which the concept of sustainable development can be integrated into a model of excellence in business. The binder of the two issues, sustainable development and excellence in business is the

management approach based on efficiency and effectiveness, in other words meeting customers' needs by calling on existing natural resources without impeding or damaging the ability of the next generation to meet their own needs.

Regarding the sustainable development from a process perspective, the values on which it is based are (Garvare, R. and Isaksson, R., 2001):

- Creating and maintaining a sustainable balance between the various stakeholders;
- Assimilate the concept of excellence through continuous learning and adaptation ability to change. Acquiring such values results in: individualization of products according to customers' needs and developing products, which consume fewer resources;
- Achieve a level of excellence based on performance proceedings. This means managing processes effectively and efficiently, achieving a result that maximizes the integrated value supported by an interested party in the long term, maintaining, however, a balance between the demands and expectations of other stakeholders. Excellence based on process performance creates the premises for improving and learning coordination in system components;
- Treatment of stakeholders starting from democratic principles as integrity and respect, accountability and leadership approach is, to some extent, everybody's attribute;
- Transparency, so that through open communication, and information of all interested stakeholders on performance standards they will be able to reach a fair, competitive and predictable environment.

In the economic environment, one of the excellence models implemented by businesses is the excellence model of the European Foundation for Quality Management, model of evaluation criteria which have affinities with values specific to the concept of social responsibility and that of sustainable development.

EFQM excellence model in recent years has become a particularly effective tool for developing management and human performance of an organization representing the most successful European model for quality in business.

This model offers not only the benefits of a strategy verified in the practice of quality management relevant for the European economic context, but also the orientation towards customer's satisfaction and other stakeholders-staff organization and society as a whole. Also, its flexibility allows the model to be applied with the same success by large organizations as well as by small and medium enterprises.

The model helps businesses to assess their performance, to understand where problems exist, further encouraging them to find solutions to eliminate their causes.

Through the nine basic criteria of the model and the corresponding sub-criteria, we aim at assessing all the aspects that contribute to obtaining performance and establishing a score that reflects, as closely as possible, the importance of each category of work organization and ultimately the organization's overall performance (Figure no. 1).

These criteria are divided into two categories "Enablers" and "Results".

The “Enablers” are (Olaru, M. et al., 2008a, EFQM, 2009): leadership, policies and strategies by which the organization implements its vision and mission, people whose knowledge and skills are provided by training and continuous improvement, developed partnerships and resources involved to achieve objectives and processes which are key components in implementing organizational policies and strategies and which create added value.

Regarding the “Results”, which are assessed in terms of the criteria for society results, along with those on the customer results, people results and key performance results.

The evaluation of the performance of each criterion shall be based on a rating scale with five levels (0%, 25%, 50%, 75% and 100%), according to the EFQM methodology established by EFQM, by awarding points. The maximum score, appropriate to the performance of 100% of all criteria, is 1,000 points. The final score quantifies the results for the entire organization and all its activities and represents the overall efficiency of the organization.

The evaluation criteria, which have affinity values specific to social responsibility and sustainable development, in the EFQM excellence model is "society results" (Figure no. 1).

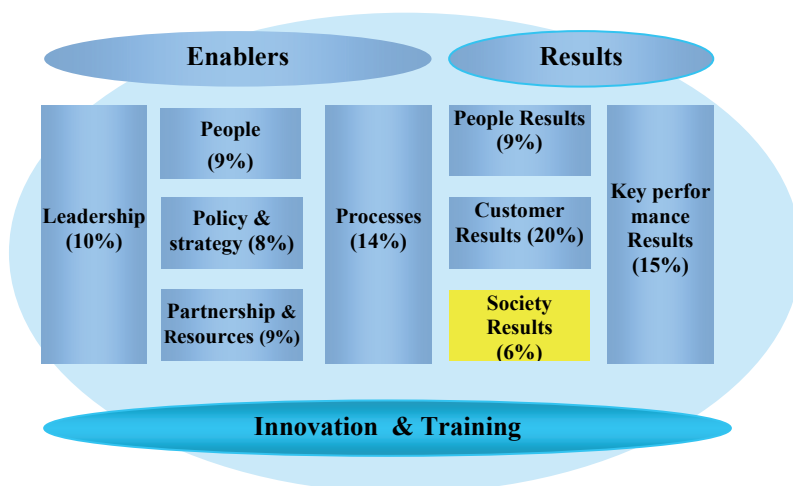


Figure no. 1: The basic criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model and their importance

Source: European Foundation for Quality Management, www.efqm.org, September 2009

The model suggests therefore that meeting the requirement of customers and of the staff, the responsible approach of the requirements of society, can be provided through appropriate management, to mobilize resources for this purpose, primarily the human ones, all business processes according to defined policies and strategies, with the integration of organizational excellence principles. Meeting the mentioned requests, acquiring a

privileged position in the market, allows further improvement of key performances of the organization.

3. Methodology of Research

For achieving our objectives, the research was conducted as a questionnaire-based study on SMEs in Romania between 2007 -2008.

To determine the minimum sample size the researchers used the following formula (Balaure, 2002):

$$n = \frac{t^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)}{\Delta\omega^2}, \quad (1)$$

where

n = minimum sample size,

t = coefficient corresponding to the probability with which the results are guaranteed (from the statistical tables of the Student distribution),

p = proportion of sample components that have explored feature (when "p" is unknown, it is considered equal to 0.5 - corresponding maximum dispersion);

$\Delta\omega$ – acceptable error limit.

To determine the minimum sample, the coefficients of the above formula have the following values:

t = 2 (corresponding to a probability of 0.95)

p = 0.5 (corresponding to maximum value of dispersion)

$\Delta\omega$ = 0.07 (error limits)

By entering values quantities t, p and $\Delta\omega$ in the formula resulted the value of 205 companies for the minimum sample size (2):

$$n = \frac{2^2 \times 0,5 \times (1 - 0,5)}{0,07^2} = 205 \text{ companies} \quad (2)$$

To achieve the research were sent 3100 questionnaires and have been received 1227 completed questionnaires, of which 830 in services (698 SMEs and 132 large enterprises). Of these, 231 SMEs and 32 large companies are in trade.

The questionnaire was structured in the following sections:

- General information about the organization (name, field of activity, employment, etc.)
- The effects of implementation and certification of quality management systems;
- *evaluating whether the criteria of the European model of quality management are met;*
- methods used by the organization to assess and improve performance.

For the evaluation of answers the researchers used a five-level scale of assessment, from "no" to "very much"/"all" (if applicable), and some of the questions answered were with two variants, namely affirmative or negative.

This paper presents the results of research conducted in the sample of 231 SMEs in the field of trade in Romania, to assess whether this category of companies promote sustainable development in terms of specific values of the European model of EFQM excellence.

4. The research results

Among the requirements formulated by the EFQM excellence model in the criterion 'results on the company' there are: reducing pollution, reducing risks to human health and safety, reducing waste, concerns for recycling, the active involvement of the organization in community life, etc.

In the study conducted according to the methodology presented, it was intended to determine to what extent SMEs in trade from Romania monitor and evaluate the impact of processes on the community, based on performance indicators in order to ensure compliance with the criteria of "society results" from the EFQM excellence model and appropriate sub-criteria.

For this purpose the questionnaire used included the following question, with appropriate response options: your organization ensures compliance with company requirements, through (various variants can be given):

- a) *monitoring and assessing the environmental impact of processes,*
- b) *reducing and preventing environmental impact processes,*
- c) *reducing and preventing risks to health and safety at work;*
- d) *assessing community perception of central and local authorities, regulatory bodies on the social impact of the organization,*
- e) *active involvement in community life,*
- f) *use of performance indicators relating to social impact of the organization.*
- g) *other (please indicate).*

4.1 Monitoring and assessing the impact of processes on environment

By processing the data obtained from the study resulted that only 43% of trade SMEs monitor "greatly" or "very much" the impact of processes on environment. An important percentage, namely 35% of SMEs in the trade said they hadn't monitored at all or monitor to a little extent the impact of processes on environment. (Figure no. 2).

We consider we should rethink the role which a small trade is to take on, and linking these businesses with the demands of society in order to timely identify expectations, ensuring a proper management of resources and reducing the negative impact of activities on the environment.

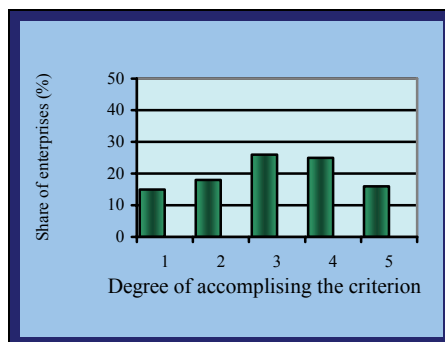


Figure no. 2: Monitoring and assessing the environmental impact of processes by SMEs in trade in Romania

Note: For graphic representation of responses in Fig. no. 2 the following coding system was used for the ratings given: 1 - no, 2 - to a small extent, 3 - satisfactory, 4 - to a large extent, 5 – greatly

4.2 Reduction and prevention of environmental impact of processes

Data obtained in the process of assessment and monitoring the environmental impact of processes are used "largely" or "very much" to reduce and prevent these impacts by 46% of SMEs surveyed trade (Figure no. 3).

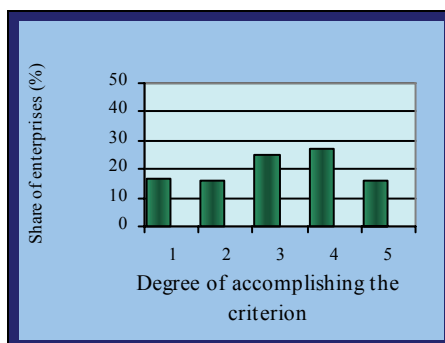


Figure no. 3: Reduction and prevention of environmental impact of processes by SMEs in trade in Romania

Note: For graphic representation of responses in Fig. no. 3 the following coding system was used for the ratings given: 1 - no, 2 - to a small extent, 3 - satisfactory, 4 - to a large extent, 5 - very much

Although in recent years, we remark an improvement of the level of using data resulting from evaluation and monitoring processes impact on the environment, the share of SMEs in trade that do not use "at all" the data or use them "to a small extent" to reduce and prevent this impact is still large (35% of all SMEs surveyed).

Therefore, in the case of SMEs in trade, we can state that there is a reduced capacity to respond to signals received from the company regarding the demands of society for the protection of life, health and environmental protection (Stoleriu, Gh. and Olaru, M., 2003, Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2007). We believe that the financial difficulties faced by SMEs in Romania, including those on trade, have a negative impact in this regard.

4.3 Reducing and preventing risks to health and safety at work

According to the study, 52% of SMEs in trade are preoccupied "largely" or "very much" by reducing and preventing risks to health and safety at work. The share of SMEs without such concerns, or whose concerns are to "a small extent" to reduce and prevent risks to health and safety at work is about 16% and 20% of SMEs surveyed said that they deal in a satisfactory manner with these issues (Figure no. 4). It follows that in this respect, there are significant reserves to improve the SMEs in Romanian trade.

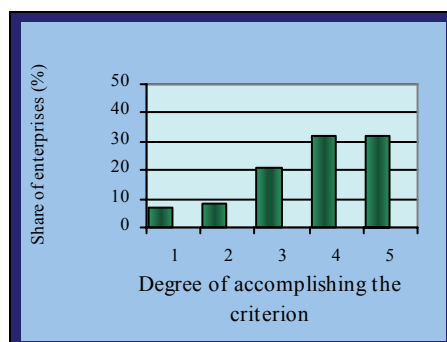


Figure no. 4: Reducing and preventing risks to health and safety at work by SMEs in Romanian trade

Note: For graphic representation of responses in Fig. no. 4 the following coding system was used for the ratings given: 1 - no, 2 - to a small extent, 3 - satisfactory, 4 - to a large extent, 5 - very much

4.4 Establishment and implementation of a program of continuous improvement of the requirements for the protection of life, health and environmental protection

a) Assessment of perception of the community, local and central authorities, regulatory bodies on the social impact of the organization

Following the research conducted it appears that SMEs in trade are less concerned with improving the perception of the community, of the central and local authorities, of the regulatory bodies regarding the impact of the organization's activities on society (Figure no. 5). Thus, 38% of SMEs surveyed said they were not dealing "at all" or only "to a little

extent" and 40% of them consider that they work "to a great extent" or "very much" to assess these perceptions.

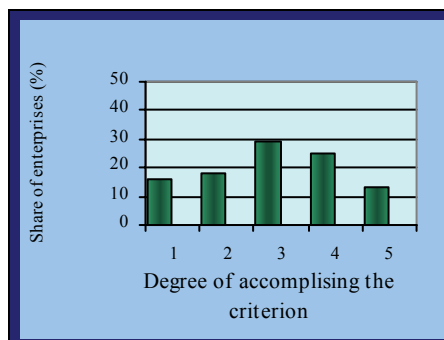


Figure no. 5: Evaluation of the perception of the community, of the central and local authorities, of the regulatory bodies regarding the social impact of the organization by SMEs in trade in Romania

Note: For graphic representation of responses in Fig. no. 5 the following coding system was used for the ratings given: 1 - no, 2 - to a small extent, 3 - satisfactory, 4 - to a large extent, 5 - very much

b) The involvement of organization in community life

According to the study, SMEs in trade got involved slightly in the community life. Thus, only 35% of SMEs surveyed said they got involved "highly" or "very much" in the community life, the share of those not involved at all or involved "to a small extent" being 38% (Figure no. 6).

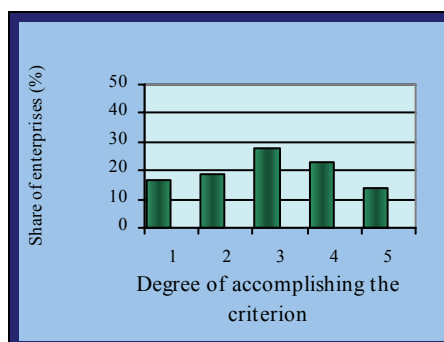


Figure no. 6 The involvement of SMEs in the trade from Romania in community life

Note: For graphic representation of responses in Fig. no. 6 used the following coding system of qualifications awarded: 1 - no, 2 - to a small extent, 3 - satisfactory, 4 - to a large extent, 5 - a lot

c) The use of performance indicators on the social impact of the organization

According to the study conducted, the share of SMEs in trade, using performance indicators relating to social impact of activities is relatively low (Figure no. 7).

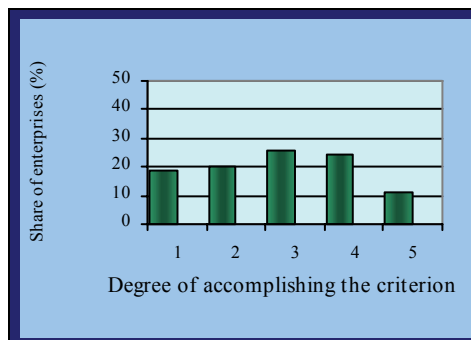


Figure no. 7 The use of performance indicators relating to social impact of the organization by SMEs in Romanian trade

Note: For graphic representation of responses in Fig. no. 7 the following coding system was used for the ratings given: 1 - no, 2 - very little, 3 - satisfactory, 4 - more; 5 - very much.

Thus, only 32% of them said they systematically use such indicators, the vast majority of SMEs surveyed, that is 68% do not use at all or use the "very little" or in a "satisfactory" manner such indicators (Figure no. 7).

d) The fulfillment degree of criterion "society results" of the European excellence model by SMEs in trade

Overall, the trade SMEs surveyed, in proportion of 57%, believe that they don't meet "at all", "to a small extent" or in a "satisfactory" manner the criterion requirements "on society results" (Figure no. 8). In comparison, only 17% of them consider that they fully meet this criterion, using performance indicators for monitoring and evaluation the impact of processes on the community.

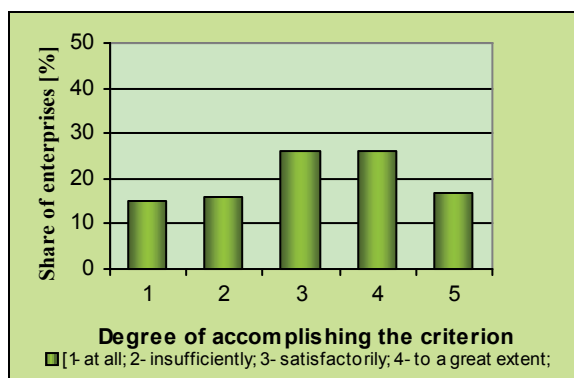


Figure no. 8: Degree of fulfillment criterion of "society results" of the EFQM Excellence Model by SMEs in Romanian trade

The results of the research reflect the existing weaknesses in addressing the social responsibility of SMEs surveyed. This could be due to the fact that the concerns of SMEs, particularly those of trade, regarding the implementation of an environmental management system or a quality management system - environment – occupational health and safety are still in the early stages.

Correlating the results concerning the degree of fulfillment of that criterion of the EFQM model of excellence to those obtained on the effects of implementation and certification of management systems (Olaru, M. et al., 2008b, Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2006), we can state that the results are better for the SMEs that have a quality management system or an integrated management system implemented according to the models proposed by international standards ISO 9000, ISO 14000 and OHSAS 18001.

This can be explained by the fact that SMEs in trade, which have implemented such management systems, following the specific requirements for these systems, have developed a program to continuously improve processes, systematically using performance indicators to measure the impact of these processes on the community (Suditu, C. et al., 2009).

5. Improve the activity of SMEs in trade from the perspective of the specific values of sustainable development promoted by the EFQM Excellence Model

For improving the activity of SMEs in trade, in terms of specific values of sustainable development promoted by the European model of the EFQM excellence, are necessary changes in mentality and in the action manner of management and all staff, to increase social responsibility of every employee (Olaru, M. et al., 2008a, Stoleriu, Gh. et al., 2009).

In this sense, we consider that firstly, SMEs in trade should give greater importance to proper resolution of complaints received from the community as a whole, taking into account the minimal requirements defined by international standards ISO 9000.

Thus, it should be established, firstly, a uniform procedure for resolving such complaints (Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2007). In setting policy and targets, on the complaint handling process, should be taken into account legal requirements and the data from all stakeholders.

We also believe that the recommendations made by international standard ISO 10002 on the stages of solving customer complaints should be also considered in the case of claims received from the community regarding the protection of life, health and environment. Thus, this process could include the following steps:

- dissemination of material which shows availability for the enterprise to solve complaints from the community,
- collecting and recording such complaints;
- confirm receipt of complaints;
- assessing claims for their validity;
- operative resolution of complaints;
- information on community action;

- regular analysis of complaints received to determine trends and to remove the causes that lead to complaints.

Also, to ensure the efficiency of resolving the complaints process, the enterprise should (Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2007, Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2009):

- apply the best practices for solving complaints from the community;
- encourage an approach to society in the organization;
- encourage innovation in the process of solving complaints;
- provide exemplary solving of complaints.

The data resulting from the resolution of complaints should be used to improve processes and services so as the requirements of society for the protection of life, health and environmental protection to be better satisfied.

On the other hand, under increasing societal demands for protection of life, health and environment, economic practice is increasingly recognized to meet these demands and the competitive pressure, the management of companies should ensure continuous improvement of environmental performance and sanogenetic processes and outcomes of these processes (Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2008, Popescu S. et al., 1999).

The data resulting from the evaluation and monitoring for meeting the needs of society for the protection of life, health and environmental protection should be used primarily for projects that improve existing processes or to implement new processes (Olaru, M. et al., 2008c, Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, Gh., 2009).

Conclusions

Under the pressure of increasingly restrictive regulations and given the growing importance of sanogenetic and environmental criteria in separating marketing products and services, in a highly dynamic and diversified offer, more and more organizations are concerned to improve the results in relation to society as a whole, with particular focus on promoting sustainable development principles.

Following the research-based questionnaire resulted that for SMEs in Romania on trade, whose interests on implementing a quality management system is in its early stages, the satisfaction degree of the society requirements from the perspective of an integrated approach to sustainable development values in the EFQM Excellence Model, is relatively low.

Given the results of research conducted, it can be concluded that the enlargement of the process of implementing a quality management system complying with ISO 9000 can provide the necessary preconditions for improving the response capacity of SMEs in trade to the company's growing demands to promote principles of sustainable development in light of the EFQM Excellence Model.

In the long run, such an approach should be integrated in the process of promoting and developing an organizational culture oriented towards business excellence based on process

performance standing in relation with the demands of society on the protection of life, health and environment, which allows integration of sustainable development values. It is also necessary to improve communication of SMEs in trade with all stakeholders and to develop systems for collecting and processing relevant information about the external environment and community expectations.

Results of research can be a starting point for improving SMEs in Romanian trade to meet the demands of society, from the perspective of an integrated approach to sustainable development values, with positive impact on improving the overall performance of these enterprises.

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