

CRUCIAL TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES IN THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT: CASE OF THE EUROPEAN SMES MANAGERS

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Abstract

The paper aims to define the top of the crucial transversal competences for non-routine tasks in case of SMEs managers. The paper provides better perception of the content of transversal competences that are urgent for solving non-routine tasks. The article also introduces the results of the empirical research that has been performed in Lithuania, Italy, Austria, Sweden, Bulgaria, France and the United Kingdom. The empirical research has been performed while implementing Life Long Learning program Leonardo da Vinci Innovation transfer project "New non-routine skills via mobile game-based learning" (No. 509893-LLP-1-2010-1-SE-LEONARDO-LMP). 62 respondents from European SMEs whose activities are related to business services have been interviewed. Top 10 transversal competences for competitiveness have been indicated and grouped according to each country. The research indicated that competences urgent for managing non-routine tasks in fast-changing environment consist of two blocks: (1) competences required for process managing and (2) competences required for partnership and self-managing. There are cases related to the argumentation of the competences' importance presented in the paper.

Paper type: Research paper.

Keywords: non-routine tasks, transversal competences.

JEL Classification: L26, L84, M53, M12.

1. Introduction

Highly dynamic environment conditioned by rapid economic and social changes has increased requirements from consumers and expectations of employees. This leads to new non-standard situations the managers of business companies are facing. This problem is very urgent for managers of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Ability to adapt in rapidly changing environment and ability to behave in non-standard situations of these managers are leading to competitiveness and success of the company. Thus, the competences enabling the managers to understand what is going on in their business environment and take actions on time are the essential precondition of SMEs activity. Therefore, the question arises: what competences SMEs managers should obtain in order to adapt easier to the changing environment?

There are different approaches to the terms of these competences in scientific literature: competences for fast-changing organization (May, 1999), generic competences (Thompson & Richardson, 1996), strategic competences (Thompson & Cole, 1997; Baker, etc. 1997, Sparrow, 2006), strategic distinctive (core) competences (Assen, 2000; Ljungquist, 2008; Ackermann, 2010). Most of the researchers are using the term of transversal competences that enables to act successfully in the environment where rules or sufficient information do not exist, uncertainty of decisions' consequences leads to anxiety and stress, where time horizons are extended and unfixed.

Successful SMEs are distinguished as innovative and highly adaptive to the market. On the other hand, they are small sized and have wide spectrum of tasks for one position, etc. Therefore, there is a clear tendency related with the broadening of required skills portfolio linked to "non-routine" tasks in SMEs. This indicates that transversal key competences (i.e., problem-solving, self-management and communication, etc.) are very urgent for SMEs employees and managers. According to Boyatzis (2008), emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competences are predicting effectiveness in professional, management and leadership roles in many sectors of the society.

There are many studies dedicated to the importance of these competences. Koenigsfeld (2012) noted that leadership and interpersonal competences have been rated as the most important and most frequently used managerial competences. Robles (2012) identified top 10 soft skills perceived as the most important by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. Dreyfus (2008) stated that nine competences (Managing Group Process, Initiative, Self-Confidence, Leadership, Helping and Delegating, Adapting, Setting and Managing to Goals, Human Frailty and Interpersonal Sensitivity) are significantly differentiating highly effective managers from typical managers.

Global crisis has induced the research related to the perception of challenges in crisis period and the competences urgent for executives and employees. Wooten & James (2008) stated that executives who enable their organizations to recover from a crisis, may own a complex set of competences in each of the five phases of crisis – signal detection, preparation and prevention, damage control and containment, business recovery, and reflection and learning.

Besides the research directed at the complex set of competences, most of the research has been directed towards the importance of separate competences in different contexts. Modern management trends like green management (Zoogah, 2011; Milard, 2011, Jackson, 2011, etc.), sustainability (Wagner, 2011; Ehnert, 2012) and related concepts allow looking at the competence management from the new perspective. Wallin (2012) stated that competences can be a useful framework when considering alternative ecosystem strategies. SME is characterized by the niche strategy in case of specific requirements for clients and individual organization activity that lead to unique product or service. This is definitely related to non-routine tasks and competences required for accomplishing of such tasks. In case of SMEs managers, openness for changes, ability to implement them and also strategic thinking are very important. Nuntamanop (2013) noted the importance of strategic thinking competence that offers a framework for developing strategic thinking of business leaders and managers, which contributes to better business strategy and performance. Jis (2008) argues that in the new environment, many enterprises convert their pyramid organizational structures into flat ones with procedure-driven configurations. Therefore, team work becomes a very important way as this competence could be understood as an expression of identification within the enterprise as well as tolerance to each other in SME case.

The results of the scientific research suppose a wide range of competences urgent for the successful business development. Actual competences, that are urgent, depend on the context. Competences that are the most important for SMEs within their specifics are distinguished in the paper. On the other hand, based on SME specifics and environment dynamics, the competences required for execution of non-routine tasks are emphasized. Summary of competences presented by various authors and the evaluation of the importance of these competences allowed to distinguish the competences and their descriptions. 12 competences have been distinguished based on two aspects: SME specifics and non-routine tasks (Figure 1).

Communication expression - contacts - feedback	Team work management – coordination - integration
Planning priorities - trends - stages and methods	Flexibility flexible style - attitudes/views of others - adaptation
Conflict Management fairness - objectiveness - mediation	Strategic thinking vision for the future - key objectives - external environment
Inspiring motivation Encourage, inspire others – present goals attractively	Innovativeness experiment- creativity- overstep the settled limits and rules
Openness to change challenges – initiative - adaptation	Initiative self-confidence - new opportunities - new activities
Decision Making responsibility – consequences/risks - assessment	Learning improvement apply knowledge – improvement - learn from own experience

Figure 1. Key competences for managing non-routine tasks at the workplace

2. Method

The aim of the empirical research is to justify the importance of defined competences urgent for managing non-routine tasks at the workplace and distinguish the descriptions of these competences. The method of the research was in-depth semi-structured interview with the subjects of quantitative survey. Semi-structured questionnaire was filled out by the interviewer. This research was carried out with 62 respondents, i.e. managers of small and medium business services companies (IT, consultations, services, insurance, etc). The research was performed in Lithuania (N=11), Italy (N=11), Austria (N=10), Sweden (N=4), Bulgaria (N=9), France (N=10) and the United Kingdom (N=12). Personal information (age, gender, education) is not presented taking into account respondents wishes for anonymity.

Each respondent was asked to evaluate the importance of non-routine tasks skills and provide the cases, explaining the importance of certain behavior. This approach allowed to ensure the deliberate and reasonable evaluation of competences' importance.

Factorial validation technique was applied for testing of scales quality. At first, all questions in a corresponding block were factorized by principal components method, while applying factors axis rotation according to the highest dispersion. Then the structure of theoretically meaningful indicators was found, and obtained single factors were additionally tested by applying alpha factor analysis method. This method was used for validity testing of single items combination to additive index. Dimensionality of the scale was tested while using this method in the research. Evaluation scales of competences for non-routine tasks were distinguished as possessing high methodological qualitative characteristics. Their inherent consistency coefficients are high enough, and they reach 0.9 limit. Other controlled indicators also have high meanings (L; i/tt; rmean, etc.). Then crucial transversal competences were distinguished, and content analysis was applied for the processing of related cases.

The top of transversal competences for competitiveness were indicated and ranged according to each country. Differentiation of transversal competences' importance in the countries was checked using the tests for Several Independent Samples (Kruskal-Wallis test) and Two-Independent-Samples Tests (Mann-Whitney test). Significance level of 0,05 was chosen to check the hypotheses. The hypotheses on equality were rejected (differences were considered as statistically more important and reliable) when p_value did not exceed 0,05.

3. Results

The research on transversal competences urgent for solving non-routine tasks was carried out in Lithuania, Italy, Austria, Sweden, Bulgaria, France and the United Kingdom. Evaluation of competences' compatibility confirmed logical determination (behavior) of competences. According to the factorial validation technique, aggregate competence needed for managing non-routine tasks consists of two competences' units. First unit of competences needed for process managing involves Strategic thinking, Innovativeness, Openness to change, Initiative, Planning and Decision making. Second unit of competences needed for partnership and self-managing involves Communication, Learning, development, Inspiring motivation, Team work, Conflict management and Flexibility (Figure 2).

Competences for Process managing as well as competences for Partnership and self-managing are equivalent according to the importance. If the most important competence is Communication that is ascribed to the competences needed for partnership and self-managing, so the second most important competence is Planning, that refers to the competences needed for process managing.

Competences needed for process managing	Competences needed for partnership and self-managing
Component characteristics: % of Variance=50,725 KMO=0,674 Cronbach's α =0,753	Component characteristics: % of Variance=51,534 KMO=0,685 Cronbach's α =0,758
<p style="text-align: center;">Strategic thinking</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,819; i/tt=0,661; Mean=3,3250; Std.D=,59890)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possesses a clear vision for the future • clearly defines key objectives • considers the company in relation to its external environment • identifies opportunities which can increase the organization's competitiveness 	<p style="text-align: center;">Communication**</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,862; i/tt=0,711; Mean=3,3994; Std.D=,45877)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is open to feedback from others without prejudice • respects the attitudes and opinion of others • provides feedback to others • can discuss different topics in an objective way • is tolerant of different customs and cultures • expresses own reflections and ideas clearly
<p style="text-align: center;">Openness to change</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,751; i/tt=0,571; Mean=3,3833; Std.D=,48814)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • realizes the need for change, and the possibility of implementing the change • initiates and implements change • adapts to the changing environment both by behaviour and thinking • supports new approaches, initiatives, methods, and technologies 	<p style="text-align: center;">Learning, development</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,752; i/tt=0,562; Mean=3,2754; Std.D=,61007)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continually improves personal behaviours • continually improves professional knowledge and skills • strives to learn more than required by each situation • learns from own experience
<p style="text-align: center;">Initiative</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,720; i/tt=0,518; Mean=3,3167; Std.D=,41647)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actively seeks new activities and work challenges • actively seeks and identifies opportunities to achieve goals • actively seeks for new information/precedents • pursues work with energy and determination 	<p style="text-align: center;">Team work</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,731; i/tt=0,531; Mean=3,3405; Std.D=,50805)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fosters commitment and team spirit • encourages and facilitates cooperation in team working • works with others to achieve goals • integrates different opinions of team members
<p style="text-align: center;">Planning</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,640; i/tt=0,439; Mean=3,3918; Std.D=,51610)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anticipates progress of actions and resources required • defines priorities • distributes and redistributes tasks and resources 	<p style="text-align: center;">Conflict Management</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,638; i/tt=0,442; Mean=3,3894; Std.D=,52366)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acts as a mediator in conflict situation • resolves conflicts between people • is fair and objective in conflict situations • handles stress in conflict situations
<p style="text-align: center;">Decision Making</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,623; i/tt=0,426; Mean=3,3600; Std.D=,47700)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluates the consequences and risks, expected benefit and cost of decisions taken • evaluates strategic impact of decisions taken • makes good decisions in complex situations • presents logical, reasoned, constructive critical comments and arguments • takes creative decisions in non-routine tasks 	<p style="text-align: center;">Flexibility</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,618; i/tt=0,420; Mean=3,3333; Std.D=,62361)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes into account the attitudes and views of others • can understand and adopt the position of others • adapts to changing demands and conditions
<p style="text-align: center;">Innovativeness</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,611; i/tt=0,413; Mean=3,0060; Std.D=,45221)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applies new work methods • generates and presents new ideas • questions accepted approaches and enters uncharted areas • operates outside of the box, i.e. finds new solutions • creates compelling future vision 	<p style="text-align: center;">Inspiring motivation *</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(L=0,571; i/tt=0,394; Mean=3,1695; Std.D=,63389)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gives confidence to other people and facilitates their success • creates space for others to succeed • enthuses other people • successful in gaining staff interest and commitment

Figure 2. Competences needed for managing non-routine tasks

* Two items were rejected:

1) creates a vision of what could be achieved;

2) defines goals in an accessible way

** One item was rejected: Makes and maintains good relationships

Respondents were asked to present the cases related to each competence's importance. One respondent indicated that long relationships with clients in seeking to satisfy their individual needs are very important and lead to clients' loyalty. Also, communication competence is very urgent because it allows explaining specific wishes of customers and presenting individualized service of product. Namely, face-to-face communication forms the relations among the clients and employees and develops the confidence in each other. Also it was indicated that employees communicate using interactive means (i.e. e-mail) too much. This kind of communication has many advantages (fast, direct, it lets a written proof...), but also some disadvantages. It is an impersonal way of communicating; employees are receiving many useless emails that can hide the most important ones. This leads to improperly provided services because expectations of customers were met unduly. In order to avoid this new trend in the company, the manager decided to promote another way of communication, namely a real face-to-face communication. He did it himself with his close colleagues to show a good example; he has shown to everyone the importance of such communication by taking some examples of words or sentences that do not have the same meaning when you read them in an email message and listen to them. According to the respondent, due to the improved communication competence, the non-routine tasks are being performed faster in the company and attention to communication competence development led to the growth of the company.

Another SME feature is related to limited resources and constant search for new possibilities and orders in the market. This situation occurred in one SME, where a big project was contracted, but the company did not have enough resources to implement the project. The SME had to reschedule the project and to make a realistic assessment of the company's resources. The main mistake was insufficient staff capacity in the company that could carry on project management. Thus, the project, its activities and intensity in terms of performance and qualification requirements were reviewed. This example illustrated the need of planning the competences for the SME.

Small difference of average meaning (3,3994–3,0060) between the most important and comparatively less important competences determines relatively big dispersal of opinions in different countries (Figure 3, 4, Table 1).

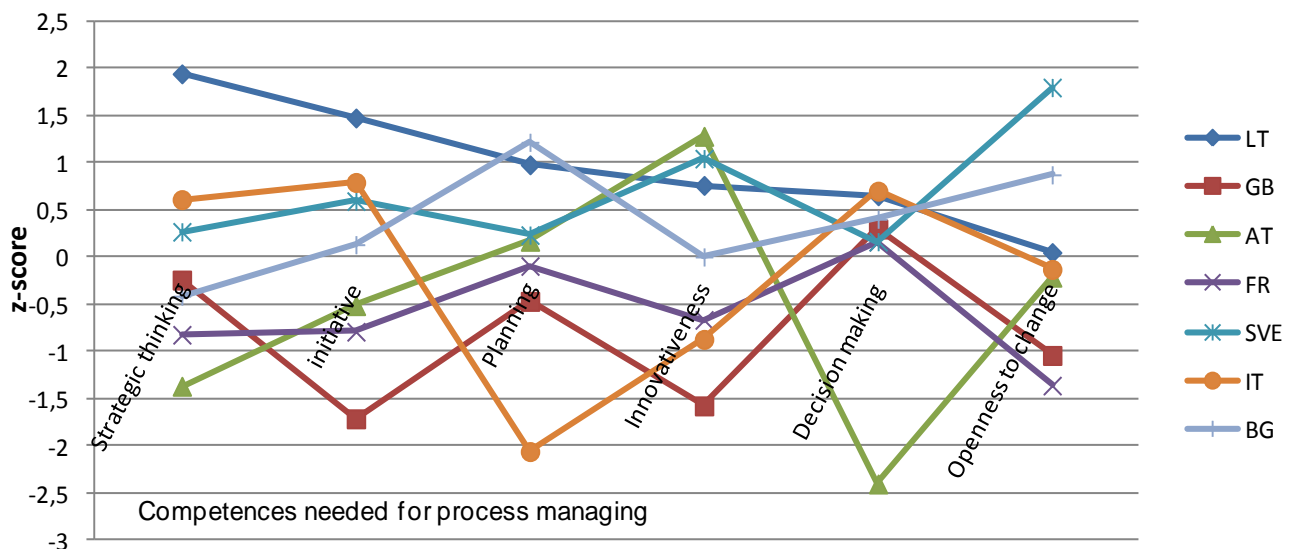


Figure 3. Significance of competences needed for managing non-routine tasks (for process managing)

Lithuanian respondents are emphasizing the competences required for process managing, especially those related with Strategic management competence. Also Lithuanian respondents are distinguishing Initiative and Decision making more than respondents from other countries. Importance of Communication competence is also the most important for Lithuanians as well as for other countries too. The United Kingdom's respondents evaluated all competences quite reasonably,

but such competences as Openness to changes, Initiative needed for process managing were evaluated the most skeptically.

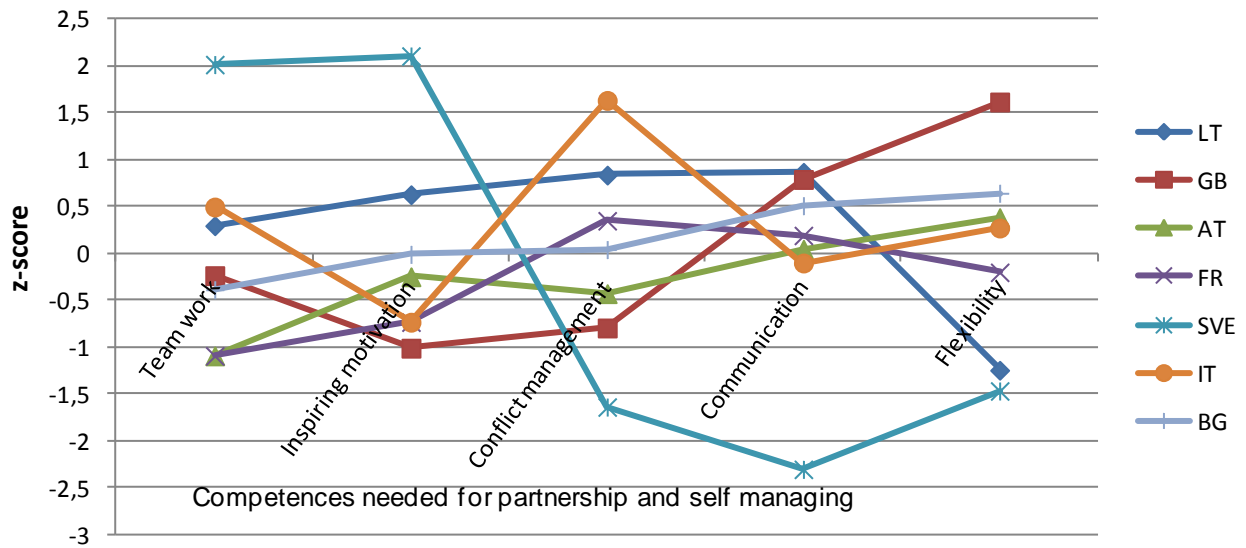


Figure 4. Significance of competences needed for managing non-routine tasks (for partnership and self-managing)

While testing the compatibility of opinions on competences’ importance, applying Kruskal-Wallis test it was estimated that opinions significantly differ, i.e. Inovativness (p_value=0,01) and Conflict management (p_value=0,04).

While performing compatibility analysis of opinions of the respondents from different countries, it was revealed that the opinion of Lithuanians was the same as Bulgarians in case of the evaluation of all competences. The difference between Lithuanian and other countries’ respondents was in one or two competences points (see Table 1).

Table 1. The differentiation of competences needed for managing non-routine tasks

Unit	Scale	LT – AT	LT – BG	LT – FR	LT – GB	LT – IT	LT – SV	AT – BG	AT – GB	AT – FR	AT – IT	AT – SV	BG – FR	BG – GB	BG – IT	BG – SV	FR – GB	FR – IT	FR – SV	GB – IT	GB – SV	IT – SV
Competences needed for process managing	Strategic thinking	,004*	,425	,061	,061	,488	,123	,484	,647	,672	,050	,219	,770	,964	,920	,814	,899	,257	,562	,201	,479	,383
	Innovativeness	,409	,366	,033*	,005*	,017*	,634	,246	,004*	,033*	,023*	,886	,193	,080	,217	,482	,221	,685	,210	,321	,060	,151
	Openness to change	,884	,102	,152	,457	,889	,037*	,152	,378	,375	,880	,067	,068	,053	,303	,519	,650	,323	,045	,483	,028*	,148
	Initiative	,144	,937	,183	,085	,815	,412	,449	,762	,668	,311	,289	,455	,342	1,000	,635	,933	,370	,379	,229	,252	,692
	Planning	,290	,809	,130	,163	,038*	,379	,178	,652	,664	,136	,942	,070	,062	,040*	,195	,878	,129	,549	,383	,689	,195
	Decision making	,010*	,817	,720	,612	,899	,416	,076	,039*	,066	,021*	,085	,934	,883	,768	,755	,928	,892	,942	,709	1,000	,862
Competences needed for partnership and self managing	Communication	,393	,818	,545	,927	,339	,018*	,562	,375	,969	,805	,072	,805	,830	,336	,084	,556	1,000	,039*	,396	,045*	,128
	Learning, development	,887	,728	,943	,899	,714	,947	,803	,892	,877	,881	,942	,563	,730	,914	,814	,964	,803	,942	,598	,931	,923
	Inspiring motivation	,337	,729	,088	,040*	,156	,072	,934	,560	,819	,658	,054	,594	,356	,832	,211	,752	,402	,016*	,378	,010*	,010*
	Team work	,143	,614	,140	,570	,333	,125	,503	,318	,587	,279	,108	,556	,952	,461	,226	,405	,137	,069	,211	,083	,432
	Conflict management	,079	,697	,518	,054	,186	,017*	,508	,657	,250	,013*	,174	,967	,483	,234	,269	,201	,070	,074	,015*	,437	,011*
	Flexibility	,259	,132	,263	,062	,141	,893	,495	,293	,756	,475	,337	,557	,950	,865	,237	,615	,481	,383	,939	,121	,244

*Mann-Whitney test, significantly differ (p_value<0.05)

Innovativeness, Decision making, Communication, Inspiring motivation and Conflict management were evaluated very differently by the respondents from each country. There is indicated that importance of Innovativeness conception was evaluated higher by Lithuanians compared to the respondents from France, the United Kingdom and Italy. Decision making was also evaluated as very important, except for Austrian respondents. Inspiring motivation and Conflict management competences were evaluated higher by Lithuanians compared to the respondents from the United Kingdom and Sweden.

4. Discussion

The results of the research indicated that Lithuanian respondents evaluated all competences (excluding Flexibility) higher than average. Bulgarian evaluations were almost the same as Lithuanian, only competences of Strategic management and Team work were evaluated lower than average of the competences evaluation. It can be assumed that these results are determined by lower competitiveness of SMEs as well as lower perception level of such competences' importance by SMEs managers in these countries.

Conversely, Innovativeness competence, compared to others, was evaluated at the lowest level. This contradicts the fact that the main feature of SMEs is innovativeness. On other hand, the results of the research revealed that innovativeness can also be defined as being open-minded to innovation, and having ability to generate and present new ideas applying new methods and finding new solutions. This confirms Schumpeter's theory that innovativeness is a combination of factors (Carroll, 2006). Innovativeness is the creation of new combinations, new quality of work, new plans formation, and striving to create. Schumpeter also stated that entrepreneurs are differing in their ability to stream, overcome social forces, network with required persons and influence them (Carroll, 2006). This approach to innovativeness would be more reasonable for the respondents; still it would be very wide and would duplicate the explanation of other competences. Therefore, although this concept of innovativeness probably has not revealed the importance of the competence, it can still be assumed that it is particularly important in hi-tech SMEs. The respondents of the current research have also emphasized the ability to adapt, particularly to adapt new methods and technologies, etc.

The top of crucial transversal competences for non-routine tasks in case of the SMEs managers provides better understanding of the content of transversal competences and allows to make assumptions for the need of targeted SMEs employees' training seeking efficiency in changing environment. Employees should be developing their competences constantly, improving their competence and the ability to adapt to changes, developing their knowledge, skills, and experience and foreseeing and correcting their possible mistakes (Håland, Tjora, 2006). Successful development of such competences is important in the organization of any size (Rabeh, 2013), but for resource-limited SMEs it is urgent. Competences needed for managing non-routine tasks enable SMEs managers to understand the situation in their business environment and take actions on time.

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