
Changes in the Strategies and Structures of Subsidiaries of Multinational Corporations during the Covid 19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to present and evaluate the changes that have occurred in the structures and strategies of subsidiaries of multinational corporations in 2020 - 2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic. The goal was implemented through an analysis of the literature on the subject and empirical research in subsidiaries of international corporations located in Poland.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study presents the following research problem: What changes took place in the structures and strategies of subsidiaries of multinational corporations in 2020-2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic? Solving the research problem boiled down to carrying out the research process. For this purpose, the method of analysis of management literature was used and telephone interviews were carried out in subsidiaries of international corporations in the automotive industry. The research was conducted among key suppliers of components for car production in Poland.

Findings: The conducted research shows that the changes in the structures of subsidiaries concerned mainly the production area. However, in the case of the strategy, they concerned maintaining the planned sales volume and taking a number of actions to adapt to the new situation.

Practical Implications: The results presented in the article can be used by other multi-stakeholder organizations to redesign organizational structures and design more flexible strategies. The results of the research showed changes that were implemented by subsidiaries in order to survive on the market.

Originality/ Value: Research has shown that the subsidiaries, by implementing specific changes during COVID 19, could continue to function and achieve the goals included in the corporate strategy. Even though they had to make changes in their organizational structures and strategies.

Keywords: Multinational corporation, parent company, subsidiary, organizational structure, strategies.

JEL classification: L10, L20, L22.

Paper type: Research Paper.

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1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, one of the most important problems that is still relevant and important, especially in the era of constant changes taking place in the internal and external environment of modern multinational corporations, are the changes in their structures and strategies. According to Brilman, an ideal organization is characterized by the ability to keep up with changes in the environment and develop faster than competitors, an efficient system of learning about customer opinions and responding quickly to their expectations, short decision-making processes - a flat structure, staff accustomed to changes (Brilman, 2002). A properly designed organizational structure and strategy should be flexible to changes taking place in the internal and external environment of the organization. As a result, the strategy and structure should sustainably support running a business at every stage of the company's development. Some phenomena occurring in the environment of the organization can be predicted and adapted to them.

However, in the case of the Covid 19 pandemic, the situation is completely different. This is a completely new phenomenon in that organizations do not have time to analyze upcoming changes and adopt defense strategies, but are almost immediately confronted with the consequences of events beyond their control (Flieger, 2020). The pandemic showed that most B2B companies and the public in general were not prepared to deal with a crisis of this scale and nature (Mora, 2020). Companies were not immune to this kind of crisis. Resilience means being able to adapt to change and develop flexible and innovative solutions (Giousmpasoglou, *et al.*, 2021) including structural and strategy solutions. The pandemic has the characteristics of the so-called a black swan, i.e., an unexpected event, impossible to predict, only after its occurrence we try to rationalize it (Taleb, 2020) Covid-19 has contributed to faster decision-making so far, for example in structures, strategies and supply chain area. He introduced uncertainty and chaos into the organization. He was the main factor behind the changes made in the structures and strategies of international corporations.

The purpose of this paper is to present and evaluate the changes that have occurred in the structures and strategies of subsidiaries of multinational corporations in 2020 - 2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic. The following research problem was posed: What changes have occurred in the structures and strategies of subsidiaries of multinational corporations in 2020 - 2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic? However, the resources of knowledge concerning the problem being the subject of the study are still modest in relation to its importance and complexity. A cognitive gap is visible in this respect. In the period of a pandemic, on the one hand, it is much more difficult to conduct research in enterprises due to limited access to managerial staff, limitations in contacts with the external environment introduced in organizations, on the other hand, enterprises are not interested in participating in the research process due to the fact that under normal conditions, the involvement of managers in solving problems that they had not dealt with before, and their scale and scope significantly

exceeds typical organizational problems. The results presented in the article can be used by other international corporations to redesign their organizational structures and develop more flexible strategies.

2. Literature Review

Apart from classic (traditional) enterprises, there are international corporations operating in a wide geographic area, operating on an international and global scale and operating on the market. An international corporation is treated as a multi-entity organization consisting of a superior unit and subsidiaries. Subsidiaries have different decision-making independence in shaping their structures and strategies. Their independence, treated as the right to make decisions, is strictly controlled by the company's headquarters. They are highly dependent on the company's headquarters in their activities. The parent unit plays the dominant role. Develops a strategy for the entire organization and shapes the structure of the entire organization. It has a significant impact on the shape of the structure of subsidiaries (its size, directions of changes, introduced improvements, etc.).

Subsidiaries play different roles in a multi-stakeholder organization. They can be limited to two basic ones, production and commercial (Birkinshaw and Hood, 1998). Subsidiaries that play a production role usually have a developed production and quality function, regardless of whether they produce for the internal needs of the corporation or for companies outside the group or for individual customers. Subsidiaries with a commercial role have a well-developed sales and marketing function. As a result, developed functions mean extensive departments in the organizational structures of subsidiaries and internal organization of activities according to the function criterion (Stonehouse *et al.*, 2001).

The greater the independence of the subsidiary from the parent enterprise and the existing contractors of this enterprise, the stronger the ties with local enterprises in the host country and the greater the variety of these ties. (Birkinshaw and Hood, 1998). However, internationalization is already considered a risky strategy as the company has to deal with the changing business environments of the multi-site locations where the company enters and operates its real estate (Sun and Lee, 2013). Considering that COVID-19 shock is not a local but a global threat, a high degree of exposure to foreign markets through internationalization may increase a firm's risk, thereby adversely affecting market evaluation and stock returns (Song *et al.*, 2021).

Organizational structure is one of the basic components of an organization and is important to its functioning (Lichtarski, 2011). Provides a useful tool that guides individual behavior through shared values, norms, and goals (O'Neill *et al.*, 2001). Organizational structures are considered important components of an organization because of their importance to operational effectiveness and goal achievement (Conner and Douglas, 2005; Armstrong and Rasheed, 2013). In recent years, researchers have tried to determine which structure brings the greatest benefits to

organizations. Some researchers have proposed that organizational structures respond to the diverse individual needs of businesses (Conner and Douglas, 2005). The other concluded that the organizational structure that has worked in business practice is characterized by a more flattened structure, decentralized decision making, more cooperation and coordination, knowledge sharing among employees, teamwork, horizontal communication, flexibility (Bryant, 2014; Lazarević and Lukić, 2015; Lee and Edmondson, 2017; Lazarević and Lukić 2018).

Other studies place a high priority on studying relationships and recommend studying, for example, the interaction between externally and internally induced changes in structures (Argyres and Zenger, 2013) or links of communication and formal and informal structure (McEvily *et al.*, 2014). An efficiently functioning organizational structure requires the identification of the influence of factors shaping the structural solutions that actually exist and causing them to change (Kraśniak, 2021). The shape of the organizational structure of a subsidiary is influenced by many internal and external factors, as well as the organizational strategy. These factors constitute significant determinants of changes in the organizational structure of the subordinate unit. Their impact may be stimulating (favoring the development of organizational structures), barrier (inhibiting, limiting and slowing down the development of structures) and bi-directional (on the one hand favoring the development of structures, and on the other limiting them). The organizational structure also influences the organization's ability to adapt to the changing environment, while the environment is one of the key structure-shaping factors, which means that it influences the creation of the organizational structure and the changes taking place in it (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2015).

The organizational structure of the subsidiary is subject to a process of constant changes (major or minor modifications). The result of these changes is the improvement of the efficiency of management and functioning of the entire international corporation. Changes in the organizational structure affect the change of strategy and vice versa, the change of strategy affects changes in the organizational structure (Chandler, 1962; Mintzberg, 1990). The Covid 19 pandemic is an absolutely new phenomenon in which organizations do not have time to analyze upcoming changes and adopt defense strategies, but are almost immediately confronted with the consequences of events beyond their control (Flieger, 2021). As a result, crises are putting entrepreneurs to the test as they are expected to be proactive about change (Ratten, 2020). The crisis is therefore an alibi to reveal organizational phenomena that are also a catalyst for change (Roux-Dufort, 2007) but also shows learning through crisis (Kovoor-Misra and Nathan 2000; Eliot *et al.*, 2000).

An example is the just in time method, which was one of the features of contemporary globalization before COVID 19. Enterprises limited their inventory levels to the minimum necessary to maintain continuity of production. They built their structures and strategies around this method. As a consequence, global supply

chains have become "tight and lean" and reliable in a way that has allowed manufacturing processes to become very efficient. However, during a pandemic, just-in-time production and management suddenly moved from very efficient and low-risk to very costly and high-risk (Brakman *et al.*, 2020). There were problems with access to raw materials or their complete shortage. This was primarily felt by companies that looked at raw materials produced in various regions of the world. The effects of delayed deliveries, limiting the volume of deliveries influenced the execution of orders and the shaping of relations with customers. Although some industries could function without restrictions and there was a huge increase in the number of transactions in them, the shortage of raw materials limited the sales and development opportunities of many companies. Difficulties for producers and consumers with closure, even temporary, have been evident in the US, UK and other countries (Zee *et al.*, 2020).

These phenomena forced companies to reorganize their purchasing policy, including the structures of purchasing departments and purchasing strategies. In many industries, there may be a tendency to move away from purchasing strategies based on maintaining minimum stocks and minimizing the number of territorially distant suppliers towards increasing cooperation with local and regional suppliers of raw materials. In a way, it is also a problem of an underdeveloped or lack of risk management process in the supply chain, but also the lack of scenarios for limited access to raw materials and shaping a new policy with end-users. In-depth telephone interviews conducted by S. Brzeziński in Poland with the senior management of randomly selected companies in the energy sector, the construction sector, including development, and commercial companies showed that none of the surveyed companies has a program to operate in the conditions of the COVID-19 epidemic (Brzeziński, 2020). No matter how well prepared an organization is, it can never predict all potentialities due to cognitive limitations that keep us from anticipating all possible situations and consequences (Rerup, 2001). Unexpected situations will inevitably occur (March and Olsen, 1976). In such situations, including those triggered by low chance and high impact events, optimal deployment of resources is difficult, if not impossible, because there is little or no time to allow for a conventional sequence of planning, formulation and implementation (Roux-Dufort and Vidaillet, 2003).

Changing the strategy and structure with incomplete access to external information and high volatility of the environment, especially in the case of large organizations such as international corporations, is very difficult and involves high risk. Structure, hierarchical decision making, and formal coordination are important to the organization and its efficient functioning under routine conditions (Bigley and Roberts, 2001). When conditions change from routine to uncertain, they often become completely inappropriate under new conditions (Weick, 2007). Changes in the structure and strategy caused by Covid 19 should be treated as high-impact changes, which is inevitably marked by novelty caused by a lack of information, communication and coordination. (comparison Boin *et al.*, 2010).

The level of uncertainty is related to the lack of information and knowledge about the results of activities and decisions made in the organization (Heerkens, 2003). Experience from previous crises, even if their scale and scope of impact were different, for those organizations that changed to survive previous crises, they were able to quickly change what they do (Hirt *et al.*, 2019). The unprecedented nature of this industry transformation is reflected in new ways of collaborating (in many business areas remote), change in risk tolerance (higher risk-taking by managers), increased time spent on strategic as opposed to operational challenges by top-management-teams (Hoeft, 2021).

3. Research Methodology

The aim of the research was to identify and evaluate the changes that occurred in the structures and strategies of subsidiaries of multinational corporations located in Poland caused by COVID - 19. The following research problem was posed: What changes occurred in the structures and strategies of subsidiaries of multinational corporations in 2020-2021 during the Covid 19 pandemic. Around the main problem formulated in this way, the following specific questions were posed:

What changes has the pandemic caused at the subsidiary level?

What will be the impact of the pandemic on the operations of the subsidiary in the future?

What changes were directly implemented in the organizational structure of the subsidiary during the pandemic?

What changes were directly implemented in the subsidiary's strategy?

Solving the research problem boiled down to carrying out the research process. The research was conducted using an interview questionnaire (telephone survey) among managers of subsidiaries of international corporations from the automotive industry located in Poland. The research was conducted among key manufacturers of components for car production. There are 47 key producers located in Poland. The study covered 10 companies, which constitutes about 21% of the surveyed population. The questions of the interview questionnaire were answered by managers with knowledge and experience in the field of research, i.e., strategic personnel making changes in the enterprise and having an impact on making strategic decisions and making changes in the organizational structure. The sample for research was purposefully selected based on the affiliation to an international corporation. The research was conducted in September-December 2020. That is, five months after the announcement of the Regulation of the Minister of Health of March 20, 2020 on the state of the epidemic in Poland in connection with SARS-CoV-2 virus infections. Changes in structures and strategies were identified through:

- employment status,
- investment status,
- state of innovation,

- supply chain situation,
- sales level,
- financial situation,
- state support,
- use of IT technology,
- forecasts for the future.

The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e., in a period when access to the managerial staff of enterprises was difficult. Many companies refused to participate in the study precisely because of the ongoing pandemic and the resulting larger scale of organizational problems to be solved.

4. Results and Discussion

This part of the study presents and analyzes the results of the research. The answers to the following questions were sought: What changes has the pandemic caused at the subsidiary level? What will be the impact of the pandemic on the operations of the subsidiary in the future? What changes were directly implemented in the organizational structure of the subsidiary during the pandemic? What changes were directly implemented in the subsidiary's strategy? The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analyzed problems affecting the structure and strategy of the subsidiary

Analyzed problems affecting the structure and strategy of the subsidiary	percentage of responses 100% = 10 subsidiaries
What changes has the pandemic caused at the subsidiary level?	
Decrease in sales	100%
Introducing remote work in areas where it was possible	100%
Limiting direct contacts between headquarters managers and the subsidiary	100%
Resignation from employees of the temporary employment agency	90%
Problems in the supply chain	90 %
Employment reduction	60 %
Reduction of operating costs	60%
Problems with the company's liquidity	40 %
Closing part of the business	30%
What will be the impact of the pandemic on the operations of the subsidiary in the future?	
Limitation of employment	70%
Limitation of investments	60%
Increase in importance of IT technology	60
Seeking local suppliers (geographically closer to the subsidiary)	30%
Reducing expenditures on innovation	30 %
Taking more account of pandemics in risk management as before	20%

What changes were directly implemented in the organizational structure of the subsidiary during the pandemic?	
Employment of executive (production) workers was limited	100%
The scope of decision-making powers of managers of subsidiaries has been increased	60%
Virtual task forces have been established	30%
The tasks previously performed outside the organization were incorporated into its structure	30 %
The digitization of production processes has been accelerated	30%
Employees were transferred to other organizational departments of the subsidiary	10%
Increasing employment in sales departments	10%
What changes were directly implemented in the subsidiary's strategy?	
Cost reduction	100%
Maintaining the existing sales volume	100%
Search for new suppliers	100%
Investment restriction	60%
Reorganization of business goals	50%

Source: Own study.

(1) What changes has the pandemic caused at the subsidiary level?

Changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic at the level of subsidiaries of multinational corporations:

- in all surveyed companies there was a decrease in sales, introduction of remote work for administrative employees and suspension of visits of head office managers to subsidiaries (headquarters of companies are located outside Poland),
- in 9 out of 10 companies, temporary employment agency employees resigned in order to protect their mother (usually production) staff from being dismissed,
- 9 out of 10 companies have problems in the supply chain. It should be noted here that the automotive industry (including the production of automotive parts and accessories) is highly internationalized and there are strong links in the supply chain. Closing borders between countries, increasing border controls, and extending material transport times resulted in an almost complete interruption of the supply chain. On the other hand, the lack of timely delivery of raw materials for production, where the vast majority of companies operating in the automotive industry operate in accordance with just-in-time, contributed to the interruption of ongoing production.
- employment was reduced in 6 out of 10 companies. The most frequent reduction in employment concerned production departments. In the first place, as already mentioned, workers employed by temporary employment agencies were reduced.

As noted, from April 2020 to June 2020, the automotive industry has reduced production significantly, which has also resulted in the dismissal of parent personnel for some companies. There were also combining production stations. However, decisions to reduce employment were made cautiously because there are shortages of employees on the labor market and after the pandemic, there may be a large

demand for automotive parts and accessories, and meeting the demand will depend on the production staff.

- in 6 out of 10 companies decisions were made to reduce the costs of running a business,
- problems with financial liquidity were observed in 4 out of 10 companies. Even if the companies had stocks of goods and production capacity, their main recipients (car assembly plants) limited the production of cars and postponed the purchases of automotive parts. These phenomena had a negative impact on the financial situation of subsidiaries,
- in 3 out of 10 companies a decision was made to close part of the production.

The introduction of these changes at the level of the subsidiary resulted in a reduction in the size of the organizational structure, e.g., as a result of far-reaching changes in the sphere of production by limiting employment, consolidating jobs, gaining greater decision-making independence by managers of subsidiaries as a result of limiting visits of managers of superior units. Organizational structures have become more independent from company headquarters. In addition, problems in the supply chain have led to the reorganization of the work of purchasing departments as a result of strengthening the existing staff of enterprises in the direction of searching for local, regional suppliers.

- (2) What will be the impact of the pandemic on the operations of the subsidiary in the future?

Changes in the organizational structure of subsidiaries will also occur after the pandemic. The obtained research results indicate that:

- in 7 out of 10 companies there will be a permanent reduction in employment, not only in production departments, but also in other organizational units of subsidiaries,
- investment will be reduced in 6 out of 10 companies,
- the purchasing strategy will change in 3 out of 10 companies. There will be a diversification of purchases. Firms will seek and collaborate with local suppliers that are geographically closer to the subsidiary,
- 3 out of 10 companies plan to limit their expenditure on innovation. As a result, it will affect the size of the organizational structure of technological departments, and will reduce them,
- 2 out of 10 companies plan to include pandemic situations in risk management.

However, the company's headquarters are to be responsible for this. The subsidiaries are to implement the decisions made in this regard in their organizational structures.

- (3) What changes were directly implemented in the organizational structure of the subsidiary during the pandemic?

According to the managers of subsidiaries, the following changes in the organizational structure were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- employment of executive (production) workers was limited in each of the analyzed organizations,
- in 6 out of 10 companies, the scope of decision-making powers of managers of subsidiaries was increased. Problems with moving between countries and the introduction of lockdowns limited (even stopped) the ability of headquarters managers to reach subsidiaries. Although remote communication tools (on-line) were used, not all matters could be dealt with in this way. Hence the decisions of the headquarters to increase the decision-making independence of managers of subsidiaries,
- virtual teams were established in 3 out of 10 companies. Remote work was conducive to the development of virtual teams. Most often it concerned sales and purchases,
- in 2 out of 10 companies, in order to maintain the parent production staff, tasks previously commissioned to external companies were picked up and included in the structures of subsidiaries,
- 3 out of 10 companies made decisions to accelerate digitization processes. The decisions made did not take effect immediately. It also resulted from the limitations of programs, computer hardware, etc. on the market. However, the accelerated digitization of production processes will affect the shape and size of production departments, and thus the entire organizational structure of subsidiaries,
- in 2 out of 10 companies, in order to alleviate the problems related to the reduction of production staff, employees were transferred to other departments. Here it was suggested by the qualifications and experience of the production workers,
- every 2 in 10 companies increased employment in sales departments.

The changes introduced in the organizational structure of the surveyed subsidiaries were aimed at:

- reduce the costs of doing business as a result of a drastic decline in sales of car parts and accessories. The reduction of employment was accompanied by a well-thought-out personnel policy as there is a shortage of qualified employees on the labor market. Therefore, the surveyed companies were very cautious about reducing employment,
- adjusting the structure to the current situation in the automotive industry,
- the use of handed-over work to an even greater extent than before (before the pandemic, this form of work was also used in the automotive industry, especially at the managerial level), but the pandemic significantly influenced the posting of employees to work at home, not only from sales departments, but also from quality control, finance, accounting and R&D departments.

(4) What changes were directly implemented in the subsidiary's strategy?

Subsidiaries have a limited ability to influence the corporate strategy. It is designed at the headquarters level. Managers of subsidiaries may only provide information support to head office managers in the process of designing the strategy. The pandemic has forced corporate headquarters to redesign their strategies, especially in

terms of planned sales volumes and new projects. By decision of the head office at the level of subsidiaries:

- a cost-cutting policy has been implemented in each of the analyzed organizations,
- in each subsidiary, steps were taken to maintain the planned sales volume,
- activities aimed at searching for new suppliers were undertaken in each surveyed organization,
- previously planned investments were limited in 6 out of 10 companies,
- business goals were reorganized in every second surveyed company.

As a result, the actions taken at the level of subsidiaries were aimed at adapting the subsidiaries to the new situation, which the organizations had not dealt with before. The actions taken indicate resignation or postponement of the development strategy. The automotive sector has developed dynamically in recent years. Covid not only inhibited the development of enterprises, but also reduced their revenues, which will undoubtedly have an impact on new investments and the supply of cars on the market in the future.

5. Conclusions

The organizational structure and strategy is a management tool and an important element supporting and organizing the processes taking place in the organization. There are no optimal organizational structures and strategies. There are only temporary solutions that work for a certain time and under certain circumstances. The role of managers is to design and implement such organizational projects that, on the one hand, facilitate the achievement of goals, reduce conflicts, and improve communication, on the other hand, allow for further modifications resulting from the experience of the company and the industry. Covid 19 has largely influenced the functioning of enterprises and the directions of their development.

In the automotive sector, there is a strong internationalization of the supply chain, just-in-time deliveries, and a large dependence of car assembly plants on suppliers of automotive parts (from their domestic factories and independent suppliers). Here, the impact of Covid 19 on the functioning of companies in the automotive sector has had a significant - negative impact. Its consequences will probably be visible in the coming years. In a way, this is demonstrated by the research results. On the one hand, the size of the organizational structure was limited in the surveyed subsidiaries, production was limited, investments were limited, on the other hand, the revenues of enterprises decreased, which will undoubtedly have an impact on the design of future development strategies. The functioning of the subsidiaries was adjusted to the difficult situation. The automotive sector was already implementing many changes related to the electrification of engines before the pandemic. And because of the pandemic, many processes have been slowed down. The Covid-19 pandemic will have many complex consequences for the organization, its structure and strategy, even in a quick recovery to pre-pandemic conditions.

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