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Managerial Competencies & Polish SMEs' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Insight

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and its implications have had a devastating impact on the business sector worldwide, especially on the SMEs' sector. By highlighting the evolution, and so the specificity, of the Polish SMEs' sector, by reference to the concept of learning organization, this paper queried the sources of the Polish SMEs' unsatisfactory response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications. A survey ($n = 147$) conducted among a sample of Polish SMEs revealed that the Polish SMEs, in general, did not recognize the salience of managerial skills in building their capacity to withstand a crisis. Creating growth opportunities, rather than accumulating and operationalizing their organization's knowledge, were stressed as the way of navigating challenges. This paper offers an insight into selected factors that influenced Polish SMEs' sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggests some ways of addressing problems thus identified.

Keywords: COVID-19; SMEs; Poland; crisis; learning organization; resilience



Citation: Bodziany, M.; Ścibiorek, Z.; Zamiar, Z.; Visvizi, A. Managerial Competencies & Polish SMEs' Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Insight. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 11864. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111864>

Academic Editor: Andrea Pérez

Received: 26 September 2021

Accepted: 21 October 2021

Published: 27 October 2021

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and its implications in the form of restrictions on mobility, negative psychology of the market, decreased and, eventually, changed structure of demand for goods and services, domestically and internationally, have had a devastating impact on the business sector worldwide. The small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent a very interesting case in this context, in that, traditionally, the size and thus the assumed flexibility were frequently hailed in the literature as the SMEs' sector secret tool to withstand crises [1,2]. More recent research, however, tends to stress different factors, such as strategic flexibility, business model innovation (BMI), agile leadership, as the sources of SMEs' capacity to effectively respond to crises [3–5]. This paper seeks to make sense of the broad debate on SMEs and their capacity to withstand crises by querying the specific case of Polish SMEs and their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications. Drawing from the outcomes of a series of interviews and a questionnaire, this paper offers an insight into the specific factors that may have influenced the Polish SMEs' ability to respond to challenges inflicted in their external environment by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research reported and elaborated on in this paper builds on the recognition that the Polish SMEs' sector reveals a unique trajectory of growth and development, in part reflecting the specificity of Polish transition and transformation that begun in the early 1990s. In other words, the growth of the SMEs sector was rapid, steered simultaneously by bottom-up and top-down processes, geared by the imperative to deliver goods and service, offer employment and generate revenue. The spectacular growth of the sector throughout the 1990s (and to some extent afterwards) reflected on the one hand, the spirit of the day, i.e., the joy of freedom regained and the return of *homo entrepreneurus*, and on the other

hand, a period of unprecedented growth and development that Poland experienced over the period 1989–2019. In these circumstances, the priorities and, thus strategies that the SMEs followed were focused on product and service delivery, rather than on managerial competencies acquisition. The COVID-19 pandemic and the sector's inability to embark on efficient risk management strategies, understood through the terms of resilience and antifragility [1,2], blatantly revealed it. The objective of this paper is to identify factors that may have led to the Polish SMEs' sector relative inability to respond to the crisis situation efficiently. The reminder of the paper structured as follows. The following section outlines the conceptual framework of this study, i.e., the concept of learning organization. In the next step, the specificity of the Polish SMEs' sector is discussed. In Section 4 the research model, research methodology and materials are elaborated. Discussion and conclusions follow in Sections 5 and 6.

2. Learning Organization as the Conceptual Framework of This Study: Highlights and Controversies

The definitional and conceptual framework of this study brings together two issues, i.e., on the one hand, SMEs and the "learning organization" (LO) approach. A case is that made by the LO approach allow a more precise insight into developments taking place within organizations, especially should they be exposed to challenges in their external environment. "Learning organization" [4–6] is an organization that continually expands possibilities of creating its future, strives for excellence, adapts to changing conditions, and ensures members' constant improvement by acquiring new skills, opportunities, and performance patterns. For the discussion in this paper, SMEs focused on development through permanent learning and adaptation to changing and relatively risky conditions of the Polish economy will be viewed as learning organizations.

The essence of Senge's theory of a learning organization is the organization's ability to learn—regardless of challenging developments in the organization's environment—due to the improvement and acquisition of new competencies by the managerial staff at all levels of the organization. What follows is that not only must managers across an organizations' levels have knowledge and skills, but also, they must be able to continuously improve the set of knowledge and skills, preferably faster and more effectively than their competitors [7–9].

Hence, on what "critical points" in the organizational structure should that knowledge be accumulated? The first organization's "critical point" is the chief manager (in the case of Polish small and medium-sized enterprises usually their owner), who, apart from the vision of development and knowledge of market conditions, should have formal competencies documented with university and course diplomas and show flexibility in action. Besides, he/she must be perceived as a planner, organizer, leader, controller, trainer motivating development, and an administrator enabling the team to function efficiently. Motivation understood from the perspective of Herzberg's two-factor theory [10], created by motivators and hygiene factors, is crucial. In the light of the theory, not only wage and non-wage motivators influence the tendency to improve qualifications but also the so-called organizational climate associated with the manager's authority, a sense of community and organizational identity, as well as proper team relationships.

Personal mastery, i.e., a commitment to lifelong learning for the benefit of the organization, is essential for analyzing the factors determining the success of Polish small and medium-sized enterprises. It has a reproductive function, i.e., it allows the knowledge of an experienced manager to be transferred to lower management levels. The formal and charismatic manager's authority correlates with the thought/mental model, i.e., with the process of self-reflection on one's own identity and identification with the organization. It fits in with personal mastery and paves the way for subordinates to build their multi-directional self-identification with the organization. That allows creating a shared vision and team thinking built on the community's pillars, cooperation, collectivism in action, and the organization's future. Thereby, the most critical matter is revealed, namely systemic

thinking, allowing activating the implementation of the learning organization, integrating the team, and avoiding blaming for failures.

The subsequent addition to the debate on LO highlights eleven features that determine the transformation of an “ordinary” organization into a LO [11]. These features include: a learning-based approach to the company’s strategy, participation in shaping the company’s policy, universality and availability of information, educational accounting and control function, internal exchange, flexible and creative rewarding, structuring, environmental monitoring, inter-organizational cooperation, learning-friendly atmosphere, and creating development opportunities [11]. The variables mentioned above are framed by double loops operating in four areas determined by the dimensions of individual and team learning and vision and action. They form a matrix composed of ideas, organizational policies, functions, and operational activities [11].

The concept of LO is controversial among some researchers [12–15]. Doubts concern primarily the subject (an individual, group, or organization understood as a system) of learning and the nature of its environment, its stability, or level of variability [12]. Ambient dualism can have either positive or negative consequences. On the one hand, the environment’s volatility may have a function that stimulates changes, searching for new solutions, and increasing its efficiency. On the other hand, the excessive complexity and dynamics of changes in the environment may lead to misinterpretation and evaluation of processes and phenomena occurring in it, thus leading to wrong decisions [13]. Therefore, an essential element of the organization’s vision is the full and optimal use of periods of environmental stability, thanks to which the so-called “organizational memory,” understood as a way to accumulate and redistribute knowledge within an organization, is built, usually with the support of information technology [13]. Moreover, the period of the environment’s stability is the time of establishing the company’s brand, learning based on experience, and “reflective practice” [14]. Experience and reflective practice, or ‘experiential learning’ is primarily related to the previously mentioned personal mastery. The common denominator is created by the manager’s intuition, whose role is to set staff improvement directions. It can happen in two ways. The first one is to simplify the chain of events and phenomena in the organization’s environment. The other one, promoting specialization, focuses on all-level managers’ specific, narrow competencies [15].

3. The Specificity of the SMEs’ Sector in Poland

3.1. General Issues

The following definition and typology of SMEs was adopted in this study. Small enterprises are companies with less than 50 employees and an annual turnover or balance sheet total not exceeding EUR 10 million. Medium-sized enterprises employ no more than 250 employees and have an annual turnover or total balance sheet not more than EUR 50 million.

SMEs, due to their size, their assumed ability of swift response to changes taking places in their external environment, and perhaps most importantly due to their high demography’s dynamics, tend to represent the most dynamic part of any given economy [16–20]. This is also the case of Poland. Over the 1989–2019, the SMEs’ sector, slowly but increasingly, contributed to the GDP formation by means of creating new jobs, productivity increases, investment outlays, and economic development [21,22]. For instance, in 2014 the SMEs’ sector share in GDP was 16% [23]. Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Polish SMEs’ sector, as compared to other EU member-states, would not outperform, yet would not be considered a laggard. The secondary implications of the global financial crisis, and the resulting liquidity squeeze, further exacerbated by Poland remaining outside the euro area, gradually undermined SMEs access to capital. Indeed, the decomposition of the value added growth suggests that growth in the Polish SMEs was driven mainly by productivity increases (2%), rather than by capital (1.4%) [3]. Overall, however, by 2018, the Polish SMEs sector would record a 5-year survival rate of nearly 40%, i.e., was just below the EU average [24]. The outbreak of the COVID-19

pandemic marks a watershed for the Polish SMEs' sector even if it would be too early to gauge if the culprit is only the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, other factors at play in the SMEs' operating environment, may have played an equally important role.

From a different perspective, a quality that characterizes SMEs in Poland is their relative economic and legal autonomy and independence from large corporations. This has clearly to do with transparency and the effectiveness of competition policy. Their other feature is operating in a relatively turbulent and risky legal and economic environment (related to the instability of legal regulations and fluctuations in the Polish currency). Regardless of those factors, extraordinary freedom of action, high flexibility in adapting to market conditions, quick and simplified decision-making, stubbornness, and consistency in achieving the intended goals on the part of managers, most frequently the business owners, characterize the companies [23].

The analysis of conceptual approaches to managerial competencies in a learning organization forces the reflection on the nature of Polish SMEs operating in a changing and risky economic and legal environment and in a specific socio-cultural environment. The evolution of the sector is associated with two turning points in Poland's recent economic history. The first one is related to the twin processes of transition and transformation that begun in 1989 [24–27], while the second concerns Poland's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. The development of the SMEs sector, the number of which increased from 494,000 in 1991 to over 3.3 million in 2001, with an average share in the economic turnover at the level of 99.54%, became the alternative for the Polish economy [28–30]. Notably, not all SMEs that were established were successful. For example, in 2000, only 55.5% of the 1.76 million registered enterprises participated in Poland's economic turnover. A very similar percentage was recorded in 2001 when 49.4% (1.69 million) out of the total of 3.35 million enterprises were inactive [31].

Since Poland's accession to the EU, the number of active SMEs increased from 1.71 million in 2004 to 1.84 million in 2014. Noteworthy, micro-enterprises dominated the sector. Four significant changes in SMEs' demographics were recorded over the period 2005–2014, namely a decrease to 1.67 million in 2005, an increase to 1.85 million in 2008, another to 1.72 million in 2010, and an increase to the level of 1.84 million in 2014 [32]. Those changes resulted from the natural business cycles on the Polish market, and in 2010 also from the long-term effects of the global economic crisis. From 2014, there was an upward trend, which in 2017 reached the level of 2.08 million enterprises, including micro—2.0 million, small—53.8 thousand, medium—15.3 thousand, and large companies—3.6 thousand. In the year under review, the share of small and medium-sized enterprises in generating GDP was on the average level of 48% of the entire enterprise sector and gave 3.96 million jobs (57.5%), including the service sector—37% of the labor market [33,34]. It should be stressed that small enterprises had the lowest (3%) share in shaping GDP and 12.2% one in the labor market of the entire SMEs' sector.

Moreover, Polish SMEs featured a low investment ratio, e.g., in 2017 it amounted to approximately 9% of the total investment of the private enterprise sector, as well as low innovative activity, i.e., both in the group of industrial (12.5%) and service companies (8.3%). Medium-sized enterprises, which recorded 0.7% of the entire sector in 2017, made a much more visible contribution to Polish economic growth and development. Their share in generating GDP was 11%, the investment ratio was around 20%, and the average expenditure on innovation was PLN 2.6 million in the entire sector [33]. In 2018, there was a slight increase in the number of all enterprises by 3.5%, i.e., to the level of approximately 2.15 million (including 52.7 thousand small and 15 thousand medium-sized ones), mostly in the services sector—52.1% [33]. In 2019, their number grew by another 2.9% to 2.2 million, of which 99.8% were micro (96.5%), small and medium-sized enterprises (3.3%) [32].

3.2. Managerial Competencies in Polish SMEs

Due to the sheer size of the SMEs' sector in Poland, its contribution to Poland's socio-economic growth, and its entanglement with domestic, regional and international

regulatory frameworks, it is imperative to explore the sector and its evolution in detail. While the twin processes and transition and transformation have had a decisive impact on defining the broad regulatory context, in which SMEs operate, Poland's accession to the EU have had further far-reaching ramifications for SMEs. The scale of challenges that SMEs thus faced are best reflected by the demographics of SMEs creation prior to and right after Poland's accession to the EU, i.e., over the period 1997–2003, on average 180 thousand SMEs were registered annually; in contrast over the period 2004–2007, only 18 thousand SMEs were registered per year [33]. The numbers might suggest that the market players, considered it challenging to face, and possibly adapt, to a new business environment that Poland's accession to the EU generated [34]. By means of facilitating the business sector adaptation, several initiatives were launched, including:

- 4th Multiannual Program for Enterprises and Entrepreneurship" (initially covering the period 2001–2005, and then extended until the end of 2006), one of support areas of which was the development of innovative activities and computerization [35];
- European Business Support Program in Poland", under which, among others, the Lower Silesian Regional Development Support Agency (DAAR) [36] operates.
- Small Business Act" for Europe (SBA) of 25 June 2008 [37].
- Moreover, owing to the EU support, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development [32] and the Centre for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises [38] were established. The following training and umbrella programs were subsequently launched: the "Academy of the Manager of Small and Medium Enterprises" [39], and the "National Training Fund" (KFS).

As a result, innovation and managerial skills in Polish SMEs slightly improved by the end of 2019. Overall, however, owing to high growth rates that Poland recorded over the period 1989–2019, a relatively big domestic market driven by growing domestic demand, Polish SMEs enjoyed a relatively good performance and thus neglected the need to invest in improving their managerial competencies. Indeed, the March 2020 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe revealed that apart from financial liquidity problems, Polish SMEs lacked managerial know-how and expertise in fields and areas that would allow them to effectively respond to the pandemic and its implications. In other words, while strategies embracing the notions of SMEs' resilience and antifragility [1,2] would be very much welcome, a great majority of Polish SMEs lacked the necessary skills, expertise, and mindset.

4. Research Model, Research Methods and Materials

4.1. The Assumptions Underpinning This Study, the Hypotheses and the Research Model

Against the backdrop of our prior research [24,26,27], the relevance and validity of conducting in-depth analysis of the performance of the Polish SMEs was confirmed. In this context, initial desk-research, and pilot study, including a focus group, revealed the necessity to query the evolution of managerial competencies in Polish SMEs. In particular, the need to examine the relationship between managerial competencies and SMEs' performance was recognized. The COVID-19 pandemic added an unexpected twist to the initial research design in that it allowed us to juxtapose the findings of the research collected prior to the crisis, i.e., in an economic environment characterized by a relative stability and prosperity, with developments shaped in times of the COVID-19 inflicted instability, uncertainty, and economic slowdown. Accordingly, our study was underpinned by two key assumptions, i.e., that (i) managerial competencies (formal and resulting from experience) acquired in good market conditions should serve as bridge-capital for an organization's ability to cope with a crisis situation, and (ii) the period of the pandemic should be treated as an opportunity to learn how to operate in periods of emergency. These two assumptions have been further adjusted to the specific case of SMEs. These led us to a two-pronged hypothesis, i.e., (i) does SMEs capacity to respond to crisis situations differ from non-SMEs; and (ii) what is the role of managerial competencies in SMEs' capacity to manage a crisis situation.

4.2. The Research Methodology

With regards to the research model that this study followed, the research was carried out in three stages based on the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods. The first stage included analysing sources and secondary data (desk research) concerning the sector and problems related to the adaptation to the EU context. The second stage was based on quantitative research conducted in Fall 2019 prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of these two stages of the research process was (i) to identify the directions of necessary improvement and enhancement of managerial competencies in Polish SMEs, and (ii) to identify problems and risk areas as seen from the managers' perspective. The third stage of the study included two sub-stages, i.e., first, desk-research was conducted (reports and press coverage) on the "condition" of SMEs during the pandemic, and second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers in the SMEs sector, operating in the region of Lower Silesia, Poland, over the period April-June 2020. The Lower Silesia region is ranked 4th in terms of economic performance and entrepreneurship in Poland.

For quantitative research, a purposeful sample was adopted based on selecting research objects from the population of managers of various levels employed in small and medium-sized enterprises and post-graduate students of enterprise management who plan to apply for managerial positions in the future. For the sample, $N = 147$, respondents with higher education were selected, including primarily those (64%—94 respondents) involved in business management, logistics, economy, or economic law. Different educational background, from agricultural, through technical, to social sciences and humanities, was declared by 53 respondents (36%). For the research purposes, the N sample was divided into five categories:

- middle managers in medium-sized enterprises— $n_1 = 78$ (53%);
- entrepreneurs of small businesses (usually their owners)— $n_2 = 35$ (23%);
- nominated post holders (persons at lower managerial positions in the organization):
 - in a small enterprise— $n_3 = 8$ (5.4%);
 - in a medium-sized enterprise— $n_4 = 10$ (6.8%),
- studying at managerial postgraduate studies— $n_5 = 16$ (10.8%).

It should be stressed that out of all 131 respondents holding positions in enterprises (including those nominated for promotion to a higher position), as many as 92% (121 respondents) completed postgraduate studies and specialist training, including all respondents with education other than related to management enterprise. About 11% were respondents not related to work in the company but studying to change job. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the respondents.

A disproportionate gender distribution characterised the sample (N). It consisted of 48 women (32.6%) and 99 men (67.4%), and varied professional experience described by three time periods: up to 5 years, 5–10 years, and more than 10 years of work (it does not apply to 16 respondents studying at postgraduate studies). The smallest group comprised respondents with work experience of up to 5 years, i.e., 18 respondents (12.2%), including 6 women and 12 men. The number of respondents representing the other two ranges of working years was substantially higher. In other words, the range of 5–10 years of work was represented by 57 respondents, including 15 women and 42 men, which constituted 43.5% of all 131 working respondents, while 56–42.8%—of them represented the range of over 10 years of work.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents N = 147.

Job Position	Mid-Level Managers						Small-Business Entrepreneurs						Nominated for the Position (People Holding Lower Positions in the Enterprise)										Postgraduate Students		
Enterprise type	Medium-sized enterprise—from 51 to 250 employees						Small enterprise—from 11 up to 50 employees						In small enterprise						In medium-sized enterprise						
Number/percentage of employees	n ₁ = 78						n ₂ = 35						n ₃ = 8						n ₄ = 10						n ₅ = 16
													n _{Σ3,4} = 18												
	53%						23%						5.4%						6.8%						10.8%
Work experience/ gender	Up to 5 years		5–10 years		Over 10 years		Up to 5 years		5–10 years		Over 10 years		Up to 5 years		5–10 years		Over 10 years		Up to 5 years		5–10 years		Over 10 years		
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
	2	5	3	34	19	15	2	5	11	4	5	8	1	1	0	2	1	3	1	1	1	2	0	5	
	Σ = 7		Σ = 37		Σ = 34		Σ = 7		Σ = 15		Σ = 13		Σ = 2		Σ = 2		Σ = 4		Σ = 2		Σ = 3		Σ = 5		
N = 147 (48F/99M)																									

Source: Own study based on the research carried out in the second half of 2019 in the Lower Silesia region, Poland.

The quantitative research applied the method of a diagnostic survey conducted using the questionnaire technique in electronic form. It aimed at identifying areas of improvement and potential effects of managers' failure to develop and/or acquire managerial skills during a period of economic boom and market stability. The questionnaire questions were open-ended, conjunctive—single-choice, or disjunctive—multiple-choice based on a cafeteria of response options. The qualitative research used partially structured interviews and the analysis of secondary data (desk research) from reports on the condition of Polish enterprises during the pandemic. The interviewees were 6 entrepreneurs, mainly owners of small enterprises, and 6 managers of medium-sized enterprises. The survey aimed to obtain answers to questions focused on the following problems:

- premises for improving competencies—the need for improvement and effectiveness of managers' lifelong learning in relation to the position held and tasks performed in the enterprise;
- forms of improvement of managerial skills and its subject scope in relation to the present and future challenges;
- time management for improving qualifications and opportunities to improve competencies;
- vision of the company's future and risk prediction.

The interviews aimed at ex-post evaluation and comparative analysis of the quantitative research results in a confrontation with the enterprises' situation during the pandemic; all this mainly in terms of expectations of state support and development barriers for enterprises.

5. Results

The survey results analysis proved that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents saw the need for managers' continuous improvement as a necessary condition to achieve the company's success and guarantee its economic stability and development. The respondents had the opportunity to select 3 out of 5 variants included in the cafeteria of answers (see Table 2). Among the indicated reasons for improvement, they most often identified the internationalisation of knowledge and managerial skills, which were seen as the primary determinant of economic success and stability on the market (119 respondents—81%), instability of the exchange rate and its impact on the Polish currency exchange rate (117 respondents—80%), and programs supporting entrepreneurship in the EU (103 respondents—70%).

A detailed analysis shows that the internationalisation of managerial knowledge and skills was significant for postgraduate students—15 out of 16 respondents ($r = 0.7$), managers of medium-sized enterprises in the range of 5 to 10 years of work experience—31 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.6$), and those with over 10-years professional experience—27 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.5$), entrepreneurs and managers of small enterprises with 5–10 years of work—11 out of 15 respondents ($r = 0.5$) and with over 10 years of work—9 out of 13 respondents ($r = 0.5$). That premise was also indicated by most managers expected to be nominated for a higher company position.

Table 2. Premises for the managers' improvement. (Pearson r-correlation coefficient $|r| \leq 0.5$ at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, α -Cronbach ≤ 0.7), $N = 147$.

Independent Variable →	Enterprise Type									Postgraduate Students	Σ	
	Medium-Sized Enterprise—From 51 to 250 Employees			Small Enterprise—From 11 up to 50 Employees			Nominated for the Position in Small n ₃ and Medium-Sized n ₄ Enterprises					
	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years			
	7	37	34	7	15	13	4	5	9			
	Σ _{EM}	n ₁ = 78		n ₂ = 35		n _{Σ3,4} = 18						
	%N	4.8%	25.2%	23.1%	4.8%	10.2%	8.8%	2.7%	3.4%	6.1%	10.8%	100%
↓ Dependent variable												
Prerequisites for the improvement of managerial competencies												
Internationalisation of managerial knowledge and skills		5	31	27	5	11	9	4	5	7	15	119
	r-Pearson	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.7	81%
The volatility of the international environment		2	25	21	4	9	5	4	4	5	15	94
	r-Pearson	0.2	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.7	64%
The volatility of domestic law		5	15	23	3	9	9	2	2	3	11	82
	r-Pearson	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.6	56%
Entrepreneurship support programs from the EU		6	21	27	6	10	9	3	3	5	13	103
	r-Pearson	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.5	70%
Exchange rate instability (no prospect of adopting the euro)		6	25	30	6	12	11	3	3	7	14	117
	r-Pearson	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.7	80%
α-Cronbach		0.65	0.74	0.76	0.72	0.74	0.74	0.64	0.65	0.59	0.77	

Source: Own study based on the research carried out in the second half of 2019 in the Lower Silesia region, Poland.

Moreover, similar indicators concerned the variability of the company's international environment, resulting primarily from changes in EU law. They were indicated by managers of medium-sized enterprises with 5–10 years of work experience—25 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.5$) and over 10 years of work—21 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.5$), as well as persons scheduled for promotion—8 out of 9 respondents ($r = 0.6$) and postgraduate students—15 out of 16 respondents ($r = 0.7$). An essential premise for improving managerial competencies is to know the mechanisms shaping the exchange rates and predicting their impact on the Polish currency. All surveyed persons, irrespective of the size and type of enterprise, length of seniority, and gender, as well as postgraduate students, indicated that variable. EU programs dedicated to entrepreneurship are another essential factor in the managers' improvement. Apart from those nominated for senior positions who declared more than 10 years of work experience ($r = 0.3$), all respondents selected the dependent variable as significant for the company's success. To assess the internal consistency of the variables, reliability analyses were run, and Cronbach's alphas (ranges from 0 to 1) were obtained, where value above 0.7 indicate a sufficient reliability.

The second problem examined concerned the forms of improvement of managerial skills and the time devoted to self-improvement. The research results show that Polish managers perceive a deficit of time devoted to improving their qualifications. The above is conditioned by the workload of professional tasks, the pace of knowledge growth, the volatility of legal regulations, and market conditions. The question about the time expended in self-improvement was dedicated only to those working in their profession—131 respondents, and it was conjunctive. The clear majority—64 respondents (49%) indicated spontaneous self-improvement resulting from the need to establish the business. That was most frequently indicated by managers of medium-sized enterprises with 5–10 years of work experience—14 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.5$), small business entrepreneurs with 5–10 years of work experience—10 out of 15 respondents ($r = 0.5$) and over 10-year seniority—10 out of 13 respondents ($r = 0.6$). The research outcomes prove that the respondents spend far too little time on personal development. Only 15%—20 out of 131 working respondents—declared the average weekly time for self-improvement at the level of 3 h, and 36%—47 respondents—less than 1 h.

Another issue that was explored was an improvement, including its forms, of managerial skills preferred by the respondents (Table 3). As in the case of premises for improvement, the question was disjunctive with the possibility of choosing three variants from the cafeteria of answers. Most respondents stated that the model of a master-mentor (managerial mastery), who teaches a profession and shares own experience, combined with improvement through experience and business contacts, is the most significant for their competencies. The first variable was indicated by 117 surveyed persons—89%, and the other one by 118—90%. The managerial championship was mentioned by the respondents of almost every category, with the most numerous group being managers of medium-sized enterprises with 5–10 years of seniority—31 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.6$) and over 10 years of work experience—32 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.7$), as well as entrepreneurs and managers of small enterprises, mostly with 5–10 years—14 out of 15 respondents ($r = 0.8$) and over 10 years of work—12 out of 13 respondents ($r = 0.7$). Quite similar results concern improvement through business experience. They were most often mentioned by managers of medium-sized enterprises with 5–10 years of professional experience—35 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.7$) and over 10 years of work—31 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.6$), as well as small business entrepreneurs representing the same seniority ranges ($r = 0.5$).

Table 3. Time devoted to self-improvement. (Pearson r-correlation coefficient $|r| \leq 0.5$ at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, α -Cronbach ≤ 0.7), $N = 147$.

Independent Variable →	Enterprise Type									Postgraduate Students	Σ
	Medium-Sized Enterprise—From 51 to 250 Employees			Small Enterprise—From 11 up to 50 Employees			Nominated for the Position in Small n ₃ and Medium-Sized n ₄ Enterprises				
	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	OVER 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years		
	7	37	34	7	15	13	4	5	9		
	Σ _{EM}	n ₁ = 78		n ₂ = 35		n _{Σ3,4} = 18			n ₅ = 16		
%N	4.8%	25.2%	23.1%	4.8%	10.2%	8.8%	2.7%	3.4%	6.1%	10.8%	100%
↓ Dependent variable		Time devoted to self-improvement (not applicable to students): N-16 = 131)									
About 3 h		1	4	4	1	3	3	2	1	1	20
	r-Pearson	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.1	15%
	α-Cronbach	0.52	0.51	0.52	0.49	0.51	0.50	0.55	0.49	0.50	
About 1 h		5	10	16	3	5	3	2	2	1	47
	r-Pearson	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.07	36%
Spontaneous—as needed or through business experience		5	14	11	6	10	10	2	4	2	64
	r-Pearson	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.3	49%
α-Cronbach		0.74	0.75	0.65	0.72	0.77	0.78	0.57	0.72	0.61	

Source: Own study based on the research carried out in the second half of 2019 in the Lower Silesia region, Poland.

Managerial mastery and business experience usually occurred in the configuration with the third option concerning traditional training indicated by 78%—102 respondents or the exchange/circulation of knowledge within the company—57% (75). That variable was indicated mainly by entrepreneurs and managers of small companies, regardless of the length of work and gender. Online training was given the lowest rank. The latter form of improvement was mentioned by only 30 (23%) respondents, mainly people scheduled for nomination to a higher position. The other extreme was the respondents' interest in traditional training courses, as was indicated by 78% (102), and specialised courses preferred by 54% (71). In the first case, managers of medium-sized enterprises were most interested in them, including those with 5–10 years of work experience—35 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.7$) and over 10-year seniority—29 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.6$), as well as most of the people intended for promotion to a higher position. The second type of traditional training concerned mainly medium-sized enterprise managers with over 10 years of professional experience—25 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.5$). Less interest in specialist courses results from a more extended period devoted to improving qualifications, associated with exclusion from professional activity. The position corresponds to the findings of other studies, which prove that the most popular and accessible method of raising qualifications is multi-day training for employees.

The third issue remaining in the orbit of the research interest under discussion was identifying areas for improving managerial competences (Tables 4 and 5). The research results indicate that the respondents assigned the highest rank to legal issues, which is connected to one of the declared premises for improvement of managerial skills. Regardless of the type of enterprise, length of seniority, and gender, that issue was the most critical variable influencing the company's success, as was stated by as many as 88% (129) of the respondents. The biggest group indicating that variable included managers of medium-sized enterprises representing work experience in the range of 5–10 years—33 out of 37 respondents ($r = 0.5$) and over 10 years of employment—31 out of 34 respondents ($r = 0.6$), as well as entrepreneurs and small business managers in all seniority ranges ($r = 0.7$). Regardless of the type of business (including post-graduate students), the respondents see the need to improve competencies in the field of technologies and IT systems supporting the enterprise's functioning. The variable was indicated by 78% (115) of the respondents, notwithstanding the type of enterprise and managers' seniority. Professional improvement of managerial competencies, indicated by 67% (98), turned out to be a significant independent variable. In addition to managers of medium-sized companies, entrepreneurs and managers of small companies representing all seniority ranges and people expected to be promoted to a higher position were interested in professional managerial training. Mastering a foreign language captured the least interest—35% (51) of the surveyed sample.

Table 4. Forms of improvement. (Pearson r-correlation coefficient $|r| \leq 0.5$ at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, α -Cronbach ≤ 0.7), N = 147.

Independent Variable →	Enterprise Type									Postgraduate Students	Σ
	Medium-Sized Enterprise—From 51 to 250 Employees			Small Enterprise—From 11 up to 50 Employees			Nominated for the Position in Small n ₃ and Medium-Sized n ₄ Enterprises				
	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years		
	7	37	34	7	15	13	4	5	9		
	Σ _{EM}	n ₁ = 78		n ₂ = 35		n _{Σ3,4} = 18					
%N	4.8%	25.2%	23.1%	4.8%	10.2%	8.8%	2.7%	3.4%	6.1%	10.8%	100%
Forms of improvement											
Traditional training		4	22	25	1	2	2	3	4	8	71
	r-Pearson	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.6	0.6	0.7	54%
	α-Cronbach	0.71	0.70	0.74	0.34	0.34	0.35	0.71	0.72	0.76	
Online training		1	2	5	0	1	2	4	4	6	30
	r-Pearson	0.02	0.01	0.1	-	0.01	0.03	0.7	0.7	0.6	23%
Traditional training		6	35	29	5	7	5	3	4	8	102
	r-Pearson	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.7	0.6	0.7	78%
Improvement through business experience		5	35	31	6	11	11	3	5	1	118
	r-Pearson	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.2	90%
Models/managerial mastery of the manager or other people		5	31	32	7	14	12	2	5	9	117
	r-Pearson	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.3	0.7	0.7	89%
Knowledge exchange/circulation within the enterprise		3	19	17	5	12	11	2	3	2	75
	r-Pearson	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.4	0.4	0.2	57%
α-Cronbach		0.71	0.78	0.76	0.70	0.82	0.78	0.70	0.71	0.67	

Source: Own study based on the research carried out in the second half of 2019 in the Lower Silesia region, Poland.

Table 5. Areas of improvement of managerial competencies. (Pearson r-correlation coefficient $|r| \leq 0.5$ at the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$, α -Cronbach ≤ 0.7), $N = 147$.

Independent Variable →	Enterprise Type									Postgraduate Students	Σ	
	Medium-Sized Enterprise—From 51 to 250 Employees			Small Enterprise—From 11 up to 50 Employees			Nominated for the Position in Small n ₃ and Medium-Sized n ₄ Enterprises					
	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years	Up to 5 Years	5–10 Years	Over 10 Years			
	7	37	34	7	15	13	4	5	9			
	Σ _{EM}	n ₁ = 78		n ₂ = 35		n _{Σ3,4} = 18			n ₅ = 16			147
%N	4.8%	25.2%	23.1%	4.8%	10.2%	8.8%	2.7%	3.4%	6.1%	10.8%	100%	
Areas of improvement of managerial competencies												
Improving/learning a foreign language		4	15	8	2	10	3	2	1	1	5	51
	r-Pearson	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.2	0.07	0.3	35%
Improvement in the field of law		5	33	31	6	13	12	3	4	8	14	129
	r-Pearson	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	88%
Professional (managerial) development		3	26	24	5	12	11	3	4	7	3	98
	r-Pearson	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.08	67%
Professional and managerial development		4	33	33	4	9	7	2	3	6	14	115
	r-Pearson	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.7	78%
α-Cronbach		0.59	0.68	0.74	0.61	0.60	0.70	0.51	0.72	0.75	0.71	

Source: Own study based on the research carried out in the second half of 2019 in the Lower Silesia region, Poland.

Furthermore, the vision of the company's future and the anticipated threats to its development were examined. The respondents' indications to open questions in the 2019 questionnaire were used for the analysis. Among the responses regarding enterprises' future, the most optimistic visions were related to expanding sales markets abroad (61%) and Poland's economic growth (56%). A significant percentage of the respondents (52%) also indicated the inflow of foreign capital to Poland as an opportunity for cooperation (43%) and the impact of subsidies from the EU fund on the development of the Polish enterprise sector (39%). Only 2% of the respondents saw opportunities in raising qualifications and improving competencies by entrepreneurs and managers. The most frequently mentioned responses to threats to enterprises and their development referred to political and legal issues, extensive bureaucracy in Poland and the EU, too high (compared with qualifications) remuneration and social requirements of employees from Ukraine, and foreign competition. None of the respondents expressed concerns about an extraordinary state or crisis that could threaten the company's economic stability and inhibit its development. Given the statements in the open questions, it can be concluded that in the second half of 2019, there was optimism among Polish entrepreneurs related to the good economic situation and the prospect of expanding the market to foreign countries.

6. Discussion

Two key types of barriers to an enterprises' development exist. These include internal and external ones understood as destructors of the learning organization's future. In the literature, internal barriers relate to the enterprise's functioning, and concern its size, strategy, structure (organizational and, for example, cost structure), technology and production possibilities, competencies of owners and management, and employees' qualifications. In the Polish market conditions, they involve weaknesses regarding competencies, business owners and staff's knowledge and capabilities, and insufficient transfer of knowledge from science institutions to new companies [40]. The external barriers refer to macroeconomic conditions and socio-cultural factors, which include the Polish society's mentality and the cultural environment of the enterprise.

Both types of barriers were reflected in the findings of 2015 study [41] on a representative sample of 1.1 thousand owners, managers, and people responsible for running micro (from 1 to 9 employees), small (10–49 employees), and medium-sized (50–249 employees) companies. The research results prove that the most significant problem the enterprises are facing is external factors, including mainly legal and strictly economic ones, and, to a lesser extent, errors in enterprises' strategies and employee selection. What is more, they indicate the almost complete marginalization of development barriers related to the managers' competencies and the need to improve and raise their qualifications [41]. The above probably stems from the good economic situation on the Polish market in the years preceding the pandemic, which revealed all dysfunctions resulting from negligence in improving and raising managerial competencies at all enterprise management levels and its development stages. It can be achieved, among others, by entrepreneurship, executive, and specialist training, classified as stimulators of the company's development in three phases (according to LE Greiner's model): start-up, growth, and maturity [42]. The model allows for identifying potential dangers and problems arising in various stages of the life cycle.

Much neglect has also been revealed in the internationalization of managerial competencies. Their absence results in Polish SMEs' resistance to the expansion of economic activity to foreign markets; a trend identifiable already in the 1990s [43]. Clearly, several other factors weigh in in the analysis, i.e., the size of the Polish market, the size and dynamic of domestic demand and other. The entrepreneurs and managers themselves argue that the relatively low degree of internationalization of their business exposure is to be linked to the high costs of foreign market entry. The latter also includes the cost of the lack of knowledge of the regulatory frameworks etc., especially in such domains as subsidies to interest paid for export credits, co-financing participation in fairs and exhibitions,

promotion instruments of Polish brands, and export support [44]. By comparison, sectors capable of benefiting from the regulatory (support) frameworks in place, e.g., transport, carpentry (furniture and windows), poultry food, children's equipment (prams and car seats), jewelry, and the IT industry, have been successfully penetrating foreign markets.

The relatively good economic situation of SMEs changed dramatically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, the COVID-19 related restrictions to mobility, both domestically and internationally, resulted in an almost complete stagnation of the Polish economy. The SMEs' sector was particularly affected. In the first phase of the pandemic, i.e., until the end of May 2020, 46% of small and 37% of SMEs sought refuge in state aid. Due to that, 56% of these SMEs succeeded to return to the level of turnover from the period before the pandemic as early as August 2020, and 44% recorded decrease in turnover. The highest percentage of companies declaring a decrease in turnover concerned the transport sector—54.8% and the service sector—46.5%, while the least – the construction sector—23.3% [45]. A survey [46] conducted in 8–14 April 2020, on a representative sample of 566 respondents—owners of SMEs—revealed anxiety about the companies' future related to the deterioration of the economic situation due to the development of the pandemic. Such a forecast was declared by 85% of the respondents, with 15% being optimistic. The pessimists (45%) also pointed to their company's alarming situation, and 55% negatively assessed the state aid under the "Anti-Crisis Shield". Among many aid postulates, 19% of the entrepreneurs saw the need for the state to initiate financial outlays intended to raise the employee competencies in the new conditions for companies' operation [46]. It should be stressed that in the period since April 2020, the supply of various types of training in remote have mode increased, the result of which is the current increase in Polish entrepreneurs' interest in them [47]. However, the business sector representatives pointed to the necessity to adapt the training programs to the demands of the economy functioning under crisis conditions and, therefore, distinguish between the needs of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. Subsequent studies conducted in the first phase of the pandemic (April–June 2020) verified the surveyed entrepreneurs' optimism related to the permanent changes in the law on state aid packages and delays in their implementation [48].

The results of this study to a great extent correspond with the points mentioned above. Twelve interviewees were selected (6 managers of medium-sized enterprises and 6 entrepreneurs of small enterprises) from among 147 respondents to the survey that aimed to obtain a comparative opinion on the problems of enterprises' operation before and during the pandemic. They were asked about the expectations of state aid for entrepreneurs, development barriers for enterprises during the pandemic, and the scope and forms of improving managerial competencies. Table 6 displays the synthesis (paraphrased and generalized) of the respondents' indications resulting from the transcription of interviews carried out using the content analysis technique.

Based on partially structured interviews with managers of medium-sized enterprises and entrepreneurs of small enterprises, the outcomes of this study offer an incomplete insight into the reality faced by the respondents during the pandemic. During the second wave of the pandemic, Polish SMEs experienced a severe crisis. Despite optimism that prevailed in Spring 2020 concerning effective state aid measures, the third quarter of 2020 turned out to be the worst in the history for Polish companies. Several SMEs announced bankruptcy or the need of restructuring [49]. The least favorable situation concerns the micro- and small-sized enterprises. Data suggests that the Spring 2020 optimism of Polish entrepreneurs, and moderate optimism still discernible in Summer 2020, nosedived during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic [13]. Research shows that the number of companies believing in improving the situation soon is decreasing. Most, namely, 54%, of the entrepreneurs believe that their economic situation will not change in the next three months. At the same time, 70% of enterprises (mainly micro and small ones) are waiting for aid from government programs, and three-quarters of them do not plan any investments. Among the enterprises that use or plan to benefit from state aid, 15.3% intends to invest in the company's development and human capital [13].

Table 6. Synthesis of the interviewees' responses.

Managers of Medium-Sized Enterprises N = 6		Small Business Entrepreneurs N = 6	
Before the Pandemic	During the Pandemic	Before the Pandemic	During the Pandemic
Entrepreneurs' Expectations for Training Provided by the State			
none	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -creating a "government" educational platform for distance learning in the field of changes in legal provisions under the "Anti-Crisis Shield"; -establishing a fund for managers to improve qualifications; -establishing cooperation with commercial educational platforms for entrepreneurs; -organisation of cyclical on-line training for managers. 	none	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -organisation of training for owners -entrepreneurs of small businesses in the field of obtaining funds from national and EU programs for support during the pandemic; -creating a training fund dedicated exclusively to small and micro enterprises; -organisation of trainings and courses aimed at changing the branch or diversifying business activities
Development barriers for enterprises and a vision of the future			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lack of time for improvement related to professional duties; -learning lessons as part of gaining work experience;-bureaucracy at the Polish and EU level; -the still unclear prospect of Poland joining the Euro zone; -increasing competition of foreign companies on the domestic market. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -difficulties in contacts with customers; -lower effectiveness of online work, especially in team management; -delays related to the implementation of aid packages by the state; -decline in profitability related to the loss or contraction of the sales market; -ineffective government support programs; -superiors' selfishness and lack of willingness to share knowledge; -malfunctioning information and knowledge flow channels; -ineffective IT systems of company management or insufficient knowledge of these systems; -lack of a shared vision of success and disintegration of teams—the advantage of individual actions for own success; -no precise forecast of the end of the crisis; -decrease in employee motivation and their creativity in acquiring new customers; -legal chaos; -moral panic and fear of the pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -political instability of the state; -no time for improvement and upgrading qualifications; -minimal training offer for small businesses; -gaps in the command of foreign languages; -insufficient knowledge of legal regulations and their changeability; -strong competition on the domestic and foreign market; -too high wage conditions for employees from Ukraine, inadequate to their competencies; -too high costs of the so-called employees (health and pension contributions) and lack of any idea by the state to relieve entrepreneurs on the verge of profitability; -instability of the Polish currency exchange rate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -insufficient manager's authority shaped by non-professional knowledge and intuition; -too rigid and conservative structures, even authoritarian business relationships; -restrictions on employing competent employees; -re-evaluation of profit "here and now" over investing in human capital and the future of the company; -resistance to changing the business profile; -managers' reluctance to develop in online mode; -pessimism about the chances of surviving the crisis; -lack of preparation to operate in the e-business sphere; -low level of identification with the enterprise and sense of group identity; -reluctance to change the sector or diversify the business profile.

Table 6. Cont.

Managers of Medium-Sized Enterprises N = 6		Small Business Entrepreneurs N = 6	
Before the Pandemic	During the Pandemic	Before the Pandemic	During the Pandemic
Entrepreneurs' Expectations for Training Provided by the State			
The scope and directions of improving managerial competencies			
-issues in the field of law and IT; -improving managerial competencies.	-adjusting on-line training packages to specific industries; -professional consultancy provided by the state and commercial companies in expanding the business profile; -free training packages offered by the state and reimbursement of high training costs provided by commercial companies; -digitisation of administrative procedures and simplification of bureaucracy; -application of good business management practices proven in other enterprises, including foreign ones; -optimal use of the pandemic time for professional development and improving managers and employees' qualifications—treating the pandemic as “time to invest in human capital”.	-management education and training; -legal and IT issues; -language improvement.	-use of state aid measures for vocational training of employees partially excluded from the company's activity; -investing in improving language, managerial, and IT competencies; -creating a friendly climate inside the company and a sense of community that will allow surviving during the crisis; -training in acquiring funds from the EU for changing the industry or diversifying the business profile.

7. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to offer an insight into specific developments in the Polish SMEs' sector. While initially the objective was to conduct a general query of the Polish SMEs through the conceptual lens of a learning organization, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, created an opportunity to extend the study. Accordingly, the COVID-19 pandemic was conceived of as a watershed, as a threshold to juxtapose specific features of the Polish SMEs before and after the pandemic. For the purpose of the examination conducted in this study at the conceptual level, the classical theories and approaches to a learning organization were employed. These were then combined with secondary data derived from industry reports etc. Against this backdrop, a focus group was conducted and a questionnaire was built. A total of 147 respondents, including managers located at diverse levels of the organizational structure, were involved in the study.

The analysis of the results thus obtained suggests that it is close to impossible to refer to Polish SMEs, as learning organizations. In other words, the analysis of the responses collected suggest that the Polish SMEs sector displays a substantial deficit in the following dimensions central in Senge's concept of a learning organization, i.e., mental models, team learning, and system thinking [4,5]. As for the remaining dimensions of the learning organization approach, i.e., personal mastery and a shared vision, the respondents revealed a sense of understanding and/or identification with.

Furthermore, considering the learning organization debate [11] it is very difficult to make a case that Polish SMEs possess the features necessary to transform from an "ordinary" organization into a "learning organization". In other words, the respondents almost completely ignored such issues as the importance of strategic approach based on learning as well as team-related criteria necessary for shaping the future of the organization. In turn, the respondents stressed the role of the universality and availability of information, sharing of information, and so-called atmosphere at work. Finally, the respondents stressed the salience of creating development opportunities as a *sine qua non* condition for success and survival in crisis conditions. This, once again, suggests a basic lack of understanding that simply moving forward, thus surviving, does not guarantee sustainable growth.

The COVID-19 pandemic, was viewed here as an emergency, or a crisis, taking place in the company's external environment. As such it was assumed that, at the company level, it would encourage, attempts aimed at gaining new knowledge, skills and experiences. These would be required to adapt and respond to the changing features of the context in which SMEs operate, including social, political and economic uncertainty. In line with the prescriptions entailed in the concept of learning organization, central in this process of adaptation should be the ability to use knowledge and managerial skills accumulated/built prior to the emergency/crisis situation. In turn, the latter should be the source of new experiences, new pieces of knowledge and new sets of skills that are necessary for a company's "survival". In this case, the so-called "organizational memory", understood as a mechanisms of accumulating and redistributing knowledge within an organization is crucial [50].

The results of the study reported here suggest that in regard to Polish SMEs, it is difficult to talk about "consumption" of the accumulated in the organization knowledge. It is because, so the results of the study, that knowledge was insufficient for the SMEs to face the challenges inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if several respondents stressed 'intuitive thinking' as a way of coping with the crisis, it cannot be seen as a reflection knowledge capital already present in the organization. Rather, it may be seen as an instance of a spontaneous acquisition of professional experience. It would make sense if it did not concern only individual managers' actions (which was pointed out by the interviewed people) but if it had the character of deliberate, coordinated action on a team- or, preferably, on the organizational-level [51].

Overall, the outcomes of this study offer several insights into the specificity of the Polish SMEs and the SMEs' sector. Specifically, by framing the analysis in context of the learning organization debate, this paper demonstrated that a substantial deficit exists in

the Polish SMEs' sector as regards the recognition of the salience of organizational learning. Interestingly, that the respondents stressed the notions of availability of information, information flow and atmosphere at work, as well as the imperative of creating development opportunities, suggests a form of a 'shallow' or "nascent" understanding of the key business functions and factors determining an organization's performance. This in turn reveals a deficit in managerial skills. What can we learn from these findings? Two points are necessary to address this question. On the one hand, the question is why the Polish SMEs' sector displays a certain neglect of the centrality of managerial skills? The other question that needs to be asked is how to address this situation? Or which measures to undertake to improve the status quo?

While detailed answers to these questions would require an in-depth study, at this point suffice it to say that inasmuch as the organic, bottom-up growth of the SMEs' sector in Poland is responsible for the sector's success, it is also a source of its today's challenges. In other words, a great number of SMEs in Poland were established as a direct response to a need, be it the lack of income and/or unemployment. This suggests that individuals establishing these SMEs were not necessarily subjected to any prior training or equipped with any managerial skills. That these SMEs survived over the years was facilitated by the benign macroeconomic environment over the past thirty years and by an overall business friendliness of the regulatory framework. Under conditions of the COVID-19 related economic strain, and exacerbated by increasing government intervention, much more was required for specific SMEs not only to survive but to thrive. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore whether the specific sector of an SME's engagement, e.g., information and communication technology (ICT) versus provision of basic services, may have played a role in this context. More research is needed to explore the notion of managerial skills in connection to the specific sector a given SME represents. The notion of location might play a role too. That being said, the question is what could be done? Two sets of actions are needed, i.e., actions addressing the problem systemically, and actions targeting individual SMEs. As for the systemic way of navigating the problem, it is necessary to distinguish between short- (tax incentives for training and education in the SMEs' sector) and long-term strategies (entrepreneurship education). With regards to responses targeting individual SMEs, several tools are already available. These include, advisory services for those who are interested. To increase the motivation of SMEs to embark on these schemes, a form of conditionality should be attached to loan and/or export insurance contracts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; methodology, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; software, Z.Ś.; validation, M.B., A.V. and Z.Z.; formal analysis, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; investigation, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; resources, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; data curation, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; writing—original draft preparation, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; writing—review and editing, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; visualization, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V.; funding acquisition, M.B., Z.Ś., Z.Z., A.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data set underpinning results presented in this paper are readily available to all interested parties upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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