

CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN TRADE SMEs. CASE STUDY – RETAIL VERSUS TRADITIONAL TRADE

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Abstract: Change management is a complex process by which organisations adapt to new market conditions, technologies, regulations or consumer needs. In the context of trade SMEs, changes can have a significant impact on long-term competitiveness and sustainability. This paper aims to analyse the management of change in trade SMEs, carrying out a comparative study between retail and traditional trade.

Keywords: change management, consumer society, entrepreneurship, large retailers, independent trade.

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are a key segment of national economies, contributing to job creation and innovation (OECD, 2021). In the commercial field, SMEs play a vital role in providing products and services, thus influencing the local economy.

The trade activity in Romania has gone through essential changes that have contributed to the formation of a modern retail market capable of responding to the newest processes of adaptability and innovation.

In addition to the main international retailers who managed to impose a dynamic and constant growth in this field, domestic investors were attracted who proved to be able to keep up with them, they even resisted and developed, creating successful businesses at the national level as and beyond borders.

The courage of independent traders to implement and develop investments in the updating of modern and innovative independent store networks has boosted the consumer goods market, which in recent years has expanded in several directions: from the increase in size, to the expansion of the retail network through which they ensured access to consumer products and their development.

In this respect, a particularity can be identified in Caraş-Severin county, where we analysed through a case study, namely a direct qualitative research using as a tool the application of a questionnaire on the evolution of the retail activity of large retailers vs that of the independent traders, meant to show how the differences between the two forms of trade can be managed, how they can be recovered and eliminated or turned into real opportunities for the development or expansion of the existing successful businesses.

Trade has become one of the most important human activities where people are increasingly involved in their capacity of consumers.

Trade globalisation has created the possibility to access fast and timely information, to get high-performance technologies, to see the elimination of difficult obstacles, to have a better life quality, and to witness a reduction of costs in general, thus contributing to the increase in the dynamics of trade flows worldwide. Through globalization, trade has benefited from numerous opportunities that, after being implemented, have created the Consumer Society in which the consumer has the status of "King" [18].

2. Theoretical Considerations

Change is unavoidable in real life as well as in organisations. Nowadays, the world is moving fast and it is necessary to make some changes to survive and be competitive on the market [6].

We are living in a world undergoing permanent change, all organisations are faced nowadays with change, and the economic and technological environment competes to accelerate the need for companies to adapt to change [14].

In the opinion of Verboncu I. (1996), change means novelty. In this context, *change* means "replacement, modification, transformation or change in shape, form and/or content of an object, product, work, service, activity or process" which results in the introduction of the new in all aspects, *towards* which the management of the company must have a favourable attitude [1].

The concept of "change" is not new to active society, but it is older than humanity and includes all aspects of the manner in which the world evolves. Thus, Change has become essential for society, both from a personal perspective and within organisations, and knowing the change process is a defining element of effective management meant to ensure the organisation's competitiveness.

Change may occur independently of human will, but regardless of the causes of production, this transformation must be known, investigated and controlled if the objectives are to be achieved [9].

According to the European Commission, the change represents an opportunity that must be organised, well managed and most importantly, predicted (European Commission, 1998).

The literature of the last decade contains numerous references (made by economists, sociologists, psychologists or specialists from other research fields) to *the process of organisational change* and even to the existence of a specific branch of management: *change management*.

In order for the organisation to survive, it is fundamental that it successfully implements change processes [10]. Basically, change is a natural and universal process of contemporary world and represents one of its constants. Therefore, change becomes a necessity, being inevitable and, more than that, it is a process with potential for adaptation and evolution for every person, organisation, society. In an era of information and communication technology, organisational changes become imminent for the survival of organisations [11].

Change management represents "the set of processes of planning, organisation, coordination, training and control of certain measures of replacement, modification, transformation or change in the form and continuity of the company or the subsystems of the company, with the aim of increasing its efficiency and competitiveness" [12]. Also, according to E. Burdus, "organisational changes are responses to certain external forces, or may be determined by certain endogenous variables, such as the tendency of managers to apply different specific methods and techniques" [1].

The process of change management is very important for the growth and sustainability of any organisation, the goal being the progress from the initial and current state to the required condition or state.

Change began to be perceived by more and more managers in modern organisations as an effective weapon that could ensure their victory in the increasingly fierce market competition. Today we may consider that the priority objective at the basis of any organisational change must be progress, the desire that the new state of the organisation allows obtaining superior results, increasing the level of performance.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) represent one of the main sectors of any economy and a real backbone for a society. SMEs are businesses that fall within a certain size range, and their characteristics vary depending on the industry, region and specific circumstances [8].

SMEs form a universe characterised by diversity, dynamism and flexibility [5]. These types of companies often have a local or regional focus, serving a specific market or community, offering a specialised product or

range of products and services and being socially responsible [4].

SMEs are typically more agile and flexible than larger organisations and closer to the customers. This flexibility allows them to quickly adapt to changes in the market, customer needs and business environments, offering a good base for evolution. The modern companies look both for profit and social impact [8].

Vision and passion, management opportunities, management motivation and providing products and services more competitive than the competitors are just some of the aspects that support change management in small firms. In small companies, change is an everyday component of a manifestation of rapid response, primarily related to leadership, while large firms keep changing organisational structures, which often means a delayed reaction and cumbersome. Therefore, the change in small enterprises is a competitive advantage that should always be maintained [15].

SMEs need to be able to give innovative responses in a dynamic environment through continuous change, adaptation and improvement. Especially, high flexibility due to on-demand and just-in-time delivery, and quick responsiveness are key [13].

In the economic reality there are two types of SMEs: the small traditional enterprise, that, mostly, doesn't have a long way strategy, but a small marketplace, the process of making goods being inherited from generation to generation; and the modern SMEs that use high technology, are in a continuous search of new markets and, by competitiveness, are looking to maximize the efficiency of their activities. SMEs, especially the traditional ones, have strengths and weaknesses that manifest closely to the involvement of their leaders and their human resources capacities. They are established, usually, on the strength of the courage and talent of their founders [2].

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play an essential role in a country's economy. They are a source of entrepreneurial skills, innovation and job creation. Their ability to adapt and disseminate new technologies is unique.

On the market, SMEs generate the largest number of new jobs with a much lower cost of capital, being an important alternative in combating unemployment.

SMEs represent over 99% of the total number of enterprises in most economies. In Romania this share is increasing to 99.6%. The largest share of SMEs (68%) are those active in trade [2].

The review of the literature and the analysis of statistical data underline these processes that have shaped the current evolution of trade activity.

The main development factors of global trade activity can be:

1. The global expansion of *the Consumer Society*, which according to Mrs. Voinea Lelia [16] has gone through

several stages such as: mass consumption; society of abundance; hyperconsumption.

Since the 1970s, we have been living in the hyperconsumption society, and some of its characteristics are [16]: changes in production and sales technologies; reorganising commercial spaces; search for the new and promotion of novelties; expansion of low-cost forms of sale; high interest in brands; stimulating consumer emotion towards products; consumption-entertainment; emphasis on comfort in the purchase of products; use of IT technology in trade and the effects generated by it, etc.

2. *Consumerism*, started at the beginning the '70s, created in the Western societies of that period the economic and social order in which consumers purchase goods and services beyond the necessary needs and banks begin to issue fiduciary money [17].

According to Valentin Lazea, in Romania only after 2000 did consumerism appear but with a rapid evolution wanting to recover the years of delay. Even the economic growth model adopted by our country was one based on consumption, compared to similar countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, which have implemented the German economic growth model based on exports [17].

The prolific period of *Consumerism* was 1990-2022, favoured by numerous factors such as the context of world peace, significant demographic increases, globalization, digitization, advantageous financial conditions through low interest rates practiced by the banking system, etc. [17].

In the post-COVID period, more precisely after 2022, as Valentin Lazea puts it, we remarked trends leading to a decline in *Consumerism*, because the factors favouring it have disappeared, and new contrary factors have appeared such as: armed conflicts with global impact, relocation of production points, i.e. the beginning of the nearshoring and friendshoring processes that will lead to the increase in the price of products that will no longer be made with cheap labour, scarce resources and high-performance digital technologies will be used in the manufacture of products that will become more expensive, the phenomenon of inflation will generate more expensive loans, including consumer loans, increased demographic deficit and the aging of the population, etc. [17].

3. *Trends in consumption* according to the International Euromonitor reflect the reality of the global trade business. In 2023 global trade activity addressed approximately 8 billion consumers, who spent over \$54 trillion on goods and services out of a \$64 billion disposable income, with an annual inflation rate of 5.8% and an increase in the total volume of retail sales of more than 6.5% (4). In the top of the most important consumer trends for 2023 compared to 2022 at the global level, the following are remarked [19]:

- Automation of the commercial sector, some significant figures in this regard being: the 51% increase in applied artificial intelligence; 42% increased use of automation and robotics or 41% increased use of AR/VR.

- Consumption has moved to the Internet, with consumers spending more time on specific mobile platforms and apps that have expanded by over 51% or over 57% of consumers have moved apps for consumption to smartphones.

- The impact of the eco economy or sustainability in consumption has reduced waste for approximately 55% of consumers, and 41% of them are willing to pay more for certain products that are more durable, 40% of them have repaired broken products without replacing them by new ones, and 34% purchased more second-hand products.

- Cultural Commerce, as over 44% of Generation Z consumers emphasize the importance of online brand culture; and 48% of them receive product innovation or purchase based on the social and political beliefs of the society of origin, while more than 64% of them make purchases based on existing reviews.

For the year 2024, consumption trends will develop along the following directions: [20]

- The impact of AI, sustainability as well as social, economic and political factors will become central to global trade activity;

- Merchants will have to innovate and create new incentives for consumers so that their offers are as accessible as possible to consumers, while they will always choose the most attractive ones;

- Consumers will be much more attentive to their well-being and health, and they will want to improve such aspects.

4. *Reorganisation of brick and click commercial spaces*, determined by the explosion of electronic commerce but also the priority of merchants to reorganize their physical store spaces in line with the changes imposed and the wishes of consumers in the New Normality [21].

For instance, in the case of Romania, the trade activity in recent years has exhibited the fastest expansion both by network size and in terms of achieved competitiveness. According to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, trade activity has become the most profitable from the perspective of the productivity indicator measured as VAB / GAV - gross added value per employee in our country. Productivity in trade activity is 14% higher in 2022 compared to the national average as shown in the graph below [22].

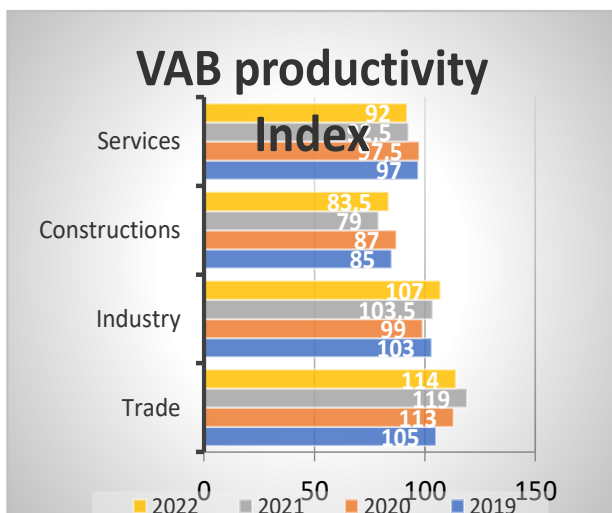


Fig. 1. VAB / GAV index

Source: processed by the authors apud Gheorghe L., 2024 [22]

Conclusive in this regard are also the data proving that trade activity has become more efficient than industry by reaching the VAB / GAV index of 114 compared to industry 107 in 2022. It should be noted that the number of employees in trade is close to 1 million out of a total of over 4 million employees, according to Gheorghe L., 2024 [22].

The investments made in retail through the construction of modern commercial spaces specific to the present Consumer Society, as well as the expansion of the most important modern store chains on our market from 1992 until now, when their number has grown to approximately 5,000 retail stores. [23] Additionally, more than 32,000 domestic companies declare they are engaged in retail trade, and the number can increase to 45,000-50,000 if traditional stores are also included [25].

For example, the number of stores of the main retailers in Romania increased in just one year (2023/2022) by over 345 stores, i.e. hypermarket 46; discount 46; proximity 221; supermarket 20, according to the data analysed from the source [24].

Independent trade in our country had a slower start influenced by the difficult economic and social factors that any entrepreneur had to face in the last 25 years. However, in this sector there have been strong independent traders who have managed to create networks of their own stores of a similar size to the large international retailers present on the domestic market.

As examples of good practice we may mention the independent store chains Annabella with over 109 stores or Unicarm with over 100 stores in 2023.

In 2022, the number of Independent Trade stores in Romania reached 765 outlets compared to 2023 when they decreased by 37 stores down to 728 outlets, according to data analysed from the source [24].

According to statistical data sources, more than 30-35 billion euros are spent in Romania for consumer goods,

i.e. food, beverages, personal and home care products, and this amount is collected in a proportion of 60-73% by the large international retail chains compared to 2-3% as much as domestic retail chains can collect [25].

The efficiency of trade activity must show what level of competition and satisfaction consumers have achieved. The fierce competition in this economic sector strongly influenced by the implementation of new technologies, new financing, transport or communication systems, etc. will contribute to the reorganisation of all transactions or businesses that will be carried out both now and in the future.

The restructuring of the entire Consumer Society must be rethought and reconceptualized in accordance with the dynamics of the global market as well as with the entire restructuring process of the entire society, and the competitiveness of trade will become a basic indicator of the competitiveness of the economic system. Trade activity is no longer a simple service for consumers, it has many values that will contribute to ensuring an economic, social and global balance. The multiple forms of trade and the technologies applied by them will make trade activity extremely complex and diverse [3].

The map of modern retail in Caraş-Severin county is presented in Piața (The Market) magazine as follows:



Fig. 2. Modern retail map

Source: <https://www.revista-piata.ro/images/harta-retailului-modern/Harta-Retailului-Modern-31.05.2024.pdf>

3. Research Methodology

Independent trade will increasingly become an important component of retail or other established trade organisation systems.

This process can be analysed through a case study on the Caraş-Severin county market, where the impact on consumers is also monitored.

The case study involved a direct qualitative research based on a questionnaire administered between March 4th and March 24th 2024 and was addressed to respondents from Caraş-Severin county, a representative sample of 96 people, with a margin of error of +/-5%.

A random sampling method was applied, and respondents could choose multiple answer options for each question in the questionnaire. The respondents were selected according to four criteria: 2 gender levels (male and female), 3 levels for residence environment-rural, urban, abroad, 4 age levels: - under 20; between 20 and 40; between 40 and 60 and over 60, as well as 4 occupational levels: employed, unemployed, education, retired.

Trade activity, both retail and independent, has intensified and developed a lot in the last 25 years in Romania, and this trend is also found in the Caraş-Severin trade. Caraş-Severin county presented in the economic-social analyses appears to have an important industrial component, namely heavy industry.

The purpose of the research: Analysis of the evolution of retail trade VS independent trade in Caraş - Severin county

Main objective: Identifying the main characteristics that contributed to the development (expansion) of retail trade and independent trade in Caraş-Severin

Secondary objectives

1. The expansion of consumption as an element having generated the development of retail trade and independent trade;

2. Consumer demands for forms of modern commerce;

3. Expansion of retailers (Lidl, Kaufland, Penny, Profi, etc.) also present on the Caraş-Severin market;

4. Essential changes in the business environment in Caraş-Severin (collapse of heavy industry in the county, adaptation to an alternative);

5. Demographic effect on consumption and evolution of trade activity in the county;

6. Consumer perception of retail or independent trade;

7. Effects of the non-existence of a commercial centre in Caraş-Severin county;

8. Impact of digital technologies in the evolution of trade activity

The hypothesis proposed to be tested through research is H0: *retail trade is more developed compared to the evolution of independent trade in Caraş-Severin county.*

The questionnaire was applied on the Google Forms platform

4. Research results

In order to reach the goals stated above, each of the questions in the questionnaire was aimed at determining the perception of the respondents in relation to them.

The results and interpretation of the data obtained from the questionnaire lead to the formulation of the following assessments:

1. Retail and independent trade in Caraş-Severin county developed under the influence of several factors as shown in the figure below:

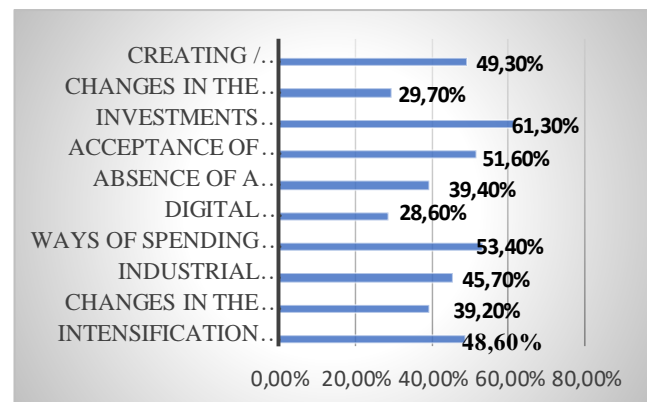


Fig. 3. Factors having favoured trade activity in Caraş-Severin county

The importance of each of the factors is significant, they contribute to a greater or lesser extent to the development of the entire trade activity. With an impact of 61.3% of the respondents identified as an important development factor for trade *the investments made in this sector*, also triggering favourable assessment for other factors mentioned by the respondents such as: 53.4% referred to spare time spending, 51.6% mentioned accepting current consumption trends, for 49.3% the important factor was creating (finding) a job easier and faster, while for 48.6% of them the intensification of consumption needs, and 45.7% of the respondents pointed out the county industrial decline.

Factors such as changes in the overall evolution of society were indicated by more than 39.2% of the respondents, or the absence of a mall in the county by more than 39.4%.

Changes in the purchasing power of the county population or digital technologies appearing and applied in stores are factors that were less appreciated by the respondents, only a little more than 28% considered they have contributed to the development of retail and independent trade in Caraş - Severin county.

2. The way retail and independent trade is perceived by consumers in Caraş-Severin county appears as follows:

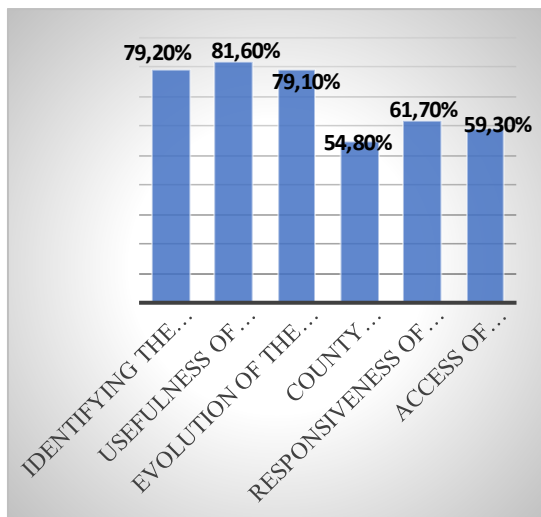


Fig. 4. Ways of perceiving trade activity by consumers in Caraș-Severin county

The criteria according to which consumers in Caraș-Severin county made assessments of retail and independent trade are presented in the following:

- The identification of the most important retailers and independent traders was appreciated by more than 79.2% of respondents. From the answers analysed, it can be seen that the most important retailers for the respondents participating in the research are: 69.5% of the respondents ranked first the international retail networks operating in Caraș-Severin county such as Lidl, Kaufland, Carrefour, Penny, Profi, Pepco, Kik, Sinsay, etc.; in second place (27.3% of respondents) are national retailers such as Dedeman, Altex, Flanco, etc., and in third place (3.2% of respondents) are independent retailers from the county, such as Mona Lisa, Parabo, Gradimex, Pasbo, CasaAlex, La Doi Pași, Unicarm, etc.).

- The usefulness / necessity of retailers and independent traders in Caraș-Severin county was appreciated by over 81.6% of the respondents. Following the answers analysed, we remark that 39.5% of the respondents consider independent retailers and merchants in Caraș-Severin to be very useful, 28.4% of them consider they are neither useful nor useless, while 13.7% of respondents consider them useful.

- The evolution of the retail market in Caraș-Severin county was appreciated by over 79.1% of the respondents. The answers analysed indicate that 46.8% of the respondents stated that the retail market in the county has developed to a very high extent, 28.9% of them answered that it has developed to a high extent and 3.4% of them had an appreciation of very low extent.

- The demographic impact of the county for retail was appreciated by over 54.8% of the respondents. Analysing the answers received, we found that 25.7% of the respondents considered the impact to be positive, followed by those who consider the impact to be negative, with a percentage of 19.8% of the respondents. Last (9.3% of the

respondents.) came the respondents who believe that the demographic effect on the evolution of retail activity has no impact in Caraș-Severin county.

- The responsiveness of independent and retail traders to the requests of consumers in the county was appreciated by more than 61.7% of the respondents. Analysing the answers received from the respondents, we saw that 37.9% of them believe that through their activity the independent and retail traders in Caraș-Severin county give a satisfactory answer to consumer requests, 18.5% of them believe that the answer is neutral, and 5.3% of respondents believe that they give an unsatisfactory answer to consumers in the county.

- The access of the county consumers to independent and retail traders was appreciated by more than 59.3% of the respondents. Analysing the answers received, we see they appreciate that the independent and retail merchants from Caraș-Severin county through their network of stores ensure a large consumer access for 28.7% of the respondents, and 30.6% of them appreciate that the merchants they do not have an extensive network of stores in the county and the access to them is insufficient.

3. The degree of satisfaction perceived by consumers in Caraș-Severin county with retail trade and existing independent trade was evaluated according to the following criteria:

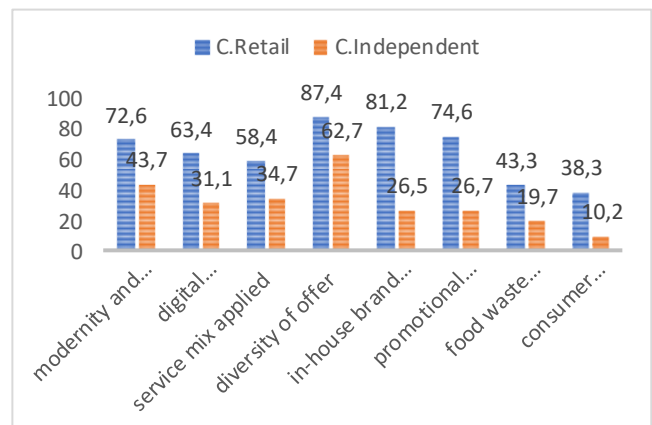


Fig. 5. Satisfaction degree of consumers in Caraș-Severin County with the existing retail trade and independent trade

The analysis of the data presented in the graph above shows an exact reality, namely that in Caraș-Severin county consumers are more satisfied with the retail trade than with the independent one. The analysis criteria were identical for both retail and independent trade, and the results are as follows:

- Modernity and design were rated as satisfactory by more than 72.6% of respondents participating in the research for retail, and by 43.7% of respondents for independent trade.

- The applied digital technologies were rated as satisfactory by more than 63.4% of respondents for retail, and 31.1% of them for independent trade
- The service mix applied was considered satisfactory by 58.4% of the respondents for retail, and for 34.7% of them they rated it as satisfactory for the independent contractor
- The diversity of the offer was rated as satisfactory by 87.4% of respondents in favour of retail, and for 62.7% of them this is satisfactory for independent trade
- The existence of the traders' in-house brand products was appreciated by more than 81.2% of respondents as satisfactory in the case of retail, and for 26.5% of them as satisfactory for independent trade
- The promotional activities were appreciated by more than 74.6% of the respondents as being satisfactory in the case of retail, these being even felt by the respondents participating in the research as aggressive, and in the case of independent trade only 26.7% of them consider them to be satisfactory
- The measures taken by retailers in Caraş-Severin county regarding the reduction of food waste were rated as satisfactory by 43.3% of respondents for retail and only 19.7% of them consider them satisfactory for independent trade
- The application of consumer protection measures was rated as satisfactory by more than 38.3% of respondents for retail and by 10.2% as satisfactory for independent trade.

4. The development perspectives of retail trade and independent trade in Caraş-Severin county were achieved according to the following criteria, according to the data in the graph below:

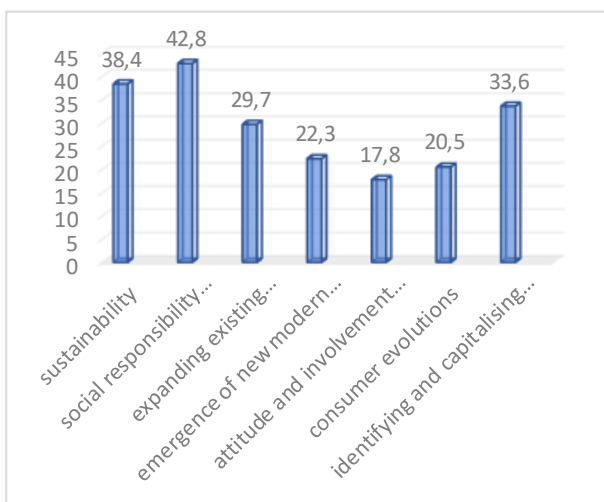


Fig. 6. Development prospects of retail trade and independent trade in Caraş-Severin county

The future development evolution of both retail and independent trade in Caraş-Severin county according to the assessments made by the respondents participating in the research indicated the following aspects: for 42.8%

of the respondents, the measures of social responsibility assumed and implemented by traders ranked first. In second place 38.4% of respondents said that sustainability can be a measure applied by independent traders or retailers to develop this sector in the future. Other criteria appreciated by the respondents able to bring about significant contributions to the development of retail and independent trade in the future, were the following: for 33.6% the identification and capitalisation of certain opportunities in the future; for 29.7% the expansion of already existing networks through new stores so as to form chains of stores of independents or established retailers according to the map of modern retail in Caraş-Severin county where only a few established retailers are present such as Lidl, Kaufland, Penny, Profi, Carrefour, and among the chains of established independent retailers, only Unicarm, La Doi Pasi, and these only with a few outlets. Modern forms of trade such as a shopping centres or a mall or a hypermarket as well as the penetration of strong, dedicated independent traders who have chains of more than 50 stores throughout the country are considered by more than 22.3% of respondents to be important for the development prospects of retail and independent trade in the county. These development prospects can also be complemented by future consumer developments that were mentioned by more than 20.5% of respondents, and 17.8% of them believe that a positive attitude and the involvement of traders can contribute to this development.

From the analysis and presentation of the data resulting from the qualitative research, the tested hypothesis is confirmed, namely that the evolution of retail trade (large retailers) is more poignant than the evolution of independent trade in Caraş-Severin county, both contributing to the development of the commercial sector and providing consumers with a framework corresponding to the satisfaction of consumption needs in accordance with the requirements generated by the present consumer society.

5. Conclusions

Change management is critical to the success of trade SMEs, particularly in the context of retail and traditional trade. Although retail SMEs have demonstrated greater adaptability, traditional trade needs to reorient and learn from recent developments to remain competitive.

The global economic system is starting to enter a productivity boom generated by process innovation to which AI or quantum computing can be added able to transform the entire society and all fields through a possible drop in prices followed by an exponential increase in unemployment, estimate made and by two economists Koen De Leus and Philippe Gijssels from BNP Paribas Fortis.

In retail, artificial intelligence is already being applied and helping retailers to identify solutions that are applicable and cost-effective in this new era. Established

retail in Romania (large retail) is expanding alongside independent trade, which is increasingly becoming an effective alternative for consumers who want a trade in which digitization, sustainability, innovation, fair price forming for products, promoting healthy consumption and the formation of a more educated customer. Consumer behaviour has changed significantly and rapidly as has the evolution of forms of commerce from traditional stores to malls or high-performing online platforms. Local entrepreneurship has contributed to the formation of a new vision of the store of the future, examples of this can be many, such as the Diana, Annabella, Unicarm store chain, etc.

Caraş-Severin county, both in terms of retail and independent trade, offers great opportunities by expanding the number of stores of already existing merchants, but especially for most of those who are not yet present, but actual niches can be identified and valuable for business development and expansion.

So as to conclude, success in the face of change depends on employee engagement, leadership adaptability and the integration of an organisational culture meant to support innovation.

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