

Article

Interpersonal Communication as a Key Driver of Competitive Advantage in Serbian Companies

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the factors of competitive advantage, and the use of communication as a special factor of competitive advantage in companies in Serbia. Scientific and empirical research show that interpersonal communication is key to successful business, both abroad and in our country. Continuous and rapid changes on the markets and business require from companies to work on improvement of competitive advantage and its factors. This research is based on the assumption that interpersonal communication is one of the main factors of a company's competitiveness. The analysis is based on the data collection through questionnaires, and statistical processing using SPSS software. The adopted methodology is based on statistical description and correlation analysis, while the qualitative research method is adopted. The research results show that the factor of interpersonal communication improves the competitive advantage of the companies.

Keywords: *Competitive advantage; communication; business communication; interpersonal communication; correlation analysis.*

1. Introduction

In the last decade, numerous authors have emphasized that organizations gain competitive advantage by basing their operations on intellectual capital and innovativeness [1–3]. Investment in technology and human capital significantly contributes to the growth and development of the economy, as well as society as a whole [4,5].

The core objective of business strategy is to create and sustain strategic advantage. Therefore, a company's strategy must be oriented toward generating new advantages that increase customer satisfaction and create asymmetry relative to competitors. This approach enables extending or maintaining competitive advantage, while simultaneously reducing or eliminating the advantages of rivals [6–8].

Analyzing an organization's competitive advantage is crucial in shaping corporate strategy [9–11]. Depending on the competitive advantage a company holds or seeks to achieve, its strategy is formed to exploit that advantage efficiently in order to satisfy stakeholder and customer needs.

Effective communication—particularly clear and targeted communication—has long been recognized not only as an advantage, but also as a foundation of successful business operations [12–15]. For every business organization, both internal and external communication play an important role, as they contribute to the successful realization of organizational objectives and represent a fundamental segment in shaping competitive advantage.

This paper is structured as follows. After the Introduction, the literature review examines key concepts related to competition, competitive advantage, and communication. Subsequently, the methodology section presents the research design and data used for statistical analysis, followed by research results and the accompanying discussion. The concluding section provides recommendations for company management and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The fundamental purpose of designing and implementing an organization's strategy is to achieve competitive advantage in the environment in which the organization operates [9]. Being competitive means ensuring continuous growth and development. Competitive advantage is difficult to attain and easy to lose under conditions of aggressive competition. Every change in the external environment provides companies with new opportunities for profit generation. Therefore, responding to changes and opportunities is a key attribute of strategic management and top managers. A contemporary organization must embed change management into its structure.

Within an organization, competitive advantage can be acquired through internal resources, external resources, or both simultaneously. Internal sources of competitive advantage (such as cost reduction, advanced proprietary technology, the learning capacity of organizational members, and others) are mostly related to new approaches to doing business that can create an advantage over competitors [16]. In the modern era, innovation plays a crucial role in creating competitive advantage, and a large share of innovation stems from digitalization and digital transformation. The shift toward the digitalization of communication is part of a broader process of digitalization, which is rapidly becoming a condition for survival in a turbulent and competitive environment [17].

Among the internal factors within a company that influence the creation of competitive advantage, interpersonal communication stands out and represents the main direction of research in this paper. Regarding communication itself, there are three basic forms: written, oral or verbal, and nonverbal communication [18]. Each form of communication is important, and according to some authors, in a business setting nonverbal communication may even be more important than verbal communication [19]. Furthermore, communication can be divided into formal and informal communication [20], as well as into internal (within organizations or companies) and external (with actors outside the organization or company) [21]. Formal communication is a pre-planned process of transmitting information in spoken or written form, aligned with organizational needs, and may be vertical (upward and downward) or horizontal [22].

In this regard, when "upward" communication allows greater autonomy and participation of employees in decision-making, a positive impact on job satisfaction can be expected—an aspect that is highly important both for theoretical and practical human resource management [23].

Business communication is defined in different ways in the literature. For example, Filipović, Kostić, and Prohaska [22] consider business communication to be the intentional exchange of ideas, opinions, and information, which may be carried out through signals, images, symbols, and so forth. It is two-way in nature, in the sense that it entails both transmitting one's own ideas and understanding the ideas of others. Communication is undoubtedly a core component of business, as Glavaš and Lamza-Maronić [26] argue, and it occurs both within and outside the company. According to Paunović and Radonjić [27], successful communication in business does not only contribute to more efficient operations, but also to employee motivation and the improvement of business relationships, which together help increase company profits [22,26,27].

Paunović and Radonjić [27] further emphasize that maintaining an efficient communication process is of utmost relevance in every company. These authors point out that it would be wrong to assume that communication in an organization is reduced solely to the exchange of business information and facts and to the coordination of business activities for the purpose of achieving organizational goals. Interpersonal communication—with a focus on the social relationships that exist among people (organizational members)—constitutes a significant share of overall communication in organizations.

Similarly, Rouse and Rouse [29] stress that organizations are competitive and successful if they achieve effective communication. High-quality communication facilitates an easier understanding of information. For instance, managers and employees will have access to better and more relevant information as a result of effective communication. Consequently, products and/or services improve and/or costs decrease, which enhances performance and contributes to a company's competitive advantage in the market. Furthermore, effective communication, especially verbal communication, supports easier access to the labor market and employment [29].

Competition between companies may also occur at the level of strategic communication [30]. Guo, Yu, and Gimeno examined firms' communication capabilities at market entry by applying computerized content analysis to quantify the ambiguous language used by incumbent firms, using a sample from the U.S. airline industry. They found that, in such situations, managers of incumbent firms often employ vague communication with the aim of hindering the entry of new competitors into the market—particularly when they perceive the new entrant as a business threat.

Given that it has been proven that effective interpersonal communication is a key component of successful business, it is reasonable to assume that ineffective interpersonal communication can jeopardize the efficiency of a company. Based on an extensive literature review and an examination of the role of interpersonal communication in developing organizational efficiency, Singh [31] established that the functionality of this type of communication rests on four basic principles: it is inevitable, irreversible, complex, and contextual [31]. Therefore, interpersonal communication skills are extremely important for employees, as they play a crucial role in a company's business success.

The literature review suggests that communication is an exceptionally important factor for a company's competitiveness. However, despite previous studies, the impact of communication on domestic companies operating under contemporary conditions in Serbia has remained largely unknown to the scientific community. This research addresses that gap in the literature and contributes to the understanding of the effects of communication in a specific national economy (the Republic of Serbia).

3. Materials and Methods

The first phase of the research involved the design and development of a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 89 companies. All participants in this research completed a single unified questionnaire, the results of which were used—due to their scope and structure—for two separate studies. A portion of the data, as an independent study, was previously presented at the XXIX "Trendovi razvoja" conference under the title "*The Role of Communication in Improving the Quality of Education and Creating a Competitive Advantage for Companies in the Domestic Market*," with a specific focus on the dual education model. The second, more extensive part of the research presented in this article represents a separate study and examines the factors of competitive advantage in Serbian companies, with special emphasis on interpersonal communication in business settings. In the email correspondence with participating companies, the anonymity of the survey was ensured, as well as the exclusive use of collected data for research purposes.

The questions included in the questionnaire referred to: general company information, evaluation of business performance and level of competitiveness, assessment of employee training and development, and assessment of interpersonal communication within company operations. The structure of the questionnaire was partially adapted from the study by Milena Cvjetković (2016), while the section related to interpersonal communication was developed by the authors.

The second phase consisted of systematizing the collected responses from the questionnaire in order to form a database. Once the database was structured, statistical processing and data analysis were conducted.

The third phase involved detailed statistical analysis of the collected data. Based on the database, the SPSS software package was used for statistical processing and hypothesis testing.

The main research hypothesis states:

Interpersonal communication is a significant factor for improving a company's competitive advantage.

The applied statistical methods included descriptive statistics and correlation analysis (Pearson’s correlation coefficient). Statistical significance is represented by the p-value, indicating the probability that the results were obtained by chance.

The results of the analysis are presented in the following section.

4. Results

The sample in this study consists of companies that sell products and services and operate in the Republic of Serbia. The response rate was 56.18%. Of the surveyed companies, 14% are micro enterprises, 42% small enterprises, 32% medium-sized enterprises, and 12% large enterprises.

Table 1. Sample structure.

Category	Variable	N	Share	Cumulative share
Headquarters	Belgrade	23	46	46
	Central Serbia	16	32	78
	Vojvodina	11	22	100
Ownership structure	State-owned	1	2	2
	Private	49	98	100
Company size	Micro	7	14	42
	Small	21	42	56
	Medium	16	32	88
	Large	6	12	100
Industry sector	Real estate, leasing, and business services	10	20	20
	Financial intermediation	7	14	34
	Construction	4	8	42
	Hotels and restaurants	4	8	50
	Education	4	8	58
	Agriculture, hunting, forestry, and water management	4	8	66
	Manufacturing	5	10	76
	Wholesale and retail trade	4	8	84
	Health and social work	8	16	100
Respondent gender	Male	32	64	64
	Female	18	36	100

The total number of respondents (company representatives) was N = 50, of which 46% were based in Belgrade, 32% in Central Serbia, and 22% in Vojvodina. Regarding ownership structure, only one state-owned company participated, and the remaining respondents represented private companies. The largest share of participants operates in real estate, leasing, and business services (20%), followed by companies in health and social work (16%) and financial intermediation (14%). The lowest participation was recorded in construction, hospitality, education, agriculture/forestry/water management, and trade sectors (each 8%). Male respondents prevailed in the sample (64%), compared to female respondents (36%).

Table 2 presents the outcomes related to the level of business performance and company competitiveness.

Table 2. Level of business performance and competitiveness.

Variable	Category	N	Share	Cumulative share
Technological level of the company	Low	3	6	6
	Average	8	16	22
	Satisfactory	27	54	76
	High	12	24	100
Competitive Capability Level	Low	1	2	2
	Average	10	20	22
	Satisfactory	30	60	82
	High	9	18	100
Importance of business improvement	Low	0	0	0
	Average	4	8	8
	Satisfactory	16	32	40
	High	30	60	100

The results show that the respondents most frequently assessed the technological level of their company as satisfactory (N = 27; 54%), and least frequently as low (N = 3; 6%). More than half of the respondents rated their company’s competitive capability as satisfactory (60%), while only one company evaluated this capability as low. The importance of improving business operations was evaluated as high by 60% of respondents (N = 30), satisfactory by 32% (N = 16), and average by 8% of companies.

Table 3. Determinants of business improvement, competitiveness development, and barriers to competitive capability.

Category	Determinant	N	Share	Cumulative share
Business Improvement Factors	Implementation of Integrated Management Systems	4	3.9	6.9
	Benchmarking Implementation	13	12.7	19.6
	Quality Management System Implementation	10	9.8	29.4
	Application of Statistical Tools and Quality Improvement Techniques	9	8.8	38.2
	Development and Implementation of Information Technologies	14	13.7	52.0
	Intensified Investment in Marketing	16	15.7	18.6
Drivers of Competitive Capability Development	Acquisition of New Equipment and Advanced Technologies	5	4.9	36.3
	Application of Contemporary Management Methods and Techniques	14	13.7	76.5
	Formation of National and Cross-Border Regional Clusters	4	3.9	100
	Obsolete Equipment and Technology	7	6.9	30.4
Barriers to Competitive Capability	Inadequate Implementation of Managerial Standards in Domestic Companies	6	5.9	46.1
	Business Environment Not Conducive to Entrepreneurship and Foreign Investment	2	2.0	92.2
	Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Domestic Companies	8	7.8	100

Table 3 presents the outcomes of respondents’ answers related to the key factors of business improvement, the elements that support the development of competitive capability, as well as the elements that represent barriers to enhancing a company’s competitiveness.

The findings indicate that the most dominant business improvement factor cited by respondents is increasing operational productivity (20.6%) [33] (p. 62), followed by benchmarking implementation (12.7%). Meanwhile, integrated management systems constitute the least prioritized improvement factor (3.9%).

Regarding drivers of competitive capability development, the leading determinant is the standardization of business quality based on international standards (19.6%) [33] (p. 62), followed by investments in marketing (15.7%) and contemporary management approaches (13.7%).

The most prevalent barrier to improving competitiveness reported by companies is resource constraints (18.6%) [33] (p. 62). In addition, obsolete technology is identified as a meaningful obstacle (6.9%) to strengthening competitive capability.

Table 4 presents the results related to employee training and development from the perspective of company competitiveness.

Table 4. Employee training and development from a competitiveness perspective.

Construct / Indicator	Category	N	Share	Cumulative share
Organizational model perception	Knowledge-Based Organization	11	14.1	50.0
	Resource-Based Organization	27	34.6	84.6
	Learning Organization	4	5.1	89.7
	Traditional Organization	8	10.3	100
Perceived importance of employee training and development	High	19	24.4	60.3
	Satisfactory	28	35.9	96.2
	Average	3	3.8	100
Employee training in the past year	Yes	35	44.9	87.2
	No	10	12.8	100
Training areas (if yes)	Benchmarking	8	10.3	23.1
	Quality Management	12	15.4	38.5
	Marketing	12	15.4	53.8
	Business	9	11.5	65.4
	Communication	9	11.5	76.9
	Business Development	4	5.1	82.1
	Business Process Reengineering	10	12.8	94.9
Employee awareness of teamwork for quality improvement	Human Resource Management	4	5.1	100
	Technical Systems Management	45	57.7	93.6
Training program aligned with quality requirements	Yes	5	6.4	100
	No	47	60.3	96.2
		3	3.8	100

Company representatives recognize knowledge productivity as an important driver of business improvement. However, most companies position themselves as Resource-Based Organizations (34.6%), while only 5.1% perceive themselves as Learning Organizations, indicating insufficient investment in employee development as a strategic priority in Serbia.

When assessing the importance of employee training and development, the dominant view is “satisfactory” (35.9%), followed by a “high” level of importance (24.4%), which represents a positive result.

A considerable number of employees participated in training activities in the previous year (44.9%), most frequently in Quality Management and Marketing (each 15.4%), and least frequently in Business Process Reengineering and Technical Systems Management (each 5.1%). Training in Business Communication, key to interpersonal and organizational effectiveness, was completed in 11.5% of companies.

Employee awareness of teamwork in achieving quality improvement was confirmed in 57.7% of companies, and 60.3% confirmed the existence of formally structured quality-related training programs, indicating a generally positive orientation toward strengthening competencies that support competitive capability.

Table 5 presents the evaluation results of the characteristics of the company’s approach toward employees, related to the improvement of business quality.

Table 5. The company’s approach to employees from the perspective of quality improvement.

Indicator	Rating (1-5)	N	Share	Cumulative share
Employees believe quality is their personal responsibility	1	3	6	6
	2	15	30	36
	3	15	30	66
	4	10	20	86
	5	7	14	100
Employees actively implement continuous improvements	2	4	8	8
	3	6	12	20
	4	25	50	70
	5	15	30	100
	2	6	12	12
Employees are included in strategic planning and goal-setting	3	24	48	60
	4	18	36	96
	5	2	4	100
	3	1	2	2
Job tasks are aligned with the company’s quality program	4	36	72	74
	5	13	26	100
	3	8	16	16
Employees are encouraged to participate in quality-improvement teams	4	28	56	72
	5	12	28	100
	3	6	12	12
Training system aligned with strategic development goals	4	17	34	46
	5	27	54	100
	3	6	12	12

Note. Indicators measured on a 5-point Likert scale; (1 = very low; 5 = exceptionally high significance).

Only 14% of respondents rated as “exceptionally high” the belief that quality is a personal responsibility of every employee, while 30% affirmed that employees actively implement continuous improvements at a high level. Merely 4% of respondents considered employee involvement in strategic planning and goal-setting as exceptionally significant for enhancing business quality.

On a positive note, none of the respondents indicated that job tasks are not aligned with the company’s quality program, and 72% rated this alignment as high, demonstrating substantial coherence between job design and quality goals.

More than half of companies (54%) rated as highly significant the alignment of training systems with the organization’s developmental objectives, indicating that many organizations recognize structured learning as a mechanism for strengthening competitive advantage.

Finally, Table 6 presents the results related to interpersonal communication as a distinct factor of a company’s competitive advantage.

Table 6. Interpersonal communication as a driver of competitive advantage.

Indicator	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance
Employees pay attention to nonverbal communication	50	3	5	3.84	0.738	0.545
Employees generate new ideas for improving verbal communication	50	2	5	3.46	0.676	0.458
Employees show interest in personal development through communication skills	50	3	5	3.94	0.652	0.425
Employees encourage each other to improve communication	50	3	5	3.68	0.794	0.63
Employees reflect on communication knowledge and skills	50	2	5	3.44	0.76	0.578
Employees show interest in additional communication training	50	2	5	3.76	0.822	0.676
Employees take initiative for additional communication training	50	2	5	3.38	0.901	0.812
Employees request that the company organize additional training	50	2	5	3.78	0.815	0.665
Company organizes communication-related employee development trainings	50	2	5	3.06	0.682	0.466
Company organizes trainings to support employees’ professional growth	50	2	5	3.94	0.682	0.466
Employees hold certificates in communication skills	50	1	5	3.44	1.128	1.272
Communication supports achievement of organizational quality objectives	50	3	5	4.3	0.678	0.459
Communication supports effective interpersonal relations	50	4	5	4.7	0.463	0.214
Communication enhances company productivity	50	3	5	3.76	0.716	0.513
Communication quality is valued more than communication quantity	50	1	5	3.22	0.996	0.991
A communication code is present within the company	50	1	5	3.2	1.195	1.429
Communication is viewed as the most important factor in employee productivity	50	2	5	3.26	0.723	0.523

Results indicate that while employees are mindful of both verbal and nonverbal communication, there is still considerable room for improvement in these areas. Interest in personal development

through communication skills scored positively (Mean = 3.94), demonstrating employees' awareness of communication as a professional competence.

The highest-rated indicators are:

- Communication supports effective interpersonal relations
(Mean = 4.70; SD = 0.46)
- Communication supports achievement of organizational quality objectives
(Mean = 4.30; SD = 0.68),

indicating broad recognition of communication as a strategic performance driver.

Companies show greater focus on professional growth in general (Mean = 3.94) than on communication-specific education (Mean = 3.06), signaling a need for stronger investment in communication skills as a component of competitive advantage.

The presence of a communication code has a relatively low score (Mean = 3.20), highlighting that formal frameworks regulating communication practices remain underdeveloped.

Overall, employers and employees acknowledge that communication contributes to productivity, although it is not yet fully leveraged as a structured competitive mechanism.

To test the research hypothesis, a correlation analysis was applied to determine the relationships between variables (Table 7). Specifically, the analysis examined the relationship between employee training for quality enhancement (results presented in Table 5) and interpersonal communication (results presented in Table 6).

On the one hand, the variables referring to employee training and development related to quality enhancement included:

- EPRQ (Employee Personal Responsibility for Quality) – Employees believe quality is personal responsibility,
- EACI (Employee Active Continuous Improvement) – Employees actively implement continuous improvements,
- EISP (Employee Involvement in Strategic Planning) – Employees included in strategic planning,
- JTQP (Job Tasks aligned with Quality Program) – Job tasks aligned with quality program,
- EPQT (Employee Participation in Quality Teams) – Employees encouraged to participate in quality-improvement teams,
- TADO (Training Aligned with Development Objectives)- Training aligned with development objectives.

On the other hand, the variables referring to interpersonal communication included:

- P2 – Employees pay attention to nonverbal communication,
- P3 – Employees generate new ideas for improving verbal communication,
- P5 – Employees show interest in personal development through communication skills,
- P8 – Employees encourage one another to improve communication,
- P9 – Employees reflect on communication knowledge and skills,
- P10 – Employees show interest in additional communication training,
- P11 – Employees take initiative regarding additional communication training,
- P12 – Employees request that the company organize additional training,
- PR1 – The company organizes communication-related employee development trainings,
- PR3 – The company organizes employee development trainings that support professional growth,
- P13 – Employees hold certificates or acknowledgments in communication skills,
- K1 – Communication supports the achievement of organizational quality objectives,
- K2 – Communication supports effective interpersonal relations,
- K3 – Communication enhances company productivity,
- K7 – Communication quality is valued more than communication quantity,
- K8 – A communication code is present within the company,

- K9 – Communication is viewed as the most important factor in employee productivity.

Based on the relationships between these variables, the analysis determines their mutual influence and their impact on the development and enhancement of a company’s competitive advantage.

Table 7. Correlation analysis.

	EPRQ	EACI	EISP	JTQP	EPQT	TADO
P2	.420**	0.132	0.245	-0.121	.376**	0.093
P3	0.121	.297*	0.230	-0.096	0.148	-0.028
P5	.359*	0.254	.336*	0.047	0.112	0.012
P8	0.267	.365**	0.108	0.045	.348*	.319*
P9	.459**	.481**	-0.038	-0.072	.341*	.373**
P10	0.275	0.235	0.263	0.254	.318*	0.072
P11	0.115	.381**	0.242	-0.264	0.162	-0.128
P12	-0.181	-0.051	-0.185	-0.124	-0.140	0.129
PR1	.437**	.342*	0.082	-0.108	.437**	0.074
PR3	.499**	0.105	0.079	0.171	.334*	0.011
P13	.530**	.428**	0.170	0.141	.449**	0.251
K1	0.107	-0.045	0.049	-.354*	.466**	-0.227
K2	-0.080	-0.137	0.107	-0.130	0.187	0.082
K3	.464**	0.205	0.186	-0.067	.408**	-0.039
K7	0.273	.419**	-0.153	-.458**	0.239	0.040
K8	0.199	0.094	0.203	0.129	0.202	.481**
K9	.324*	0.089	0.261	-0.185	.361**	-0.099

** statistically significant at 0.01 level * statistically significant at 0.05 level

A statistically significant relationship with a positive correlation coefficient was found between the following variables:

- EPRQ and P2, P5, P9, PR1, PR3, P13, K3, K9,
- EACI and P3, P8, P9, P11, PR1, P13, K7,
- EISP and P5,
- EPQT and P2, P8, P9, P10, PR1, PR3, P13, K1, K3, K9,
- TADO and P8, P9, K8.

A significant negative correlation was identified between:

- JTQP and K1, K7.

Although the mutual influence of employee training and development and communication on improving company competitiveness has been confirmed, certain elements of training and communication were found to be statistically non-significant, while others demonstrated either greater or lesser degrees of statistical significance.

For example, EPRQ (employees’ belief that quality is their personal responsibility) is positively associated with PR3 (company-organized trainings supporting professional growth) at 49.9% ($r < .01$).

Similarly:

- EACI (employees actively implementing continuous improvements) is most strongly associated with P9 (reflection on communication knowledge and skills), at 48.1% ($r < .01$),
- EPQT (employee participation in quality-improvement teams) shows its strongest correlation with K1 (communication supports achievement of quality objectives), at 46.6% ($r < .01$),

- TADO (training aligned with development objectives) is significantly associated with K8 (presence of a communication code), at 48.1% ($r < .01$), indicating that the company formally supports communication quality as a source of competitive advantage.

Regarding statistically significant negative correlations, the strongest negative association is observed between JTQP (job tasks aligned with the quality program) and K7 (communication quality valued more than communication quantity), at -45.8% ($r < .01$).

This result suggests that companies must prioritize quality over quantity of communication in order to ensure that job tasks are properly aligned with quality programs—and vice versa—further reinforcing the central importance of communication.

In summary, the correlation analysis confirms that the relationship between employee training and interpersonal communication is generally significant for companies, thereby supporting the hypothesis of this research.

5. Discussion

The obtained research results support the theoretical foundations presented in the literature review concerning the role of communication in interpersonal relations and the creation of competitive advantage in the Serbian market. Additionally, certain elements of business communication demonstrate stronger significance than others. For instance, the positive relationship between EPRQ (employees' belief that quality is their personal responsibility) and PR3 (company-organized employee development trainings that support professional growth) (Table 7) confirms that companies provide training to employees at an average level (Table 2). The potential benefit lies in further strengthening employees' personal responsibility for business quality to enhance the competitive advantage of companies.

It was found that business quality is imperative for improving company competitiveness (Tables 5 and 7), which is consistent with Đurakić (2011). Companies that show interest in the professional and personal development of their employees – by organizing additional communication training and employee growth programs – cultivate a stronger sense of personal responsibility for quality, support EACI (active implementation of continuous improvements), and enhance teamwork collaboration (Table 7). These findings align with the claims of Brkić et al. (2017), who emphasize that employee development is crucial when a company aims to strengthen its competitive advantage.

This is additionally supported by the finding that employees will be more accountable for business quality when they are formally certified in communication skills (Table 7). This reinforces the argument that effective communication is a highly significant determinant of competitive advantage [21] (pp. 361–369) and that high-quality education and communication skills add value to human capital [36].

Furthermore, the results show that encouragement for teamwork and professional growth training influences TADO (training aligned with the company's development objectives), and vice versa. This outcome is similar to the conclusions of Ilić, Cvjetković, and Cvjetković (2014), who found that companies focusing on the intellectual capital of employees are more successful in acquiring competitive advantage compared to those that do not. Beyond individual company benefits, this also contributes to the growth and development of the overall economy and society [5]. In addition, enhancing communication between employees and external stakeholders is of crucial importance, given that consumers are becoming increasingly educated and informed due to rapid technological advancement [37].

Therefore, it can be concluded that employees are aware of the importance of improving communication in interpersonal relations, as effective communication enhances both interpersonal collaboration and the clarity of products, services, and business processes. On the other hand, there remains considerable room for improving verbal, and especially nonverbal communication (Table 6), which is partially consistent with Paunović and Radonjić [22]. The importance of interpersonal communication can be considered particularly relevant in sectors in which companies predominantly

operate (e.g., real estate, education, healthcare, financial intermediation – Table 1), as these business activities require direct and frequent interactions with clients.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to determine whether, in addition to certain commonly recognized factors, interpersonal communication is also a significant factor of business competitiveness in Serbia. The results demonstrated that communication indeed represents a meaningful determinant in enhancing the competitive advantage of companies in our country.

Based on this, it can be concluded that it is highly important for companies to invest in communication within interpersonal relations. Investing in communication not only contributes to a company's competitive advantage, but also improves existing behavioral patterns in the business environment.

This research showed that effective interpersonal communication generally leads to the improvement of competitive advantage. The results may be useful for companies that intend to strengthen their competitive position, as they provide insights into the relevance of communication as an integral element of human capital.

Finally, this research can also benefit scholars and academics, as it highlights the need for shifts in scientific research and perspectives on this topic – particularly the need to acknowledge and classify interpersonal communication as an important scientific category, especially within microeconomic frameworks.

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