



National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

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DOCTORAL THESIS

Management of Programs and Projects as a Lever for Implementing Change in SMEs in Romania

Summary

Scientific Supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Adriana GRIGORESCU

Author:

Andreea MOCANU (NICOLAE)

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In today's dynamic global economy, the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Romania is undeniable. These entities are not only essential drivers of economic growth and innovation but also play a critical role in adapting to the latest industry trends and practices.

A major focus has been placed on the effective implementation of project and program management strategies within these SMEs. Research indicates that Romanian SMEs often struggle with strategic planning and forecasting. Effective project management can act as a crucial lever to help these businesses identify, evaluate, and capitalize on emerging global trends. By adopting robust project management methodologies, SMEs can better anticipate and respond to market changes, technological advances, and evolving customer requirements.

This doctoral thesis aims to explore how program and project management can serve as an effective tool for implementing global trends in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Romania. By analyzing the fundamental concepts of change management, the specific context of Romanian SMEs, and essential global trends, the research aims to provide practical solutions for improving the resilience, sustainability, and competitiveness of Romanian SMEs.

The main objective of the thesis is to investigate the role of program and project management in facilitating the adoption of global trends by Romanian SMEs, thereby contributing to their operational efficiency, competitiveness, and sustainability. This main objective has been developed with the help of the following specific objectives:

1. Understanding the fundamental concepts of change management, program management, and project management.

Exploring the principles of change management and their relevance to SMEs involves analyzing the differences between programs and projects and their implications for organizational success. It also requires examining the principles and framework of change management, as well as defining and differentiating between program management and project management. Additionally, the interaction between these management approaches in the context of organizational change and innovation is explored.

2. Analyzing the current state of SMEs in Romania.

Defining SMEs in the Romanian context involves analyzing the challenges and opportunities faced by small and medium-sized enterprises in Romania. It is important to identify the main financing needs of these businesses. This involves defining SMEs based on various criteria and contextual factors, conducting a detailed analysis of the structural and economic characteristics of Romanian SMEs, as well as identifying and evaluating the main financing needs and challenges they face.

3. Identifying and analyzing global trends with significant impact on SMEs.

This research investigates the circular economy model and its applicability to Romanian SMEs, explores cohesion and business ethics as factors of sustainable growth, and evaluates the impact of sustainable development practices on the resilience of SMEs. It examines the principles and practices of the circular economy and their relevance to SMEs, as well as the importance of cohesion and business ethics in the global context.

Additionally, the objectives and initiatives of sustainable development and their implications for SMEs are explored. Finally, the analysis focuses on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs and the necessary adaptations for recovery and resilience.

4. Evaluating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evaluating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic involves understanding how this crisis has influenced SMEs in Romania and identifying the adaptive strategies used by them during the crisis.

5. Evaluating the effectiveness of various support programs and projects for Romanian SMEs.

This involves examining Romania's strategy for sustainable development and aligning it with global trends, investigating the use of structural funds and EEA and Norwegian funds by SMEs, and exploring national programs and projects aimed at enhancing their competitiveness. It also evaluates the role and impact of structural funds on SME development, examines the contributions of EEA and Norwegian funds to SME growth and innovation, and analyzes national programs and projects aimed at supporting SMEs, identifying successful case studies and best practices.

6. Developing a framework for leveraging program and project management in implementing global trends in Romanian SMEs.

This aims to synthesize conclusions from the analysis of fundamental concepts, the context of SMEs, global trends, and support programs, proposing practical solutions for improving the resilience, sustainability, and competitiveness of Romanian SMEs through the application of structured management approaches.

In *Chapter I: Fundamental Concepts*, it is demonstrated that change is a necessity for the survival and development of organizations. Effective change management is crucial as it involves managing people, who are the most important assets of an organization. Leaders play a vital role in the change process because people often resist change due to fear of failure.¹

¹ Dadallage, J. (2015, July 21). Experiencing Organisational and Personal Change Management for Continuous Organisational Effectiveness. , 5(0), 27-27. <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljda.v5i0.7125>

In the first subchapter, titled *I.1. Change Management* is a people-centered approach, it is emphasized that this requires a deep understanding of the human dimensions of change, including the psychological factors influencing employee reactions, communication strategies needed to address resistance, and implementation methods that encourage engagement and commitment. Effective change management relies on careful planning, sensitive implementation, and, above all, consulting and involving the people affected by changes.

In subchapter *I.2. Programs and Program Management*, it is discussed that programs (which are collections of related projects) also require effective change management. Program management involves coordinating and directing multiple interconnected projects to achieve strategic objectives. Change management is essential in this context because programs often involve significant organizational restructurings, process modifications, and the integration of new technologies or systems.

Similarly, *I.3. Projects and Project Management* reveals that projects require a proactive approach to change management. Projects, which are temporary efforts to create a unique product, service, or result, are inherently subject to change. Effective change management in the context of projects involves identifying and analyzing change factors, establishing change management standards, and developing customized processes to address changes as they arise.

At the end of the chapter, it is evident that the fundamental concepts of change management, programs, and projects are closely linked. An integrated approach to these disciplines can lead to more efficient organizational transformation and the successful delivery of business objectives.²

Chapter II: The Context of SMEs in Romania describes the vital role that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play in Romania's economic landscape, significantly contributing to employment, innovation, and overall economic growth. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the context of SMEs in Romania, focusing on three key aspects: defining SMEs, analyzing their current state, and exploring their financing needs.

In an attempt to understand the importance of the subject, I began with *subchapter II.1. Defining SMEs*. The European Union has established a set of criteria to classify enterprises as small and medium-sized. These criteria are based on the number of employees, annual turnover,

² Cho, J Y., Lee, D Y., Lee, Y., & Lee, M. (2015, January 1). Effective Change Management Process for Mega Program Projects. Taylor & Francis, 14(1), 81-88. <https://doi.org/10.3130/jaabe.14.81>

and total annual balance sheet. In Romania, the SME sector represents a significant part of the overall business environment, accounting for 97.64% of active enterprises in 2013-2014.³

For the second subchapter *II.2. Analysis of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Romania*, I analyzed existing research indicating that Romanian SMEs face several challenges that hinder their competitiveness and growth. According to a study by Iancu Guda, president of the Romanian Association of Bankers and Financial Analysts, while Romanian SMEs generate 14% of the total national income, they represent 96% of all Romanian companies. This suggests a significant discrepancy between the contribution of SMEs and their representation in the overall business landscape.⁴

Despite these challenges, Romanian SMEs play a crucial role in the economy, significantly contributing to employment and added value. The SME sector is considered the backbone of the European economic system, driving economic growth and technological progress through innovation, research, and development.

In subchapter *II.3. The Main Financing Needs of SMEs*, it was demonstrated that access to financing is a critical factor for the success and growth of Romanian SMEs.⁵ Although there are various financing options, some analysts believe that the development of SMEs is hindered by an insufficient supply of capital. To address this situation, public authorities have intervened to increase the supply of funds and support SMEs in accessing the necessary financing.⁶

Chapter III: Global Trends with Impact begins with subchapter *III.1. The Circular Economy*. The traditional model has long been recognized as unsustainable, giving rise to the concept of a circular economy, which creates new job opportunities as activities such as repair, refurbishment, and remanufacturing require more labor-intensive processes. Additionally, the circular economy can boost economic resilience and energy independence by reducing reliance on finite natural resources.⁷

Subchapter *III.2. Cohesion and Business Ethics* demonstrates that in an increasingly interconnected world, the role of ethics and cohesion in business has become crucial.

³ Popa, I., Sebastian, C., Dobrin, C., & Eduard, C. (2009, January 1). Romanian SME' Strategies, Policies and Competitive Advantages. <https://doi.org/10.1109/iacsit-sc.2009.137>

⁴ Stelea, N., & Gavrilă, C. (2021, January 1). Development of Brasov SMEs through public financing of innovative products or services. *EDP Sciences*, 343, 05006-05006. <https://doi.org/10.1051/mateconf/202134305006>

⁵ Mihai, L. (2019, July 22). An exploratory Study Regarding the Romanian SMEs' Leader's Profile. , 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.5171/2019.831063>

⁶ Lacatus., & Văidean, V L. (2015, December 1). Opportunities and Constraints in Financing SMEs. , III(Issue 2), 66-72. <https://doi.org/10.35808/ijeba/72>

⁷ Romani, A., Rognoli, V., & Levi, M. (2021, June 29). Design, Materials, and Extrusion-Based Additive Manufacturing in Circular Economy Contexts: From Waste to New Products. *Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute*, 13(13), 7269-7269. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13137269>

Globalization has brought new challenges, requiring organizations to carefully navigate the complex maze of social, environmental, and regulatory responsibilities. Researchers have emphasized the importance of cultivating a corporate culture that prioritizes ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable practices. Aligning business objectives with ethical considerations can contribute not only to the well-being of society as a whole but also to the long-term viability and resilience of organizations.⁸

The third subchapter refers to *III.3. Sustainable Development*. The pursuit of sustainable development has become a central imperative for global progress, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Businesses are increasingly expected to play a key role in advancing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which address urgent issues such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a profoundly disruptive factor with long-term implications across various domains. Thus, in subchapter *III.4. The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, the discussion revolves around how businesses have had to navigate unprecedented challenges, from supply chain disruptions and changes in consumer behavior to workforce management and financial uncertainties.

At the same time, the pandemic has further accelerated the need for sustainable and resilient business models, as the fragility of traditional systems has been exposed. The importance of increased agility, adaptability, and a focus on stakeholder well-being has become increasingly evident, highlighting the importance of incorporating sustainable practices into the fabric of organizational operations.⁹

Chapter IV. Programs and Projects for Supporting SMEs describes Romania's commitment to supporting the growth and development of its small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through various strategic initiatives and financing mechanisms. This research document will explore the key programs and projects aimed at supporting Romanian SMEs, including the country's sustainable development strategy, access to structural funds, as well as specific national programs and initiatives.

Subchapter *IV.1. Romania's Strategy for Sustainable Development* discusses Romania's comprehensive strategy for sustainable development, highlighting the crucial role of small and

⁸ Maila, M W., & Pitsoe, V J. (2012, October 1). Globalization, Sustainability and Ethics: What are the Critical Links for Present and Future Generations?. *Kamla Raj Enterprises*, 40(1), 43-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09709274.2012.11906522>

⁹ Lim, W Q., Nadarajah, D., & Wahab, S A. (2021, March 1). Sustainable Manufacturing Practices and Sustainability Performance: A Conceptual Framework for Manufacturing SMEs. , 12(1), 108-108. <https://doi.org/10.5296/bms.v12i1.18253>

medium-sized enterprises in driving economic growth, promoting innovation, and contributing to the country's social welfare and environmental sustainability. Recognizing the need to empower SMEs as drivers of sustainable progress, the strategy provides a multifaceted framework that encourages SMEs to adopt environmentally friendly practices, invest in technological advancements that enhance their operational efficiency and competitiveness, and actively participate in Romania's transition to a more circular economy.¹⁰

In subchapter *IV.2. Structural Funds*, the document presents how Romania's membership in the European Union has opened significant opportunities for SMEs to access various structural funds and financing mechanisms. These funds, designed to promote economic and social cohesion within the EU, have been instrumental in supporting the growth and development of Romanian SMEs.

The utilization of structural funds has enabled Romanian SMEs to invest in innovative products and services, modernize their operations, and improve their competitiveness. Moreover, these funds have facilitated the creation of collaborative networks, promoted knowledge exchange, and provided access to specialized training and consultancy services, thereby contributing to the overall strengthening of the SME landscape in Romania.¹¹

In addition to the European Union's structural funds, subchapter *IV.3. EEA and Norwegian Funds* explains how Romania has also benefited from the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms, which have further extended the support available to Romanian SMEs. These funds have helped address specific challenges faced by Romanian SMEs, such as access to finance, internationalization, and the adoption of sustainable practices.¹²

Subchapter *IV.4. National Programs and Projects* discusses how Romania has complemented EU-level support. The Romanian government has implemented a series of national programs and projects specifically designed to strengthen the country's SME sector. These initiatives cover a wide range of areas, from providing specialized information and assistance to supporting the dissemination of a new quality culture within the SME community.¹³

¹⁰ Rădulescu, I., & Rădulescu, A V. (2021, March 24). Case study concerning successful Romanian SMEs development by students education and entrepreneurial training. , 3(1), 18-24. <https://doi.org/10.33727/jriss.2021.1.3:18-24>

¹¹ Mioara, D., Popescu, C., Lucía, A., & Dumitru, D. (2012, August 17). Strategic Dimensions of the SME System in Romania in the Context of the European Strategic Framework. <https://doi.org/10.5772/45801>

¹² Granturile SEE și Norvegiene 2014-2021. Recuperat de la <https://www.eeagrants.ro/>

¹³ Stelea, N., & Gavrilă, C. (2021, January 1). Development of Brasov SMEs through public financing of innovative products or services. *EDP Sciences*, 343, 05006-05006. <https://doi.org/10.1051/mateconf/202134305006>

Chapter V. Evaluating the Perception of Project Impact in SMEs describes the methodology of the work. The aim was to identify how the understanding of a subject has evolved over time to recognize emerging directions and growing research subdomains. Regarding the analysis of SMEs, it involved combining quantitative data from multiple studies to obtain an accurate aggregated estimate, along with providing evidence-based recommendations for formulating or modifying public policies and identifying the most effective evidence-based practices. All these goals highlight the versatility and importance of literature review in the research process.

The analysis starts with *V.1. Bibliometric analysis of the phrase "Project Management in SMEs"*. The network map of frequently used and correlated terms in scientific articles, created with VOSviewer on the topic "project management for SMEs," provides a comprehensive view of key terms and their interconnections in the field of project management for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This analysis helps identify crucial themes such as "implementation" and "performance," which are central terms with many connections, indicating their critical importance in the context of project management for SMEs.

To achieve the objectives of this research, an approach that includes both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was proposed. The study began with a thorough literature review to gain a deeper understanding of existing research on Romanian SMEs, project management practices, and the integration of global trends into internal business operations.

Subchapter V.2. Qualitative research on the implementation of projects in SMEs presents the focus groups with project management consultants that were used as a secondary step to the literature review, for a more concrete understanding of the "field reality". Preparing and conducting a well-designed focus group session is a crucial aspect of qualitative research, providing valuable insights into the perspectives, experiences, and behaviors of a target audience.

The conclusions from the focus group session were interpreted in the broader context of the research objectives and integrated with other data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the investigated subject. Throughout the process, the researcher had to maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of participants and adhering to the principles of informed consent and research integrity.

Conducting this research highlights the feasibility of conducting effective remote focus groups via Zoom, while also emphasizing the importance of considering the methodological, practical, and ethical implications of this approach.

In subchapter *V.3. Quantitative research on the experiences and needs of SMEs*, the way in which the literature review, along with the conclusions of the focus groups, served as a basis for the development of the questionnaire and the identification of the main areas of investigation is described. The next step was to associate each research question with a corresponding hypothesis, considering operationalization, specifically defining how each variable related to the hypotheses would be measured or observed.

The process continued by formulating questions that align with the research objectives and hypotheses; this includes both closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions to obtain a comprehensive view. These questions should address the key aspects of the study and guide the investigation.

Although only 172 responses were obtained, the study provided valuable insights into the current state of the Romanian SME landscape and their readiness to adapt to the continuously evolving business environment.

The results highlight the importance of adapting financing strategies to the specifics of the industry and region, investing in employee training, and implementing innovative and sustainable measures.

The study found that SMEs often face limited resources, both financial and human, which can hinder investment and the effective implementation of project management practices. Additionally, the uncertainty and dynamic nature of the SME environment can make it difficult to adhere to rigid project management frameworks, necessitating a more agile and adaptable approach. Focus group discussions also revealed that SMEs often lack access to project management expertise and face difficulties in finding the right tools and technologies to support their needs.

These conclusions provide valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners who wish to better understand the unique challenges and requirements of project management within SMEs. By addressing these gaps, SMEs can benefit from project management principles and Techniques to improve their productivity, competitiveness, and long-term success. Therefore, the research findings were presented in a structured and well-organized manner, with clear and concise writing to facilitate understanding in both academic and business environments.

The study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge about Romanian SMEs and provide valuable information for policymakers, business support organizations, and the enterprises themselves, enabling them to make informed decisions and develop tailored strategies to support the growth and development of the SME sector in Romania.

The research includes qualitative perspectives from 13 project management professionals and quantitative data from 172 questionnaire responses, revealing that difficulties in accessing financing represent a significant barrier to project implementation. This mixed-methods approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

The findings underscore the need for improved project management practices, better access to financing, and enhanced training and experience in project management within SMEs. Therefore, in *Chapter VI. Concrete Proposals for Improving Financing Programs for SMEs*, the recommendations address these needs and provide a structured approach for SMEs to adopt global trends, enhancing their sustainability and competitiveness.

VI.1. The 10-step model for operationalizing SME functionalities, represented in Figure 19, outlines the 10 steps that an SME wishing to operationalize its functionalities should follow. This model can be adapted according to the specifics of each enterprise and its particular needs.

It is recommended that this process be repeated periodically and as needed to ensure not only the operationalization of functionalities but also their continuous improvement to support the SME in implementing ever-changing global trends.

By repeating the 10-step model, SMEs can identify areas for incremental improvements in processes, products, and services. This approach promotes a culture of continuous improvement, essential for long-term success. Regular iterations of the model encourage innovation by keeping R&D functions and other operations aligned with the latest technological advancements and market needs.

VI.2. The strategy for accessing financing and implementing projects is necessary for SMEs to effectively address and adapt to several key areas in today's business environment. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global economies, and SMEs, in particular, were severely affected. Accessing financing is crucial for these businesses to rebuild, recover losses, and stabilize operations.

1. **Identifying Opportunities:** SMEs are at the center of this strategy, focusing on leveraging key opportunities that are crucial in today's global and local business environment.

2. **Assistance Program:** The first step after identifying opportunities is participating in an assistance program aimed at preparing the SME to efficiently plan and execute a project that aligns with one or more of the identified opportunities.

3. **Project Implementation:** Once the SME is equipped with the necessary knowledge and resources from the assistance program, it moves to the implementation phase.

4. **Support Measures:** During project execution, SMEs may require additional support to ensure the project stays on track and any emerging challenges are managed effectively.

5. Follow-Up Measures: Follow-up can include additional support or corrective actions to address any issues that arose during implementation.

6. Restarting the Process - Cyclical Nature and Continuous Improvement: This iterative approach ensures continuous improvement and adaptation to changing conditions, allowing the SME to progressively capitalize on all opportunities over time.

The need for such a process arises from the complexity of modern business environments, especially for SMEs with limited resources. The business environment, particularly post-pandemic, is constantly changing. SMEs face multiple challenges, including technological advancements, regulatory changes, shifts in consumer behavior, and sustainability pressures. This process provides a structured approach to navigate these complexities, ensuring that SMEs can adapt and remain competitive.

Last but not least, the *VI.3. Model for Designing Financing Programs* is based on the critical importance of developing a comprehensive model for creating a financing program specifically tailored for Romanian SMEs.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on SMEs, with many struggling to survive. A specialized financing program can provide the necessary support for recovery, helping SMEs rebuild and adapt to post-pandemic market conditions.

Identifying emerging areas for SMEs is a crucial step that ensures businesses can adapt to changing market conditions and capitalize on new opportunities. This process involves analyzing trends, evaluating industry dynamics, and understanding technological advancements. Establishing the development levels of regions, represented in the top right quadrant, is essential for adapting policies, investments, and development programs to the specific needs of the region. This process requires a comprehensive assessment of various economic, social, and infrastructural factors.

After identifying emerging areas for SMEs and evaluating the development level of regions, the next steps are designing and developing efficient and suitable financing programs for Romanian SMEs, which can be consolidated into a strategic approach found in the bottom right quadrant of the figure. Finally, the bottom left quadrant presents measures regarding Reevaluation and Continuous Improvement.

Also in Chapter VI, you will find *VI.4. Support measures for improving financing programs for SMEs*. The proposed strategies and models provide a clear and structured approach that guides SMEs through the essential steps for accessing financing and implementing projects. This reduces uncertainty and increases the likelihood of successful outcomes.

By emphasizing the role of assistance programs and support measures, the scheme ensures that SMEs are not isolated. They can access external expertise, resources, and financing, which are critical for overcoming internal limitations.

The models and strategies presented help SMEs focus on key opportunities such as digitalization, sustainability, and post-pandemic adaptation. By targeting these areas, SMEs can align with global trends and market demands. The cyclical nature of the process ensures continuous improvement. SMEs are encouraged to regularly review and refine their strategies, projects, and operations, leading to sustainable growth and development.

The main beneficiaries are the SMEs themselves. This process provides them with the tools, structure, and support necessary to grow, adapt, and thrive in a competitive market.

Entities such as chambers of commerce, trade associations, and government bodies that support SMEs can use this framework to guide their assistance programs, ensuring they are aligned with the needs and realities of SMEs.

Investors and financial institutions also benefit because SMEs that follow such a structured process are more likely to succeed, reducing the risk associated with financing them. This, in turn, increases the attractiveness of SMEs as investment or lending opportunities.

For policymakers focused on economic development, this process helps ensure that SMEs—often the backbone of the economy—are resilient, innovative, and capable of contributing to broader economic goals such as job creation, innovation, and sustainable growth.

The study's limitations, such as response rate and applicability of conclusions, are acknowledged and discussed transparently, providing a basis for future research.

As Romanian businesses improve their ability to plan, execute, and deliver projects efficiently, they become more attractive partners for multinational corporations and other international actors. This can open up new opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and access to global markets—essential for the long-term growth and sustainability of Romanian SMEs.

In conclusion, studying project and program management as a lever for implementing global trends in Romanian SMEs is a crucial area of research. By strengthening their project management capabilities, these enterprises can enhance their competitiveness, adaptability, and integration into the global economy, ultimately contributing to the growth and prosperity of Romania's business environment.

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