

Magdalena SZYDEŁKO<sup>1</sup>

## THE CONCEPT OF MAPPING THE BENCHMARKING PARTNERSHIPS OF CLUSTER ENTERPRISES – THEORETICAL APPROACH

Benchmarking is a response to the needs of contemporary enterprises participating in clusters, that search for solutions to increase efficiency and effectiveness of processes and to improve their competitive advantage. At the same time, the ability to build and develop partnership relations by cluster members is currently one of the key conditions of their external growth. The valid and important field of scientific research is intra-cluster benchmarking partnership. So far, none of the researchers has performed theoretical analyses in terms of the possibility of benchmarking adjustment to the needs of cluster members.

The purpose of the paper is to present the essence of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises and the concept of mapping of data and information exchange in intra-cluster benchmarking based on partnership. The main research methods are as follows: the analysis of literature sources and deductive reasoning. The selection of the specific field of theoretical considerations and conceptual works has been motivated by the identified knowledge gap within the scope of the indicated elements of the concept of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises.

In view of the presented definitions of basic conceptual categories closely related to the analysed form of partnership, it has been assumed that the essence of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises is a mutually beneficial exchange of information between cluster members, concerning their performance and best practices, according to partnership rules, that leads to improvement of performance of the parties involved in the benchmarking process.

**Keywords:** benchmarking, good practices, cluster, partnerships, benchmarking partnership.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

On the basis of the observation of the economic practice as well as the analysis theoretical considerations and the results of research on the cross-organisational relations included in the subject literature<sup>2</sup>, it may be concluded that currently, the combat with

---

<sup>1</sup> Magdalena Szydelko, PhD, Department of Management Systems and Logistics, Faculty of Management, Rzeszow University of Technology, Powstańców Warszawy Ave. 10, 35-959 Rzeszów, e-mail: mszydel@prz.edu.pl.

Dr Magdalena Szydelko, Politechnika Rzeszowska, Wydział Zarządzania, Katedra Systemów Zarządzania i Logistyki, Al. Powstańców Warszawy 10, 35-959 Rzeszów, e-mail: mszydel@prz.edu.pl.

<sup>2</sup> See: J. Moore, S.R. Curry, *The Death of Competition*, "Fortune" 133/7 (1996), p. 142–144; G. Hamel, Y.L. Doz, C.K. Prahalad, *Collaborate with Your Competitors and Win*, "Harvard Business Review" 67/1 (1989), p. 133–139; W. Czakon, A.S. Fernandez, A. Minà, *Editorial – From Paradox*

competitors is a thing of the past, and the enterprises evolve along with the changing environment, redefine the relations and enter new forms of relationships with other business entities.

Partnership as a “higher level of business relations”<sup>3</sup> and *modus operandi* of enterprises in the third millennium determines a new quality in contacts and cross-organisational cooperation<sup>4</sup>. The ability to build, develop and improve cross-organisational partnership relations “is becoming one of the key factors of effective external growth”<sup>5</sup> and constitutes a basic competence for the growing number of organisations<sup>6</sup>. External growth, contrary to internal growth, that consists in developing on the basis of enterprise's own potential, is the development focused on cooperation.

An example of the effective form of implementation of cross-organisational partners' strategies and integration through cooperation, is a cluster. It is emphasised in the literature that clusters have become a global phenomenon and are established in all sectors of economy, from traditional industries to high-tech branches. Enterprises participating in a cluster, that base their external growth on establishing partnership relations with other members of such network, both in form of cooperation and cooptition, undoubtedly increase their chances to reach strategic benefits and to achieve and effectively maintain the competitive advantage. They may establish long-term partnership cooperation in fulfilment of common projects and cluster initiatives resulting in the improvement of market performance and competitiveness of involved partners. Benchmarking is the response to the needs of contemporary cluster enterprises, that do not intend to rely solely on their own concepts, solutions and experiences, but are also focused on learning and using the achievements of partners within the cluster.

## 2. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY OF CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH

A combination of three subjects of interest in the scientific and management field: cross-organisational partnership relations, clusters and benchmarking, gives a specific scope of research, encompassing benchmarking partnership of cluster companies.

It must be pointed out that the analysed form of partnership has not been a subject of previous in-depth scientific research. There is a cognitive gap in the subject literature in the knowledge on this form of cluster partnership, both in the theoretical and conceptual dimension, and also in the empirical aspect. This paper presents the results of research in the theoretical and conceptual field, focused on indicating the essence of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises, and also a graphical representation of the exchange of benchmarking data and information.

---

*to Practice: the Rise of Cooptition Strategies*, “International Journal of Business Environment” 6/1 (2014), p. 1–10; W. Czakon, M. Rogalski, *Cooptition Typology Revisited – a Behavioural Approach*, “International Journal of Business Environment” 6/1 (2014), p. 28–46.

<sup>3</sup> E. Rigsbee, *PartnerSHIFT. How to Profit from the Partnering Trend*, New York 2000, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> M. Szydełko, *Atrybuty i czynniki sukcesu partnerstwa przedsiębiorstw*, “Modern Management Review” XIX/4 (2014), p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> D. Latusek-Jurczak, *Formy współpracy międzyorganizacyjnej*, in *Relacje międzyorganizacyjne w naukach o zarządzaniu*, ed. A. K. Koźmiński, D. Latusek-Jurczak, Warszawa 2014, p. 46.

The purpose of the paper is to present the essence of benchmarking partnership of enterprises participating in a cluster as well as the results of mapping of data and information exchange in intra-cluster benchmarking based on partnership.

The indicated cognitive gap in the knowledge on benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises requires a significant epistemological effort and conceptual work. This paper shall contribute to filling this gap.

The purpose of the work has determined the selection of research methods, such as the analysis of literature sources and deductive reasoning. A formative approach to the conceptualisation of benchmarking partnership of companies within a cluster has been used.

### 3. BENCHMARKING PARTNERSHIP OF CLUSTER ENTERPRISES – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The review of the literature and observations on business practices lead to a conclusion that the concept of benchmarking is so vast and flexible that this process might be adjusted to conditions of functioning of different types of social and economic structures. In this connection, it is possible to transfer the benchmarking theory to the cluster background. Determining the essence of benchmarking partnership of enterprises within a cluster requires setting certain conceptual categories, closely related with that form of partnership. These are the following categories: partnership of enterprises, cluster, benchmarking and benchmarking partnership of enterprises.

The concept of partnership evokes a variety of associations that result from using this term in an informal and scientific sense<sup>7</sup>. The term of partnership is interpreted in different ways both in the management sciences and in the business practice, and in some cases it is also used in wrong contexts. The variety of definitions of enterprise partnerships results mainly from the shift of importance to its different attributes. M. de Lurdes Veludo points out the cause of ambiguity of partnership that is rarely mentioned in the literature. She claims that it is the lack of common vision (stream) of scientific research concerning its essence<sup>8</sup>. Attempting to define partnership, the researchers determine its limits not only using specific attributes, but also dimensions, critical factors and success indicators<sup>9</sup>. For the purpose of this paper it has been assumed that partnership of enterprises consists in voluntary and dynamic relations built to reach common goals, leading to achieve additional synergistic effects and competitive advantage<sup>10</sup>. The distinctive features of this type of relations include: mutual trust of partners, their involvement in common activities, sharing risks and benefits and also mutual exchange of information. Partnership reflects the essence of close cooperation of enterprises and is a form of implementation of the cross-organisational win-win strategy, in which the winners are all participants of the partnership.

---

<sup>7</sup> M. Szydełko, *Atrybuty i czynniki...*, p. 233.

<sup>8</sup> M. de Lurdes Veludo, *Business Relationships in the Automotive and Component Industries in Portugal*, Ph.D. Thesis, School of Business and Management University of Glasgow, Glasgow 2005, p. 81, <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/1544/1/2005veludophd.pdf> (available 13 March 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See: P.W. Mattessich, M. Murray-Close, B.R. Monsey, *Collaboration: What Makes It Work. A Review of Research Literature on Factors Influencing Successful Collaboration*, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Saint Paul, Minnesota 2001, pp. 7-29; M. de Lurdes Veludo, *Business Relationships...*, p. 81-99.

<sup>10</sup> M. Szydełko, *Atrybuty i czynniki...*, p. 240.

According to the classic definition introduced by M.E. Porter (1998), clusters are „geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries, and associated institutions (e.g., universities, standards agencies, trade associations) in a particular field that compete but also cooperate”<sup>11</sup>.

Clusters can be characterized as a group of independent business entities and related governmental and local government bodies, non-governmental organisations as well as other business support organisations that:

- are geographically concentrated in one or several regions, but may also be global,
- specialise in a specific field of activity, constituting the core of cooperation, and use common technologies and skills,
- compete and cooperate in the same or related branches,
- are inter-related with an extensive system of vertical and horizontal formal and informal relations,
- form a more or less institutionalised and formalised group,
- accepted a common path of development and strategy,
- form partnerships,
- develop external relation capital, reflected in creating a firm framework of multi-dimensional cooperation,
- are focused on sharing assets and creating knowledge and innovation.

Benchmarking refers to “gathering what others are doing, usually to evaluate whether you are operating efficiently or identify areas for improvement”<sup>12</sup>. In a general approach, it is a process of creative improvement of an organisation through learning from peers and using their best practice experiences in a given field. In a detailed approach, benchmarking is a process implemented both on the operation and the strategic level of an organisation, consisted in systematic measuring of processes and comparing own experience (results) and solutions in various fields (constituting the subjects of benchmarking) with best practices within and outside the organisation. The last stage of the benchmarking process is the creative adjustment of best practices, that allows to reach the set measurable and non-measurable goals, not followed by anti-competitive effects.

The literature of benchmarking often uses the term “best practice”. A reasonable question has been formulated by T. Wireman: does “best” mean: most efficient, most cost effective, most customer service oriented or most profitable?<sup>13</sup> The author replied himself, claiming that “best practices are good practices that have worked well elsewhere. They are proven and have produced successful results. They must focus on proven sources of best practices”<sup>14</sup>.

The review of the literature leads to a conclusion that the benchmarking partnership phenomenon has not been the subject of any previous in-depth scientific analyses. The concept of “benchmarking partnerships” has been defined by T. Bendell, L. Boulter and

<sup>11</sup> M.E. Porter, *On Competition*, Boston 1998.

<sup>12</sup> R.S. Sharma, M. Iqbal, M. Victoriano, *On the Use of Benchmarking and Good Practices for Knowledge Management for Development*, “Knowledge Management Research & Practice” 2013, No. 11/4, p. 352.

<sup>13</sup> T. Wireman, *Benchmarking Best Practices in Maintenance Management*, New York 2004, p. 35–36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

P. Goodstadt in a popular book titled "Benchmarking for Competitive Advantage". For the purposes of this paper, the term "benchmarking partnerships" shall mean "mutual beneficial exchange of best business practice information which should lead to improved performance for all the organisations involved"<sup>15</sup>.

The confrontation of the scope of the four categories characterized above gives rise to a conclusion that the essence of benchmarking partnership of enterprises within a cluster is a mutually beneficial exchange of information between enterprises participating in a cluster, concerning their performance and best practices in various fields of activity, according to partnership rules, that leads to improvement of performance of the parties involved in the benchmarking process (micro level) and improvement of the cluster competitive advantage (meso level).

It must be emphasised that establishing benchmarking partnerships of enterprises within a cluster is a positive factor that improves competitive advantage of that type of cross-organisational networks, which in turn fosters innovation and economic competitiveness.

#### **4. MAPPING OF BENCHMARKING PARTNERSHIP OF CLUSTER ENTERPRISES SUPPORTED BY AN IT PLATFORM AND A MODERATOR**

The specified benchmarking goals and the methods of fulfilment, as well as the potential of benchmarking partners, including the skills in acquiring and processing credible data and also creating and using the knowledge, determine the efficiency and effectiveness of activities within the scope of intra-cluster benchmarking.

It must be emphasised that currently the knowledge, that is purposefully acquired, created, provided and used, is becoming the most important strategic resource of enterprises. The data and information obtained in the course of the benchmarking partnership within the cluster are worthless until they are processed and transformed into knowledge useful in the process of adopting best practices. Consequently, intra-cluster benchmarking should constitute an indispensable part of the knowledge management system in enterprises that strive for effective management of this resource and achieving relevant measurable benefits.

Considering the specific character of clusters, two approaches to benchmarking partnership may be distinguished. Both variants assume that "in intra-cluster benchmarking, information is derived from benchmark-partners, that is the compared business entities, with a model status in terms of best practices in a given field"<sup>16</sup>. The first approach assumes that benchmarking partnership is pursued by cluster companies within a single benchmarking group, and is supported by a moderator and an IT tool (platform). The second approach of fulfilment of the described concept refers to benchmarking partnership of enterprises within a number of benchmarking groups, aimed at exchanging and adopting model practices, in which the activities of partners are not supported by a moderator or a benchmarking platform. Since the length of this paper is limited, it focuses only on the characteristics of selected elements of the first approach to benchmarking partnership within a cluster.

It must be pointed out that the executive management of enterprises grouped in a cluster should voluntarily accept participation in benchmarking, with respect of partnership rules

---

<sup>15</sup> T. Bendell, L. Boulter, P. Goodstadt, *Benchmarking for Competitive Advantage*, London 1998, pp. 124–125.

<sup>16</sup> M. Szydełko, *Ramy koncepcyjne zastosowania benchmarkingu w klastrze*, „Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu” 2015/399, p. 461.

within a single benchmarking group supported by a moderator and an IT platform. The decision on participation in intra-cluster benchmarking should be preceded by the analysis of the proposals made by the initiator of the undertaking and the confrontation of the benefits and risks related with that form of learning from peers. The initiators of benchmarking partnership may be:

- cluster animator (coordinator),
- cluster leader (enterprise or other institution inspiring to take actions within the cluster, having a strong position in the cluster structure),
- enterprise participating in a cluster, not acting as its leader,
- representatives of academic institutions,
- representatives of business support institutions (e.g. enterprises offering services in consulting or design and development of a platform including the benchmarking tool).

An attempt of graphical representation of data and information exchange within a benchmarking group has been made. Figure 1 presents a diagram referred to as a map of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises. Its components include:

- different types of market entities constituting a benchmarking group (main participants of the undertaking),
- data and information exchange platform,
- moderator (internal or external),
- potential relations between these components, reflecting the benchmarking data and information exchange,
- market entities not interested in learning from peers within a cluster benchmarking group (potential participants of the undertaking).

The benchmarking data and information exchange platform is a multifunctional IT tool available in the electronic environment. Its major function is to facilitate the selection of benchmarking partners of enterprises. Its role should be considered mainly with reference to benchmarking data and information (financial and non-financial measures<sup>17</sup>). It allows collecting, processing, monitoring, comparing and visualising data and information.

The key actions at the stage of building a benchmarking partnership within a cluster include a common agreement between potential benchmarking partners concerning the methods of data collection and the functional assumptions of the IT platform, and also the identification of comparable benchmarking indicators (titles and descriptions) that would be included in that platform. Another important aspect is arranging by the interested parties the method of presentation of good practices and exchange of experiences between the benchmarking partners. It is recommended that the parties share their good practices and experiences during work meetings of the cluster benchmarking group.

The management of the enterprises that intend to participate in the benchmarking partnership in a cluster supported by an IT platform should cooperate with the moderator. The moderator is responsible for the entire organisation of the undertaking and improving the benchmarking process using the gained experience. In particular, the moderator must

---

<sup>17</sup> The literature refers to such data and information as the “benchmarking indicators”.

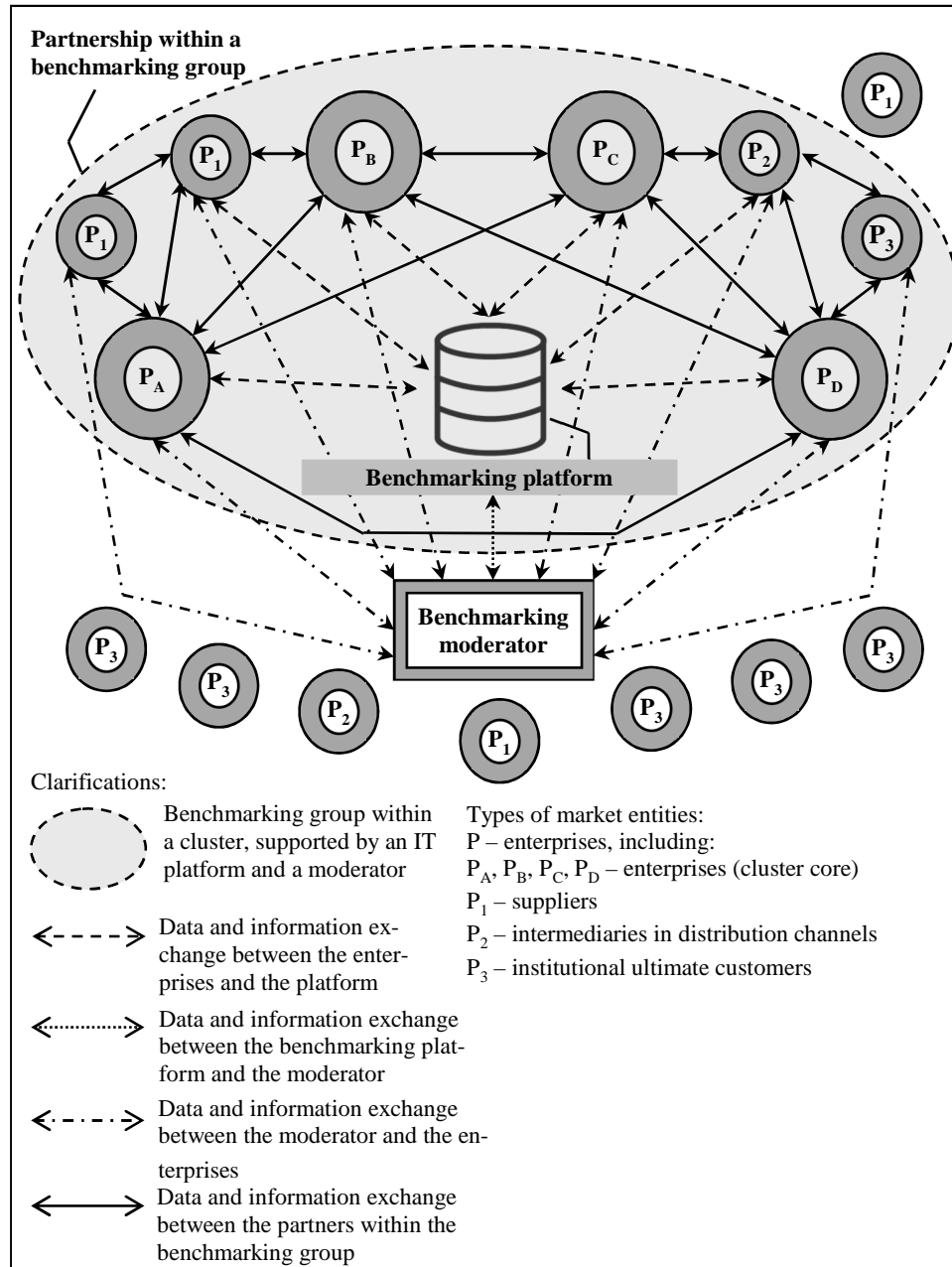


Figure 1. A map of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises supported by a benchmarking platform and a moderator

Source: Author's own work.

ensure training in entering and implementation of data in the benchmarking database, in which leaders representing the cluster enterprises would participate. Such training allows to eliminate differences in competences among the representatives of enterprises intending to participate in the benchmarking partnership.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of conceptual considerations was to indicate the essence of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises and present the benchmarking data and information exchange diagram in the form of the map of these form of partnership.

An attempt of graphical representation of the map of benchmarking partnership of cluster enterprises has been made on the basis of the following elements: partners within the benchmarking group, moderator, electronic platform, relations between them reflecting data and information exchange, as well as potential participants of the undertaking. In the context of the described issue, it needs to be emphasised that the practice of benchmarking proves that it is much easier to obtain the required information if there is a possibility of equivalent exchange of such information between potential benchmarking partners. Additionally, intra-cluster benchmarking should be particularly important in the implementation of the knowledge management strategy in cluster enterprises focused on absorbing knowledge from the outside in order to learn from the other members of the cluster.

The effect of the conceptual efforts made in the course of the research are the implications both for the management theory and the management practice in cluster enterprises. Appropriate building and development of benchmarking partnership within a cluster requires relevant methodological guidelines. An interesting proposal in terms of the scientific aspect of development of the described concept is mapping the exchange of data and information in intra-cluster benchmarking. The described approach to benchmarking partnership, that involves participation of a moderator and the use of an IT tool, may be used in practice by cluster enterprises and coordinators of that specific form of network in order to:

- 1) check the possibilities of implementation of such form of partnership within a cluster,
- 2) intensify intra-cluster benchmarking,
- 3) adjust the current scheme of behaviour in intra-cluster benchmarking partnership.

To sum up the considerations presented herein, it needs to be emphasised that the key factors in the presented concept are previous cross-organisational relations with partnership character and undisturbed exchange of benchmarking data and information between: the partners within a cluster benchmarking group, the moderator and the IT benchmarking platform. In the course of intra-cluster benchmarking, partners often exchange confidential information, thus the most important rule should be building trust on the grounds of respect of the legal and ethical standards.

## REFERENCES

1. Czakon W., Fernandez A.S., Minà A., *Editorial – From Paradox to Practice: the Rise of Coopetition Strategies*, „International Journal of Business Environment” 2014, 6/1.
2. Czakon W., Rogalski M., *Coopetition Typology Revisited – a Behavioural Approach*, „International Journal of Business Environment” 2014, 6/1.



3. De LurdesVeludo M., *Business Relationships in the Automotive and Component Industries in Portugal*, Ph.D. Thesis, School of Business and Management University of Glasgow, Glasgow 2005, <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/1544/1/2005veludophd.pdf> (available: 13.03.2018).
4. Hamel G., Doz Y.L., Prahalad C.K., *Collaborate with Your Competitors and Win*, „Harvard Business Review” 1989, 67/1.
5. Latusek-Jurczak D., *Formy współpracy międzyorganizacyjnej [w:] Relacje międzyorganizacyjne w naukach o zarządzaniu*, red. A.K. Koźmiński, D. Latusek-Jurczak, Wolters Kluwer business, Warszawa 2014.
6. Mattessich P.W., Murray-Close M., Monsey B.R., *Collaboration: What Makes It Work. A Review of Research Literature on Factors Influencing Successful Collaboration*, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Saint Paul, Minnesota 2001.
7. Moore J., Curry S.R., *The Death of Competition*, „Fortune” 1996, 133/7.
8. Rigsbee E., *PartnerSHIFT. How to Profit from the Partnering Trend*, John Wiley and Sons, New York 2000.
9. Szydełko M., *Atrybuty i czynniki sukcesu partnerstwa przedsiębiorstw*, „Modern Management Review” 2014, XIX/4.
10. Szydełko M., *Ramy koncepcyjne zastosowania benchmarkingu w klastrze*, „Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu” 2015/399.
11. Sharma R.S., Iqbal M., Victoriano M., *On the Use of Benchmarking and Good Practices for Knowledge Management for Development*, „Knowledge Management Research & Practice” 2013, 11/4.
12. Porter M.E., *On Competition*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston 1998.
13. Wireman T., *Benchmarking Best Practices in Maintenance Management*, Industrial Press, New York 2004.
14. Bendell T., Boulter L., Goodstadt P., *Benchmarking for Competitive Advantage*, Financial Times Pitman Publishing, London 1998.

## KONCEPCJA MAPOWANIA PARTNERSTWA BENCHMARKINGOWEGO PRZEDSIĘBIORSTW TWORZĄCYCH KLASTER – UJĘCIE TEORETYCZNE

Benchmarking jest odpowiedzią na potrzeby współczesnych przedsiębiorstw tworzących klastry, które poszukują rozwiązań w zakresie zwiększania efektywności i skuteczności realizowanych procesów oraz podnoszenia ich konkurencyjności. Jednocześnie umiejętność budowania, rozwoju i doskonalenia partnerskich relacji przez członków klastra jest obecnie jednym z kluczowych warunków ich skutecznego wzrostu zewnętrznego. Aktualnym, ważnym i interesującym poznawczo obszarem badań naukowych jest benchmarking wewnątrzklastrowy o charakterze partnerskim. Koncepcja partnerstwa benchmarkingowego przedsiębiorstw klastrowych wpisuje się w postulowane obecnie w naukach o zarządzaniu paradygmaty relacji i współdziałania przedsiębiorstw w organizacjach sieciowych. Żaden z badaczy nie prowadził do tej pory rozważań teoretycznych w zakresie możliwości adaptacji benchmarkingu do potrzeb członków klastra.

Celami artykułu są: wskazanie istoty partnerstwa benchmarkingowego przedsiębiorstw tworzących klastry i przedstawienie koncepcji mapowania przepływu danych i informacji w benchmarkingu wewnątrzklastrowym opartym na partnerstwie. Postawiony cel zdeterminował wybór takich metod badawczych, jak analiza źródeł literaturowych i rozumowanie dedukcyjne. Wybór wskazanego kierunku rozważań teoretycznych i prac koncepcyjnych został podyktowany zidentyfikowaną luką wiedzy w zakresie wskazanych elementów koncepcji

partnerstwa benchmarkingowego przedsiębiorstw klastrowych. Najważniejsze wnioski płynące ze zrealizowanego postępowania badawczego można uznać za implikacje o charakterze teoriopoznawczym i praktycznym.

W świetle przedstawionych ujęć definicyjnych podstawowych kategorii pojęciowych ściśle związanych z analizowaną formą partnerstwa przyjęto, że partnerstwo benchmarkingowe oznacza wzajemnie korzystną wymianę informacji z zachowaniem zasad partnerstwa przez przedsiębiorstwa tworzące klaster, o osiągniętych wynikach i najlepszych praktykach stosowanych przez nie w różnych obszarach działalności, która prowadzi do poprawy wyników benchmark-partnerów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** benchmarking, dobre praktyki, klaster, partnerstwo, partnerstwo benchmarkingowe.

DOI: 10.7862/rz.2018.mmr.19

*Tekst złożono w redakcji: kwiecień 2018 r.*

*Przyjęto do druku: czerwiec 2018 r.*