
Cooperation and Competition in Project Teams¹

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Abstract

The topic of cooperation and competition in the workplace is the subject of discussions between representatives of social sciences, including sociology, psychology and management. Among researchers there is no clear position on the superiority of one over the other. Either concept can in certain circumstances be effective, or on the contrary, it might have an opposite effect. Although there have been many studies on cooperation and competition within various groups and between them, there is no research available on cooperative and competitive behaviour in project teams. For this reason, authors decided to take a look at the relationships between members of such groups in order to find answers to our questions: how do respondents define the concepts of cooperation and competition (what words do they use to describe them?), have they experienced cooperation and rivalry, and if so, which do they think occurs more frequently: what promotes cooperation and teamwork? Why does competition occur, and how does it manifest itself?

The aim of this article is to present the results of our study on cooperation and rivalry in project teams. The subjects of authors study are individuals working in project teams who are also students of the Faculty of Management at the University of Lodz. Authors used the biographical method to collect the data. Authors asked respondents to describe a situation from work within the scope of relevant information according to our instructions. The presentation of the results of study is preceded by a brief literature review, and a description of the methodology used (introduction). At the end of author's presentation a summary of author observations included. Although the results of this study are not subject to generalization for the entire population, it shows that employees working in project teams more often cooperate than compete with each other. Their attitude is largely due to keeping the focus on the goal of the team, and the belief that each member has specific skills, which may affect the results of the team's work. The results of the preliminary study will be used to prepare the tools for use in complex research: a survey and interview questionnaire.

Key words: *project team, cooperation, competition.*

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Introduction

The topic of cooperation and competition in the workplace is the subject of discussions between representatives of social sciences, including sociology, psychology and management. The question of which of these concepts is more effective in the workplace seems to remain without a clear answer. In some situations, cooperative attitude might dominate, while in others, the competitive approach has an

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edge. The issue of cooperation and competition is of particular importance when it comes to the new, more flexible organisational structures where project teams are utilised.

A project team is a unit composed of employees who, on a daily basis, work in different organisational units, but for the duration of the project are given specific tasks associated with it, and are responsible for completing them. (Дедова В.Е. 2014, Дроздова В.А, 2016). Project teams are characterised by their temporary nature – they are appointed for the duration of the project and dissolve after its completion. They function on the basis of subject specialisation, selecting participants based on their expertise, which is often specialised and unique. It is also important to direct the focus of all team members to the goal of the project, and ensure the complementary knowledge and skills of all participants.

Project teams constitute certain communities, in which interactions occur between their members and reveal a variety of behaviours, such as "they may seek to maximize their dominance over their partner (rivalry, competition), or to gain mutual benefits for both themselves and their partner (cooperation)" (Pajestka G., 2012). In the first case authors are dealing with actions aimed at individual success, that is the attitude of "it's most important that I win", we are enemies", while in the second case we see a different attitude: "we are here for each other, we need each other to achieve the goal". Although subject literature presents views on cooperation and competition in teamwork within the organization, there is no discussion regarding these issues in project teams. Due to the subject and purpose of this article we have concentrated on inter-team cooperation and competition.

The analysis of available subject literature (Benndorf V., Rau H. A., 2012 Kip, 2014, Naidoo S., Sutherland M., 2016, Севастьянова И. Г., Стегний В. Н., Спосиб А. Г., 2010, Świątek-Barylska 2016), shows that cooperation is generally seen as positive. We noted that many authors emphasise that internal cooperation can lead to effective problem solving through the exchange of knowledge and innovation, which are the source of new ideas (Kip, 2014, p. 2, Севастьянова И. Г., Стегний В. Н., Спосиб А. Г., 2010, pp 98), stimulate learning processes (Benndorf V., Rau H. A., 2012, pp 12), and motivate individuals and teams to develop further, which may result in increased productivity (Naidoo S., M. Sutherland, 2016).

Rivalry, the second concept described, causes more controversy. "For many years now, at least on the basis of social psychology, there is an ongoing dispute between two opposing views on competition" (Szmajke, Urbanowicz, 2012). W. James and the supporters of his theory emphasise the economic and task-based benefits (productivity, profit, quality of work, etc.), while E. Aronson and his researchers (i.e. the Aronson option) attach greater importance to the socio-relational costs (hostility towards others, decrease in openness and trust in social relations, deteriorating social climate, etc.)

Depending on its intensity, competition can be either constructive or destructive (Barylska-Swiatek, 2016, p 93). In terms of positive aspects, authors can conclude that competing workers are often faced with the need to confront others, with their views and skills, which in turn contributes to the development of their own competencies. Competition increases the motivation and commitment of employees and stimulates them to action (Ораев Г. 2012, p. 35, Świątek-Barylska, 2016, p. 94). Competition is also an antidote to boredom, it invigorates and brings excitement and joy. Competition creates an environment in which people can fulfil their need for achievement. During competition success becomes even more attractive (Tyszka, 1998).

On the other hand, (Murayama, Elliot 2012) competition could have negative consequences if, instead of motivating to improve, it leads to evasive motivation, focused only on ensuring that the quality of work is not inferior to the level of performance of one's rivals. Competition can evoke the fear of failure in the employee, which can mean that his only motive will be not to work better than others, but do just enough to not come last in the competition. When competition arouses fear it leads to the avoidance of

ambitious and challenging goals. "Individuals competing with each other are afraid of losing, and of the social consequences of failure. A person who competes may be concerned about their public image and fear the negative emotions of shame, humiliation, and the inability to free themselves from the thoughts of missed opportunities, doubting their own abilities, or letting down the trust of others" (Skruczaj 2016). Poorly understood and executed competition leads to stress, psychosomatic illnesses, professional burnout, and relationship breakdowns. Competition causes some people to feel lost, harassed, and even forced to behave in ways they don't agree with (Skruczaj 2016, Stankiewicz 2014).

"Competition limits the rationality of action, and may cause difficulty in predicting the negative consequences of actions. Focusing on the desire to win and defeat the opponent, as opposed to the activity itself, results in competition being considered to be one of the most important factors that reduces intrinsic motivation. " (Skruczaj 2016).

"Focusing on the desire to prove themselves better than others, results in fewer available cognitive resources, which the individuals could use to achieve their objectives - this leads to decreased creativity, originality of thinking, and hinders learning. At the same time, persons behaving in a very competitive way are perceived by others in a negative light when it comes to their interpersonal skills". (Doliński, 1998).

Due to the fact that it is difficult to conclusively determine the advantages and disadvantages of inter-team cooperation and competition, choosing between the two concepts is often described in scientific publications as a dilemma. To solve it, we need to study the conditions of these concepts and their consequences, in order to combine both to achieve the optimal performance of teams, which means determining the level of intensity of cooperation and competition that will be beneficial for the organisation (Naidoo S., Sutherland M., 2016).

A content analysis of the literature led us to conduct a pilot study (preliminary). Our intention was to find out whether employees will want to speak about cooperation and competition in project teams, and if so, what will they focus on. In addition, authors assumed that the results of the pilot study will be used to prepare the tools for use in complex studies: (a survey and interview questionnaire).

The aim of our study was to gather information on the relationship between employees at their place of employment, and the behaviours of individuals that affect the nature of these relationships. One aspect was the issue of cooperation and competition at work. Based on the literature review we formulated questions for which we wanted to find answers in the course of our study: how do respondents define the concepts of cooperation and competition (what words do they use to describe them?), have they experienced cooperation and rivalry, and if so, which do they think occurs more frequently: what promotes cooperation and teamwork? Why does competition occur, and how does it manifest itself?

Authors decided to use the biographical approach in our research [Bednarz-Łuczewska, Łuczewski 2012]. We asked respondents to describe a situation from work within the scope of relevant information according to our instructions. Choosing this method to collect information allowed the respondents to remain anonymous and gave them a sense of security, which seemed important due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed.

The subjects of our study were working students of the Faculty of Management at the University of Lodz (studying in the areas of Management and Logistics, and part-time Masters' Degree students), who demonstrated an understanding of the issues, and declared their willingness to participate in the study, which increased the likelihood of obtaining reliable data. Authors of this research collected

the biographical stories in December 2016 and January 2017. In total, we received 134 stories ranging in length from 4 to 12 standard-sized pages. For further analysis, for the purpose of this article, we chose only those stories, in which the authors declared their experience working in project teams in private companies representing various industries. The samples were therefore selected on purpose. In the following table we summarised the authors of the biographical stories (gender, age, job tenure in the company described, and job title), as well as the companies in which their experiences took place. Not everyone provided all the required information, but from the point of view of the aim of our study, the lack of some data was not an issue.

Table 1: Characteristics of the authors of biographical stories

No.	Author information	Company characteristics
1	Female, 24 years old, employed for 1.5 years as an International Freight Forwarder	A small, private transport company operating since 2008 in the Lodz Province, one owner, employs 12 people (2 international freight forwarders, one administrative employee and 9 drivers); providing transport and shipping services throughout Poland and Europe (Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia).
2	Male, employed for 1 year as a purchasing Logistics Specialist	The company belongs to a capital group of a large global telecommunications operator, and is engaged in the construction and maintenance of fibre and telecommunications infrastructure. The main area of business is to provide customers from the B2B and B2C sectors cutting-edge telecommunications and ICT solutions. On the basis of the key skills of specialists and own resources, the company also offers comprehensive services in the areas of consulting, concept development, design, construction, maintenance and servicing of a wide range of telecommunication infrastructure, electronic security systems and monitoring; a manufacturer and distributor of passive and active components to build ICT infrastructure. More than 7,000 employees throughout the country.
3	Male, 24 years old, employed for 8 months as a warehouse worker	A private company with foreign capital operating in the beauty industry, known on the Polish and global markets. It is a trade and production company. It has been operating on the Polish market for over 20 years, but her parent company has existed for over 100 years. The corporation employs over 77,500 employees worldwide, and about 900 workers in Poland.
4	Female, 23 years old, employed for 6 months as a Media Analyst	A private limited company with two owners, employing 25 workers - 15 office employees working on-site, and 10 employees working remotely; media agency
5	Female, 24 years old, employed for 2 years as a	A private company managed by one owner, operating since 2002, engaged in designing marketing materials, employs 12 people.

	Customer Advisor	
6	Female, 24 years old, employed for 1.5 years as Assistant Manager	Trading company in the fast fashion clothing industry, operating as a franchise since 2006, employs 32 people.
7	Male, works as a Manager	A large, family-owned private company producing ceramic tiles, employs about 1,700 workers.
8	Female, 36 years old, Legal Counsel, employed for 9 years, currently as a Manager in the firm in the regional office	A firm belonging to the international consulting company of the so-called Big Four, provides world-wide services in the areas of audit, economic and financial consulting, risk management and tax consulting, as well as legal advice; operates in more than 150 countries and employs over 200,000 specialists, including 2,200 people in Poland of which 100 work at the firm.
9	Female, 24 years old, employed for 1.5 years, first as Assistant to the Management Board, and for the past 2 months as Quality Manager.	The company, which I present in this paper, is a limited liability company dedicated to developing software. It specialises in creating mobile and web applications. The company was founded in 2010 in Lodz, starting with two employees, it currently employs 40 developers and testers.
10	Male, 24 years old, employed for 7 months as a Warehouse Logistics Specialist	A private distribution and production company, employs 8 people; modern, rapidly growing company engaged in the creation, production and distribution of weight loss products, and functional, dietary, and healthy foods.
11	Man, 43 years old, employed for less than a year as a Project Manager	A private company operating as a joint stock company, one owner, mostly engaged in research and development in the field of social sciences and humanities. The company employs 15 workers. In addition, it works with more than a dozen people on the basis of civil law contracts.
12	Female	A private German company managed by two Polish citizens. Operating on the Polish market for over 15 years, employs approx. 200 workers, produces plastic components for the construction industry.

Source: based on own studies

As the table shows, we analysed 7 stories provided by women and 5 given to us by men. Most of the respondents are between 23-24 years old, which is most likely due to the fact that they're graduate students. Respondents described various companies, both in terms of the size, measured by the number of employees, as well as the specific business operations of the company. The differences in these operations affect the nature of the projects implemented. However, at the preliminary research stage, we decided not to analyse the relationship between the specificity of the project teams' work and their focus on either cooperation or competition.

In this article we presented the results of qualitative analysis. In the text we referred to the statements we received from responders. In the parentheses following these statements we

included the Arabic numerals indicating the particular citation from which the biographical story comes from.

Research results and discussion

The study suggests that cooperation is viewed as being associated with working to achieve common goals, sharing resources necessary to achieve these goals, mutual respect, perceiving all members of the project team as competent and motivated to work, and mutual trust. The words used to describe cooperation are positive (e.g. working together, motivating, helping and supporting each other, solving problems together, pleasant atmosphere, camaraderie). Competition, on the other hand, is understood as a desire to be better than others, to stand out from the group, and receive higher awards, including the possibility of faster promotion. When writing about competition, respondents use words like: disagreement, resentment, fighting, game, conflict, conflict of interests, race, hostility, and usually give the term 'competition' a negative tone. One of the authors of a biographical story admitted that competition is everywhere, and it results from the need to secure the best possible living conditions for oneself, "everyone wants to live as best and as comfortable as possible, which is why they try to get the best results. I do the same myself, and I don't really feel bad about it. After all, this is why I come to work (3).

Most of the respondents claim that, in the project teams in which they worked, or are still a part of, relationships are based largely on cooperation – as many as 11 people. They support this with the following statements: "We have many projects that are multidimensional (...) completing these projects is only possible thanks to a very strong collaboration between employees (8), or "cooperation is most important here, and the success of the project mainly depends on it"(10). When writing about cooperation in project teams, they mention mutual help, especially in difficult situations, e.g.: "Of course, if necessary, every one of us can count on the help or support of another person. We're happy to help each other, if the situation requires it"(1); "There was never a time in which an employee was left alone with a problem. Everyone was willing to help in order to solve the problem together. Very often I'm not able to complete all my tasks, because there are so many of them. Then I can always count on the support of the people I work with. As a member of the team, I also offer support to people who need help while working on projects"(2).

Willingness to cooperate may be based on personal characteristics. One of the authors of the analysed stories admitted that, in her case, the unwillingness to compete most definitely stems from her limited experience and short tenure at the company "(4).

The authors of these stories emphasize that cooperation is possible thanks to focusing on goals and achieving desired results. This is evidenced by the following statements:

- "We support and help each other on various levels because we know that we are a team, and we want to achieve the best results of our work" (1).
- "What's most important at our company is the feeling that we are a team, and that we strive to complete our tasks together. Our work is based on teamwork, no one here works alone and solely "for himself," we all strive to reach a common goal"(5).
- "The aim is to complete the project together, and without cooperation it would be difficult" (8).
- "Relationships are strongly based on cooperation in order to achieve the best results as a team. There is no room for competition here"(10).
- "Employees who prepare individual projects or their components are aware that their daily work contributes to the achievement of the objectives" (11).
- The key to cooperation are clear rules of operation, and the fact that project team members have specific tasks to perform. We can conclude this from the following statements:

- "There is no competition here. Everyone has their own tasks to perform, which they focus all their attention on. A clear division of labour eliminates competition" (1).
- "When assigning tasks, the manager, must familiarise individuals with the project, explain the business background, describe what needs to be done and what is expected. Other questions may arise during the project"(8).
- "Proper implementation of specific tasks by individual team members determines the quality, method and the completion time of tasks by others. The key factors are: transparent rules and adequate compensation based on results. Using measurable indicators for achieving objectives has a positive effect on accountability and mutual trust" (11).
- "Due to the small number of employees in the company we have a friendly work atmosphere. In last year's quarterly talks, 90% of staff specified our work atmosphere as the biggest plus of working at the company. We know our strengths and weaknesses, which makes it easier to delegate work and assign specific tasks to the right people"(9).

The essence of cooperation in project teams, according to the respondents, is the opportunity to submit ideas, and for relaxed, constructive discussion. One of the respondents, in support of the above statement, provides an example from their place of work: "A recent situation can prove that work relationships are based on cooperation. We were working together with the department on an advertising campaign for a key client. One of our colleagues had a different view on how to execute the project from the rest of the group and firmly stood his ground. We did not completely reject our colleague's idea, on the contrary, we listened to all of his recommendations and even implemented some in the project. Our colleague took into account the opinions of other members of the group, and thanks to the joint compromise we were able to communicate without competing and arguing whose idea is better. Together we have achieved our goal. The important thing is that we are able to listen to each other and understand different points of view" (5). Another respondent who shared her experience said: "Communication with the project manager is a two-way street, he is open to the exchange of opinions, views and ideas of employees. A good example here is the meetings he convenes in case of problems and to implement projects. During such meetings, employees and their managers have the opportunity to present their own ideas, discuss their advantages and disadvantages, implement them in practice, and to share the responsibility for sub-tasks, which result in the successful completion of the project "(6). Another respondent also appreciates the advantages of joint consultations, saying: "Most of the tasks that we undertake is done jointly, and if not, we consult each other at every stage" (12).

In reference to the open exchange of opinions, respondents repeatedly emphasised the role of brainstorming as a useful technique when working on projects:

- "We solved every problem together. Brainstorming always resulted in great solutions" (2).
- "The head of the project team communicates his ideas in meetings, and everyone else implements the project. Cooperation also plays a role when introducing a new product. During the meetings everyone can express their opinion on a particular product. Every opinion counts, which results in selecting the best product according to general opinion" (10).
- "The project allowed for hour-long group meetings during working hours in order to search for ideas, or brainstorm, divide tasks, and establish regular meetings to finalise the completed areas of the project" (12).

Our study also shows that the key aspects for cooperation in project teams include mutual respect, understanding, and equal treatment of individuals. The authors draw attention to the above mentioned issues in the following statements:

- "(...) I worked in a very close-knit team made up of professionals with extensive experience in the construction of telecommunication networks, who had a lot of compassion and understanding for others. I couldn't imagine a better team"(2).
- "We have mutual respect for our work and together we are a team" (4).
- "What I like about our workplace relationships is that there is no unhealthy competition there. Employees don't blame each other for failures, they don't criticise, and don't complain to superiors about other team members. Every employee feels safe. He knows that if a problem arises, there will be someone who will help him solve it. All employees are friendly to each other and treat each other with respect"(6).
- "In the development and implementation stages of the project everyone on the team is equally important. Together we determine who will be responsible for certain parts of the project: the feasibility study, the functional and utility programme, other supplements, and the appropriate application. The project manager coordinates the work and is responsible for the entire project. Individual members support each other in carrying out tasks, exchange information and insights, and benefit from the experience of other team members" (11).

Our analysis of the statements we've collected shows that working in project teams where there is cooperation between team members has many advantages, including:

- "Relationships based on cooperation are a huge motivating factor when it comes to undertaking new projects" (2).
- "I think that such projects and ideas are an interesting way to work together and get to know each other while working on various tasks, as well as a welcome break for employees from everyday responsibilities in order to fully commit and cooperate in a team setting. Recently for several months we were working on a project for building a new web tool for our audiences, which involved most of our departments, and integrated all employees who expressed their desire to participate in a joint cooperation working on the project"(9).
- "This type of work allows for flexibility and autonomy. Employees establish their own rules for cooperation" (11).

As it turns out, there are also situations that arise in project teams, which the authors associate with competition. Competition between team members occurs when employees strive to gain first place and get the biggest reward. This competition manifests itself in various ways. In reference to this behaviour, one of our respondents states: "It happens, however, that very ambitious people compete on the principle of: I will work more than you, I will take on more tasks, I'll stay in the office day and night" (8). Another worker notes that "there are people who wait for someone to make a mistake, and they are quick to report their colleague. I get very angry when I see this type of behaviour. These people are trying to compete with other employees. The competition between co-workers involves completing as many tasks as possible since these determine occasional bonuses for employees. These bonuses tend to be as high as half of the employee's salary, so they are something worth fighting for (...) Many times I have seen situations where coordinators have become negotiators between quarrelling employees. They also had to introduce discipline in the workplace and bring the arguing co-workers to order "(3). The same respondent draws attention to the "race" in submitting ideas: "An employee submitted a concrete solution to a problem, which was applied, then another worker submitted the same solution for another, but the same type of device, and it was the latter got credit for the idea and received a cash prize. I see this as a manifestation of

unhealthy competition. I, myself, presented an idea to my supervisor and have recently learned that this idea is one of the points of strategic action, though it is no longer my idea but my supervisor's"(3). Another manifestation of competition in teams is a reluctance to share knowledge: "I don't like the fact that some people want to keep certain knowledge solely for themselves and use it at the right time to "get their spotlight" (7). In turn, one woman experienced a lack of willingness to cooperate several times, which, in her opinion, was due to a large age difference. Several older workers made her feel that they don't like being supervised by someone so young, and a woman to boot. (4).

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

In today's competitive work environment, both competition and cooperation often occur simultaneously. This is demonstrated by other research as well as our study, which we present in this article.

The aim of our study was to gather information on the cooperation and competition between employees at their place of employment. In preparation for the study, we formulated questions for which we were seeking answers. First of all, we wanted to understand how respondents viewed cooperation and competition. It turned out that the terms used to describe cooperation within the project teams were associated with something positive, while those used in describing competition had negative connotations. None of the respondents mentioned any positive aspects of competition in a project team. We therefore assumed that cooperation is seen as a factor influencing the results of work of a project team, while competition is seen as a destructive factor, which hinders the achievement of the team's objectives.

Moreover, we were interested in whether the respondents experienced cooperation and competition, and if so, which of those occurred more frequently. It turned out that the majority of people (11) more frequently cooperated with others in project teams. One person admitted to being competitive. Of the 11 people proclaiming they experienced cooperation more frequently than competition, 4 provided examples of competitive behaviour that occur during interaction within the teams. Because respondents provided more examples of cooperation within project teams than situations in which there was competition between participants, we concluded that project team members, due to the nature of these organisational formats, cooperate more often than they compete.

Another question we asked was what fosters cooperation? On the basis of our study we concluded that the need for cooperation is mainly due to the desire to achieve goals and see the effects of the work performed, and the belief that obtaining better results is due to the joint efforts of all team members, often providing different skills. The importance of goal awareness, which determines the high level of commitment, is also noted by K. Kip (2014 p 3). Clear rules of operation and assigning specific tasks to team members are conducive to cooperation, as is the method of "assessing the actual contribution of each member of the project team" (Романова, 2011).

Research shows that the reasons for competition may be: striving to receive a higher award, the desire to prove yourself better than others, and to gain universal recognition. These reasons cause team members to strive to do "more work", lay claim to someone else's ideas, and be reluctant to share knowledge. Other authors also mention the problem of sharing knowledge and competing for superiority of one solution over another. Team members in project teams composed of skilled workers who have a high level of education and expertise, and have the ability to apply their skills to identify and solve unique problems, often consider themselves experts, which could lead to conflicts and, consequently, competing for their individual solutions to be implemented (Севастьянова И. Г., Стегний В. Н., Спосиб А. Г. 2010, pp 98).

The same authors also refer to competing for skills. They write: employees are aware that unique skills are highly valued in the market and that the joint project will require a combination of these skills, prompting them to engage in joint action. On the other hand, it can cause unhealthy competition for these unique knowledge and skills (Севастьянова И. Г., Стегний В. Н., Спосиб А. Г. 2010). Yet another reason for inter-team competition may be the temporary nature of the project. This awareness leads to a loss of perspective and a sense of uncertainty about the future (Ораев Г. 2012, p. 35, Севастьянова И. Г., Стегний В. Н., Спосиб А. Г.98), which can cause a tendency to engage in competitive behaviour, and increase tensions and misunderstandings. This internal competition may give rise to conflicts. Colleagues competing with each other are fighting for projects in which they may be involved in the future. This, in turn, is the cause of mutual dislike – it causes an unpleasant workplace atmosphere in which co-workers don't trust or respect each other. On the other hand, in the course of our research we found that competition can be driven by diversity in terms of age and experience of team members.

In conclusion, the cooperation of participants in project teams is essential, and is the key to the success of these teams and today's businesses. In order for this cooperation to take place the following is needed: understanding of the project's goal, trust, mutual respect and open communication (constructive discussion, exchange of knowledge and information). Cooperation appears to be especially important in the case of difficult, complex, and complicated projects that require high competence of the people who will implement them.

Our study focused on qualitative analysis, and the results are not subject to generalization for the entire population. They results can provide inspiration for further research. For example, it may be interesting to conduct a study on whether there is a relationship between work experience and education of project participants and their preferences with regards to cooperation versus competition, as well as the relationship between the specificities of the company and the tendency of its employees to focus on either cooperation or competition. We intend to use the results of both the literature analyses and this study to prepare a complex study (including the use of a survey and interview questionnaire).

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