

From Challenges to Opportunities in Educational Management during COVID-19 Pandemic: The case of Fun Science Romania

~ Ph. D. Student **Andreea-Mihaela Stoica** (Faculty of Management, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania)

E-mail: andreeastoica314@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper describes consequences of COVID 19 on Fun Science Romania, an organization providing educational services. It also reveals the best strategic options according to SWOT analysis. The aims of the paper are to present the challenges and opportunities in educational management during COVID-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has triggered an unprecedented social and economic crisis by terrifying the very core of human existence. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected entire business segments especially educational services for children because the main way of working – direct interaction- was completely disturbed. Numerous questions arise such as: What is the first thing you can do as an organization in times of deadlock ?, What options are left in the race of survival?, What are you heading for, as an organisation, in time of total uncertainty? In this respect, Fun Science Romania may provide answers as it is the Romania's leading science enrichment provider, delivering unique science experiences for children. This study is based on findings from fifteen years of practice in science events area.

Keywords: educational management, COVID 19, Fun Science, challenges, opportunities

JEL: A10, I20, M10

Introduction

Everybody defines difficulties differently but I really like the way Winston Churchill said it "Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts". The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has triggered an unprecedented social and economic crisis by terrifying the very core of human existence (Verma and Gustafsson, 2020). It continues to spread uncontrollably throughout the world; as of July 14, 2020, 12,403,888 people have been infected globally (WHO, 2020). Policies like "social distancing" and "stay-at-home" were discharging speedy, which severely damaged businesses across industries (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected entire business segments especially educational services for children because the main way of working – direct interaction- was completely disturbed- e.g., activities involving direct contact between consumers and service providers have been adversely affected by restrictions on movement and social distancing (Giritli and Olofsson, 2020).

We are talking about continuity in this study as well. When the entire world is locked in unprecedented global crisis, such as the one activated by COVID-19, the greatest bravery of an organization is to continue working in the most hostile environment hoping to reach a future point, which cannot be seen yet. But the question is: "How can we go on with it? Which is the best possible strategy in this context?" Our hypothesis is that the solution of organizational continuity relies in strategic alliances and partnerships, despite distances and isolation brought up by this pandemic.

Also businessmen and managers can not forget that the key to the profitability and

sustainability of future organizations is talent management in order to build successful business models, especially during the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Marinescu, et al., 2016; Toma and Marinescu, 2018; Tohănean and Toma, 2018).

Regarding the future, the leader of the future is trustworthy, capable to inspire others, open-minded, empathetic with strengthened digital capabilities, people-oriented, promoting transparency and caring for the environment. (Popescu, et al., 2019).

The aims of the paper are to present the challenges and opportunities in educational management during COVID-19 pandemic. The article consists of four parts. The next section reviews the literature. The research methodology is presented in the third section. The fourth section deals with results and discussion. Paper ends with conclusions.

Literature review

In order to better understand the context we have reached, we consider it appropriate to carry out environmental analyzes like SWOT analyze, a widely used as a strategic planning tool which includes in depth and critical examination of internal and external factors. Although it is not enough just to collect the appropriate factors.

As we all know, SWOT represent the acronym standing for Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats, (Wehrich, 1982). SWOT is a usually used tool for exploring internal and external environments in order to reach a systematic approach and support for a decision situation (Kotler, 1988)

According to Kurttila et al. (2000) the managers must interpret these factors from different standpoints and recognize the most

important internal factors, which may be called critical success factors. In addition, external factors should be reviewed in relation to internal strengths and weaknesses. Following these analyses, managers will have their keystones, the factors on which future success and strategies should be based.

We decided to apply AHP, a hierarchical decision schema, constructed by splitting the decision problem into its decisions elements for choosing the most important features using pair comparing method. AHP is a commonly used decision analysis method. The Analytic Hierarchy Process and its eigenvalue calculation framework are integrated with SWOT analysis.

Research Methodology

The research methodology was based on a Fun Science Romania study case. The case study method is defined as „an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” according to Yin. Fun Science Romania is a provider of educational services since 2005, offering the children a fun and nutty alternative of science experiences. It is a 1996

Spanish franchise that became a success in Romania as well.

Results and Discussions

Phase 1: Accomplishment of comparison between SWOT 2019 and SWOT 2020

By looking at quadrant Strength we can easily notice that the most two important features from 2019 simply vanished in 2020. We are talking about “competitive advantage” and “exceptional portfolio services”. Not only they vanished but they turned into Weaknesses which represents any organization’s nightmare.

At the same time, one can notice that a feature of Opportunities quadrant turned into the most dangerous threat. We are referring to “expansion of market/niche” becoming “market/niche shrinking”

On the other hand we notice that a threat turned into an opportunity, respectively “human resources crisis” became “abundant human resources”. We can also see that the opportunities have doubled, whereas the threats increased by a quarter.

The worst aspect is that also the weaknesses have doubled in 2020 compared to 2019.

Table 1 Fun Science Romania, SWOT Analysis, during 2019
S –Strengths, W-Weakness, O-Opportunities, T-Threats

<p>S1 S1 highly experienced owner (14 years) S2 strong social media engagement S3 ability to develop new services S4 customer focus S5 strong brand identity S6 home based location S7 competitive advantage S8 exceptional portfolio services S9 franchise relationship S10 high quality staff</p>	<p>W1 W1 lack of human resources W2 limited cash flow W3 lack of penetration in lower economic classes W4 short term contracts with clients</p>
<p>O1 O1 expansion into new markets/niche expanding O2 development of social media O3 the educational needs of society O4 develop strategic alliances co-branding</p>	<p>T1 T1 human resources crisis T2 political instability T3 economic uncertainties T4 negative perceptions and lack of understanding of science in Romania T5 diminishing resources in education T6 unfriendly legislative framework</p>

Table 2 Fun Science Romania, SWOT Analysis, during COVID 19 crisis 2020, key factors.
S –Strengths, W-Weakness, O-Opportunities, T-Threats

<p>S2 S1: highly experience owner (15 years) S2: strong social media engagement S3: ability to develop new service S4: customer focus S5: strong brand identity S6: home based location S7: great quality staff S8: Franchise relationship</p>	<p>W2 W1: limited cash flow W2: lack of penetration in lower economic classes W3: short term contracts with clients W4: limited flexibility in pricing W5: no standard operating procedure W6: no more competitive advantage W7: portfolio services not available anymore W8. disrupting the business model</p>
<p>O2 O1: expansion into online markets O2: development of social media O3: a strong educational need of the society O4: developing strategic alliances co-branding O5: media attention O6: digital economy, boom information technology services O7: abundant human resources O8: Increasing awareness of science and technology</p>	<p>T2 T1: easy to be mimic T2: market/niche is shrinking T3: no more events, or upcoming offline activities T4: strong economic uncertainties T5: absence of direct communication T6: cyber security risk T7: reject of remote learning T8: Shift in focus in digital media</p>

Table 3 Strategic opportunity window analysis model applied on 2020 Fun Science Romania SWOT Analysis
 SO –Strengths-Opportunities, WO-Weakness-Opportunities, ST- Strengths- Threats, WT- Weakness-Threats

<p>SO For “attacking strategy” we selected: S5 “strong brand identity “and O4 “developing strategic alliances co-branding” from table2.</p>	<p>WO For “defensive strategy” we selected O4: “developing strategic alliances co-branding” and W6: “no more competitive advantage” from table2.</p>
<p>ST For capitalization we selected: S5: “strong brand identity” T2: “market/niche is shrinking” from Table2</p>	<p>WT For mitigation measures we selected” W6: “no more competitive advantage” for T2 “market/niche is shrinking” from table2</p>

Phase 2: Identifying the four most relevant features of SWOT Analysis

According to AHP pair comparing method we split the features into pairs. We graded them by using 1 to 9 scale, where 1 is low and 9 is maximum grade.

Eventually we achieved the following:

Strength (2020): S5 “Strong brand identity”

Weakness (2020): W6 “No more competitive advantage”

Opportunities (2020): O4 “developing strategic alliances co-branding”

Threats (2020): T2 “market/niche is shrinking”

For SO “Attacking Strategy” we selected S5 and O4 from Table2.

S5: “Strong brand identity “has been chosen as the most powerful feature of strength quadrant according to AHP pair comparing method for maximizing the most relevant opportunities of O4 “developing strategic alliances co-branding”

For WO “Defensive Strategy” we selected O4 and W6 from Table2.

By using O4 opportunity “developing strategic alliances co-branding” we will try to recover the most precarious weakness W6 “no more competitive advantage” revealed by AHP pair comparing method.

For ST “Capitalization” we selected S5 for T2 from Table2

As regards the most dangerous threats, by using AHP pair comparing method, we identified T2 “market/niche is shrinking”. Thus, we consider S5 as being the most decisive tool to overcome the threat emerging from the desire of copying a strong, successful brand, as we all know it happens. The latter is an important factor in increasing any market.

For WT “Mitigation measures” we selected W6 for T2 from Table2

In order to overcome T2 “market/niche is shrinking”, the most dangerous threat according to AHP pair comparing method, we think that the best solution to rehabilitate the most vulnerable weakness W6 “no more competitive advantage” is to regain the competitive advantage by challenging the competitive environment of the market.

There are some limitations of our analysis such as:

- Some features of an organization can be both a strength and weakness at the same time.
- SWOT does not show how to reach a competitive advantage, so it must not be an end itself. We have already seen how important the competitive advantage as a result of the performed analysis is.
- SWOT is only a starting point for a discussion.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to understand the disastrous consequences of COVID 19 on Fun Science Romania, an organization providing educational services. It also shows the best strategic options according to SWOT analysis. We can easily notice how a 15 years

old organization, which is at the same time the market leader in its branch, fights for its survival upon the COVID-19 pandemic having a strong brand identity as its unique ally.

Could developing strong strategic alliances be enough to defeat one of the most dangerous threats for an organization, namely the market disappearance itself? This remains an open question, at the time of writing this paper, when the pandemic still affects our lives and the fight for survival continues for organisations.

With this knowledge, the executive team members and leaders can formulate a relevant, adaptive, innovative strategy that will guide the organization into a successful future. (Ionita & Stoica, 2019). We speak about the future in terms weeks rather than years, plans are drafted on short term taking into consideration the strategic vision established under “driving in fog” conditions.

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