ISCTE Business School
University Institute of Lisbon

The strategy of implementation of a Shared Services Center by Europcar

Mafalda Osório de Menezes Corrêa Arouca

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Supervisor:

Ph.D. Renato Lopes da Costa

Department of Marketing, Operations and General Management

ISCTE – University of Lisbon

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ABSTRACT

Between always uncertain conditions and rapid pace of change, companies face true challenges in such competitive environment when trying to achieve viable solutions to improve their performance in order to survive in the competitive world and more than that, to create value.

To accomplish those objectives, over the years, new ideas and revolutions have taken place in the organizational and productive path of the firms. One of the best and most recent examples of that fact is the appearance of so-called Shared Services Centers which have been in the recent years continually delivering increased value, reaching masses of productivity and cost savings as never seen before.

To better understand this kind of organizational model, it was developed a case study based on the contribution of a big multinational company Shared Services Center's employees.

Keywords: Strategy, Value, Competitive advantage, Shared Services Center

- JEL classification:

  L25 – Firm performance: Size, Diversification, and Scope

  L0 – Industry Studies: General

RESUMO

Entre condições sempre incertas e um ritmo de mudança acelerado, as empresas enfrentam verdadeiros desafios num ambiente tão competitivo ao tentarem encontrar soluções viáveis que melhorem o seu desempenho de forma a sobreviverem perante a concorrência e mais que isso, que criem valor.

Para atingir esses objetivos, ao longo dos anos, novas ideias e revoluções tiveram lugar na organização e produção das firmas. Um dos melhores e mais recentes exemplos deste facto é o aparecimento dos chamados Centros de Serviços Partilhados que têm vindo ano após ano a criar valor, a atingir níveis de produtividade e poupança nunca antes vistos.

Para melhor compreender este tipo de modelo organizacional, foi desenvolvido um caso de estudo baseado na contribuição dos trabalhadores do Centro de Serviços Partilhados de uma grande empresa multinacional.

Palavras-chave: Estratégia, Valor, Vantagens competitivas, Centro de Serviços Partilhados

- Classificação :

  L25 – Desempenho organizacional: Tamanho, Diversificação e Âmbito

  L0– Organização industrial: Geral

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1. Introduction

Since long, especially in the academic world we are used to hear the word strategy applied to many contexts. The study of the same is an ongoing process, existing many authors and researchers specialized in the subject with well-known names. Many of them and non-experts made fortunes trying to clarify it with all kind of buzzwords and different scenarios, with the outcome of only making things more confuse (Kane & Santoni, 2002).

Much time ago, strategy was just an abstract part of business, not seen as necessary or mandatory. As the business environment was nothing compared to what it is nowadays, things were much more stable, there was much less competition among markets and therefore much less obstacles to overcome and much less to plan.

Strategy has entirely changed the way of thinking organizations and its businesses. It has become a vital source of success for organizations and entrepreneurs. Nowadays it is known that to start a business and most important of all, to maintain it successfully, one of the first steps or even the first step is to well think and organize a strategy. It has become an organizational need to have one. The need to overcome obstacles, to perform better, to reduce costs, to innovate, to succeed, etc. These needs are attached to the one and only solution: strategy.

From knowing the necessary resources to achieve a given objective, strategy introduces the “how” part of the planning. Strategy allows organizations to know how they are going to get where they want to, through studying, making questions and planning to anticipate obstacles. This is where we reach the execution of strategy: planning. In this part, organizations define which the necessary resources are, how long will it take, among other pertinent questions.

It is mandatory that the organizational strategy is well communicated to all the stakeholders, along with its mission. This will help the organization to keep its direction with all the intervenient working through the same goals (Kane & Santoni, 2002).

Well formulating a strategy means that the organization will be able to anticipate the changes and overcome the unexpected events in the markets’ environment. It can never be only a simple study or quick definition of how are things going to be done. Strategy is far more complex and difficult than it seems and since long, building and executing it well has been seen as promoting a source of competitive advantage (Waal, 2011).

To better understand the importance of business strategy in practical terms, it was chosen the company Europcar, which is an international rent-a-car and market leader in Europe. Europcar has adopted a very interesting strategy, moving recently most of its European countries financial services to one and only center in Portugal (Shared Services Center) which was clearly a strategical decision taken by its management board with certain objectives that will be known further in this study.

Shared Services Centers are a whole new dimension of strategic arrangement for organizations, having a bigger and bigger presence in the business world and in the minds of management boards of big multinational companies, such as Europcar, BNP PARIBAS, Siemens, Grunenthal, among others. For that reason, this study will focus on the strategy of implementation of the Shared Services Center by Europcar.

Which are Europcar's values, mission or vision? What is the company's strategy? In the value chain, where does Europcar optimize value? What is a Shared Services Center and what are its competitive advantages? Why this strategical decision and was it right? Why did the company choose Portugal to implement it? All these questions are deepened throughout this study. Therefore, this research will go further on the impacts of strategical decisions applied to an international company.

Succinctly, this investigation will begin with a chapter based on theoretical approaches of several authors concerning themes and concepts important to understand before tackling the issue in practical terms. This will be followed by the study's methodology explanation, results presentation and discussion and finally the conclusions drawn in the same.

In theoretical concerning, the main contribution this study offers is the investigation of the strategical decision of an international company to implement a Shared Service Center in Portugal, aiming to fill the gap in the literature review about the topic above mentioned. In fact, there are several recent studies about Shared Services Centers, but none concretely about Europcar or a company who chose Portugal to implement its center.

This study can be useful in practical terms as well as it might be used by other companies that intend to study the possibility of making the same strategical decision as Europcar and improve the knowledge about Shared Services Centers in practical terms such as the opinion of workers and managers of a SSC. Furthermore, it is believed that the results of this study can help business managers and entrepreneurs to better understand the concept of Shared Services Centers and even help them to make their own strategical decisions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Definition of strategy

Given that the present investigation fits within the field of Strategy, it is essential to start by clarifying its concept resorting to the definitions presented by reputable authors. A variety of definitions of strategy have been produced, being in some cases significantly different, which makes it worth of attention for this reason alone (Smith, 1985).

Chandler (1962) argued that strategy is the identification of long-term goals of a company and the adoption of courses of action to achieve those goals with the available resources of a firm.

Andrews (1971) considered strategy as the definition of the main goals of the organization, along with the plans and actions needed to achieve them, which should be established according with the type of organization it would like to be.

Henry Mintzberg, a prestigious author concerning theory development in the field of strategy, defended that strategy corresponds to the deliberated or undeliberated actions taken to integrate the organization in the environment (Mintzberg, 1978). Mintzberg and Waters (1985) suggest a continuous reflection between "pure deliberate" and "pure emergent" strategies. In the first, strategies arise from study, reflection and planning and in the second, strategies just emerge without any planning.

Mintzberg (1987) sees strategy as the need to overcome the rivals and achieve the defined goals without many efforts. According to this author, strategy is a plan to win which has a set of rules to follow; a pattern based on a learning process; a perspective of acting according to the organization's vision; a position that defines which actions to be taken; a ploy in the moves to play in this survival game (Lopes da Costa, 2012).

Based on the assumption that strategy actually involves all the critical activities of a firm it can be said that strategy provides stipulated direction and purpose as well it facilitates the necessary changes when the internal and external environment of a firm demands it. The strategy of a firm can be seen as making questions and planning so that the basic objectives are fulfilled. As such, it is a pattern of decisions a firm makes (Hax & Majluf, 1988).

It can be analyzed as well in terms of establishing an organization's purpose about long-term objectives, action programs and resource-allocation. This is a more classical view. In this point of view, strategy is a way of defining concretely the long-term goals, planning ways and actions to achieve it successfully as well as determining the needed resources to do it (Hax & Majluf, 1988).

If the firm's long-term objectives change constantly, the sense of this approach decreases. This unstable scenario is very harmful for the firm and its stakeholders, customers, employees and stockholders. However, the contrary case, stability of the long-term objectives does not guarantee the perfection of a firm's programs. This should be complemented with the continuous re-adjustment of the short-term strategic actions that must be aligned with the long-term goals and critical steps in resources strategic allocation (Hax & Majluf, 1988).

Porter was one of the main authors developing theories about strategy. This author argued that the gist of strategy establishes in choosing to perform activities in a different way than the competitors, which demands creativity and firm's introspection (McCarthy, 2003).

Companies need to define their own unique strategic positioning in an industry and not focus on having the best positioning, clarifying what kind of value they want to create, to whom, and how the value created will be different from its competitors (Porter, 1980).

Positioning is all about how the organization is seen by the customers, relatively to the competitors. In other words, it corresponds to the immediate perception that consumers have on their minds when thinking about the organization (Aker, 1991).

Over the years and with industries evolution, companies must be more and more flexible to react rapidly to competitive and market changes. They must analyze its own practices and study better ones to achieve the best results. Resources must be used in the best way in all the firm's activities to achieve efficiency. Competences must be acquired to stay ahead of the rivals (Porter, 1998).

Hereupon, it becomes necessary to understand organizational values concept. Organizational values correspond to the patterns for which an organization stands for (Walter, 1995). It is a sort of 'soul' of the firms, which highly impacts it (Hitt, 1990). Values provide a common direction in a daily basis for all the employees and members of an organization, consisting in the 'ground' of the organization which leads it to accomplish its mission and achieve goals (Posner & Schmidt, 1983)

The term "strategy" refers to the long-term scope of an organization and its decisions about product offer, market range and competitive approach (Wickham, 1998).

A firm's strategy is all about understanding an industry structure, defining its relative position within the same, and making decisions to either change the industry's structure or the firm's position within the industry's competition to achieve better results (Richard, 2001).

An industry's structure will define the growth possibilities of a firm as well as its earnings potential and define what is possible to achieve while the firm's relative position in the industry defines its strategic decisions and actions (Richard, 2001).

In essence, strategy is a firm's template in what concerns to the resource allocation decision-making. At a business-level, strategy is the decision made by the management-board of what costumers to target and the offer needed to fulfill their needs. From these decisions arise the group of activities which comprise the firm's competitive advantage (Porter, 1996). It is difficult to identify a concrete definition of competitive advantage in literature. Although, Sigalas et al. (2013) recently elaborated a definition that includes all the potential views of this concept. These authors mention that it is "the above industry average manifested exploitation of market opportunities and neutralization of competitive threats." (Sigalas et al, 2013, p.335).

Strategy is not static. It should be able to be modified and allow changes in the organization when internal or external environment conditions demand so and should also give discretion to the employees to be innovative and arrange ways to operate better while moving towards the same objectives and without breaking the codes of conduct of the firm (Rylander & Peppard, 2003).

Strategy is in this context, not a plan but a process. It needs to be reviewed and redefined if needed, based on the changing internal and external conditions. This can be very challenging and difficult for the employees at the same time. The only aspects that can hold a firm together and succeed in this occasions are the strong beliefs and values along with the union of the members of the organization (Rylander & Peppard, 2003).

Strategy has two main reasons for being the core business process, lying at the heart of any organization. Firstly, all other processes usually tend to flow from it. It is senseless to conceive innovation processes or supply chain policies without defining strategy first. Secondly, it is not possible to outsource all the process of strategy-making (Smith, 2007).

The definition of strategy's concept born from the will of the practical in transforming the subjects related to this field in theory. Since the beginning of the 60's this definition was introduced in the universities. As such, many approaches to this definition emerged but the essential to retain is that there is only need of strategy due to the existence of a concrete problem which can be resolved in many ways (Lopes da Costa, 2012).

In this way, it can be concluded that independently of the definition, strategy always converges to the need of creating value from various points of view (Lopes da Costa, 2012).

2.1.1. Strategy-Making

Strategy-making implies not only selecting or creating a strategy as also applying it into the 'real world', in other words, put into practice (Harrington et al., 2004).

The process of developing a strategy is as important as the selection of the wanted strategy for an organization and depends highly on the context (Pretorius & Maritz, 2011).

In terms of strategy-making, two different approaches can be identified: deliberate strategies and emergent strategies. The first outcomes from a more formal process, implying rational and comprehensive analysis while the second are not necessarily a result of a deliberate plan but an incremental and trial-and-error type of making which comes into being consistent along the way. Organizations tend to implement one of the two or even a combination of both (Harrington et al., 2004).

These are opposing views in what concerns to making strategy but they are not mutually exclusive. Harrington et al. (2004, p.17) argue that the deliberate view and emergent view should be considered as "ends of a continuum with multiple elements". This is a thought also shared by Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) as well as by Mintzberg and Waters (1985).

Deliberate strategy-making is seen as a rational and analytical approach and allows to assess external conditions, plan and coordinate internal actions and define a common direction to the organization (Ansoff, 1965, 1991; Schendel & Hofer, 1979; Andrews, 1981).

The rational approach is many times associated to a higher type of control where the organizational leaders become responsible for the good selection and implementation of the strategy, coordinating the systems and processes of the organization (Maritz, Pretorius, & Plant, 2012).

On the other hand, the emergent type of strategy is seen in organizational contexts when low-level managers implement actions or strategically decide aspects without the knowledge or approval of the top management (Mintzberg, 1994; Burgelman, 1996; Anderson and Nielson, 2009).

Another distinctive characteristic between both types of strategy-making is the separation between planning and implementation. While the deliberate approach is characteristic of a consistent process of definition, implementation and evaluation (Idenburg, 1993) where the implementation is only started after a careful design of the strategy selected, in the emergent approach, strategy's definition and implementation happen at the same time and not by pre-formulation process, which is more risky (Maritz et al., 2012).

Although, there is no best strategy or strategy-making but effective ones. An effective strategy is the one that "fits" in the firm's needs, combining the conditions of the external environment with the firm's own essence. Every firm has its own essence which is formed by its culture, values and mission as well as its relations with the environment (Smith, 2007). A firm's mission is specific commitment that is explicit to all the members and time-restrict. It clarifies the firm's purpose, direction and values, influencing all the employee choices and behaviors (Hirota, Kubo, Miyajima, Hong, & Park, 2010).

A well stipulated strategy anticipates the way in which an organization should react to the changes in the external environment, planning internally which actions should be put into practice and identifying the consequences on the product, price, sales or services of the organization for example (Waal, 2007).

Long since, stipulating and implementing a well-defined strategy has been seen as the main motive or way for firms to reach competitive advantage (Hitt & Stadter, 1982).

Strategy development process can be analyzed from an organizational culture point of view, from the market's point of view and from the firm as a system itself. The ideal is to take into account a little of every view (Smith, 2007).

Wall (2011) found in his study six main characteristics or reasons for which strategy is important in sustaining and developing organizations especially big and high performance ones, which are:

- **It imposes a consistent vision that stimulates and challenges the members of the organization**. Well implemented, strategy will persuade all the stakeholders of an organization making them a united group which works for the same goals based on a winning strategy or big idea that the management-board has introduced and shared. The organization parts become motivated and struggle for a common ambition, being motivation-guided (Collins & Porras, 1994; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Quinn, O'Neill & St.Clair, 2000).
- **It defines clear and specific goals**. Setting ambitious but also measurable and realistic objectives is one of the aims of strategy. This raises the organization aspiration which works to reach the proposed targets without creating demotivation and deviating from the focus (Jennings, 2002).
- **Equilibrates short-term goals with long-term goals.** To achieve long-term objectives of the business it is necessary to establish short-term goals and obtaining them, making it possible to plan against future obstacles and strategy makes this possible. It manages the organization in order to balance short-term activities and actions with long-term planned achievements and growth (Bloom & Reenen, 2006; Challis, Samson and Lawson, 2005).
- **Creates a clear perception of the organization's direction.** Common strategic mind-set among the stakeholders of the organization. If the strategy is well-communicated to the group, they will know what matters the most, having awareness of each individual role in the organization as well as each department/ business unit's role and common purpose (Denison et al., 2006; Joyce et al., 2003; Moynihan & Pandey, 2005).
- **It enables the organization to distinguish from the rest.** Strategy allows the company to gradually grow and progress. Through its planned actions it will make advances taking advantage especially from high-risk opportunities which consequently have high-return profits. It also permits to overcome unsuccessful actions by developing many new options and alternatives.
- **Balances internal aspects with external environment.** Allying the organization's objectives, vision and goals with the requirements of the external environment. By reviewing the short-term actions organizations constantly intend to fulfill costumers' needs. Strategy should always be based on "what-ifs" questions and aware of the high

uncertainty of the markets. It also should be made based on resilience more than on optimization (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006; Joice et al., 2003).

Although every organization needs a strategy and having one can allow an organization to survive, it is not by itself necessarily a success guarantee. Its competitors will have a strategy as well. The crux is that the strategy should be unique, setting the organization apart from its rivals. This argument is reasoned by Porter (1980) and several recent studies (Waal, 2011).

From a deep study of 259 organizations during a more than thirty six years period, Harris and Ruefli (2000) concluded that an organization unique strategy is a paramount factor for improved performance.

Delmas et al. (2007) found that companies within the energy sector preferred uniqueness in order to be more valued by the (potential) costumers.

In a comparison between low and high performance Small and Medium Enterprises, has been concluded that the high-performance SMEs favored obtaining uniqueness strategy rather than efficiency-based ones (Lester et al., 2008)

Last but not least, Taylor and LaBarre (2006) argued that only nonconformist organizations with completely unique strategies would succeed and be the winners in the business competition.

Concluding, it is not only choosing a strategy and well-implement it that will consequently be more important in the competitive environment, whether it is any of the generic business strategies that will be explained further ahead, but much more finding a unique strategy capable of creating value to the costumers and being better than the competitors within the same industry (Waal, 2011).

The essential during strategy-making process is to recognize the main characteristics that will enable the organization to stand-out from its rivals and after that, exploiting forms of utilizing those resources in order to reach sustainable competitive advantage (Waal, 2011).

Thereby, there is no best proclaimed strategy for any organization in any industry (Porter, 1980).

2.2 Types of strategy

2.2.1 Corporate vs Business strategies

The distinction between corporate and business-level strategies is an old and durable theme in the area of strategic management (Bowman & Helfat, 2001; Hofer and Schendel, 1978). The difference between these two levels of strategies is reflected in multidivisional organizations. In these, the chief executive officer (CEO) and the corporate office set a corporate strategy and put in charge of the managers of each unit the more detailed considerations (Watson & Wooldridge, 2005).

The firm's strategy as a whole is sometimes referred to as corporate strategy, opposed to strategies of small businesses within a firm. At a corporate-level, the question to be done is "in what area(s) of business (es) should we be?" (Hofer & Schendel, 1978: p.27). After this question comes the resource allocation matters among businesses, also at a corporate-level (Watson & Wooldridge, 2005).

On the corporate level, strategy is the definition of the industry or market in which an enterprise wants to act, product range it will offer and the available resources allocation among them. On the other hand, business level strategy is the one which designates the tools used by the firm to develop a distinctive performance among its rivals (Andrews, 1971).

On the other hand, there is business-level strategy and concerning to define it, the question "how can we compete in a particular industry or product/market segment?" (Hofer & Schendel, 1971).

Business strategies is the organization's strategy within each industry which it competes in. This means that if a firm is present in more than one different industry, it should have separate individual strategies for competing in each one of them (Beard & Dess, 2017).

Hofer and Schendel argue that "at the business level, strategy focuses on how to compete in a particular industry or product-market segment. Thus, distinctive competences and competitive advantage are usually the most important components of strategy at this level" (1978, p. 27-28).

Business-level strategy is seen as the differentiation of an organization's strategic characteristics relatively to all the other organizations competing within the same industry (Hofer & Schendel, 1978).

2.2.2 Generic Business strategies

As the focus of this investigation is business strategy, it will be conducted a detailed study and explanation of its implicit concepts in order to better understand and frame some topics of this thesis, despising corporate strategies.

Without a doubt, the academic researcher who boosted the most to the field of strategy was Michael Porter. Porter also introduced the concept of generic strategies.

Along the years, many types of business strategies have been identified and introduced (Chrisman, Hofer & Bolton, 1988; Porter, 1980). Despite this fact, Porter's generic strategies remain as the most commonly accepted and supported types of strategies and the most referred in academic researches (Dess et al., 2004; David, 2003; Wheelen & Hunger, 2004; Thompson & Stickland, 2003) and in literature (Miller & Dess, 1993).

In a competitive environment, a firm's survival and success is based on creating and sustaining a competitive position. Porter (1980) identified three consistent strategies that can be applied individually or in combination and which can be used to stabilize a competitive position in the market (White, 1986).

Business strategy can assume three types. The three generic business strategies differ in dimensions other than functional. Implementing each one of them successfully requires different resources and skills. The generic strategies also involve different organizational configurations, actions, procedures and incentive systems. Also different kind of leaderships may be required in each type of strategy, which leads consequently to different people and cultures inside the organization as well as values and atmospheres (Porter, 1980).

If an organization achieves lower costs for its products or on the other hand, higher product or service quality (by using differentiation on its products or by being better in what it offers) than its rivals, it means that it is unique and consequently it is valuable and successful (Ketels, 2006).

In the process of implementing a chosen generic strategy, the direction of the firm is continuously making decisions about type, time, quality, steps of its resources exploitation with the aim to develop valuable assets such as being the cost-leader, innovative technology, distribution network or prestigious reputation that will constitute the organization's competitive advantage and lead it to achieve its proposed goals (Amit, 1986).

Introducing the three generic strategies:

1. Cost leadership

This strategy is perhaps the clearest of the three. Following it, a firm aims to be the low-cost producer or the cost leader within an industry. Its scope is broad and it serves many segments in an industry and may even operate in other related industries (Porter, 1985).

To achieve such cost advantage, firms will put a considerable focus on trying to control production costs, enhance their utility capability, analyzing materials suppliers or distribution channels and minimizing costs such as human resources, research & development or marketing and advertisement (Prajogo, 2007).

Day (1984) related the price sensitivity of the costumers to the viability of a cost leadership strategy. This is one of the main conditions to adopt a cost leadership strategy but it is not sufficient by itself. The bigger the price sensitivity of the costumers is, the bigger the probability of succeeding in the market with cost leadership against the other firms.

The forms of cost leadership are diversified and depend on the structure of the industry. Although, cost leadership is only viable if cost structures vary across the competitors and not only in a way related to the output but in terms of quality management. It means that it can be adopted if it is possible to exist economies of scale in the production or economies independent of scale as learning effects, distribution channels or access to inputs. Perhaps the second ones are more viable to implement cost leadership (Murray, 1988).

The economies independent of scale can be grouped in three types: access to lower costs raw materials, access to product or technology and access to distribution channels. Whether or not these economies can adopt cost leadership is dependent on external factors and industry structure (Murray, 1988).

Economies of scale are the other viable durable basis to implement cost leadership. This type of economies result in the decreasing of average costs of production as the quantity produced increases (Prince, 2006).

This strategy, when based on economies of scale, can only be successful or guarantee a better performance than others if only one organization can achieve it and this occurs when the optimal point of operations is more than a half of the market in question (Porter, 1985). However the optimal scale of operation depends on the production, distribution as well as product and market conditions. So, similarly, these also depend on industry structure (Murray, 1988).

As said, economies of scale and economies independent of scale can be two ways of implementing a cost leadership strategy. But lower costs or cost advantages may arise from process innovations, learning benefits, staff reduction or other type of reductions, product design which reduces production time or costs, reengineering, etc (Allen, Helms, Takeda, & White, 2007).

If a firm considers choosing a cost leadership strategy, it is necessary to analyze the costs evolution along the time to conclude if costs reduction may clearly be reached and maintained (Amit, 1986).

Fundamentally, cost leadership strategy finds its basis on elements that allow the organization to achieve cost advantage and maintain them, sustaining its position (White, 1986).

Pure cost leadership strategies are characterized by using low-cost raw materials, focusing on human resources productivity and having the sufficient capital to sustain necessary investments as inputs. As output these organizations will commonly have easily manufactured products or services with efficient distribution based on price discrimination preferences (White, 1986).

A cost leadership strategy is well-implemented and managed when the business establishes, puts into practice and markets a product or service comparably more efficient than the rivals in the same industry (Allen et al., 2007).

2. Differentiation

Differentiation is building a product with noticeable different characteristics offered to the customer such as product design, brand new technology, brand image, packaging, sales service (Murray, 1988). Alike the other strategies, Differentiation has main conditions for its success, although alone they are not self-sufficient. Costumers given importance to product's attributes other than price is an example of a mandatory condition.

This strategy has the inverse relation to price sensitivity which Day (1984) referred to be a factor related to the cost leadership strategy success. This means that in the case of differentiation, customers will value more the attributes of one product disregarding its price. If the product has few attributes, its value weight to the customer will be low and consequently the customer will be extremely price sensitive and will care little about the level of the product on other attributes. "If costumers do not value products that differ along nonprice dimensions, they will not value a differentiated product and will not pay more for it" (Murray, 1988: 394).

Differentiation based on building superior products depends on the capability of a firm maintaining that superiority while facing the competitors' probable imitation. While an industry matures, this task becomes substantially difficult which makes innovation an unlikely way for sustainable differentiation. Hereupon, two other bases for product differentiation have been receiving much attention recently: quality and service (Peters, 1987).

Product quality can be defined as the ratio of its actual performance to its claimed performance, consequently quality variation will have a big impact on sales as the industry matures and customers became aware of the product's quality through many ways. The importance of this impact will depend on the cost of low performance to the customer. If this cost is high, than it can be concluded that a differentiation strategy can be viable by using product quality and reliability (Porter, 1985).

The cost of acquiring a product is not only the price of it but also factors as inconvenience and uncertainty. If the cost of making a purchase is low, the differentiation can be based on service through more convenient locations, pre and post-sales support, handy parking, shorter checkout lines for example (Murray, 1988).

Concluding, differentiation strategy can assume multiple forms but first it will depend on customers' perception and appreciation between offers. When a range of products is new, innovation in the design may be the best way to achieve uniqueness but as an industry matures, the capability of maintaining that uniqueness decreases and the preferable way to maintain differentiation is through quality, reliability and service (Murray, 1988).

3. Focus

This generic strategy is based on the choice of a restrained competitive scope within an industry. The firm selects a segment or a group of segments in the industry to serve exclusively. It focuses on a particular buyer group, geographic area market, product line, among other forms (Porter, 1985).

From the three Porter's generic business strategies, Focus strategy is the one that causes the greatest confusion. Porter (1985) attempted to clarify this confusion by arguing that the choice of a focus strategy is independent of the choice of the other two.

The choice of a focus approach has to start by the need of differentiate its product offer from the other existent offers at the same market and from this point arises many times the confusion between a focused strategy and differentiation (Murray, 1988).

Focus strategy has two forms. Whether it can assume a cost focus or a differentiation focus. While on the first, a firm aims a cost advantage in the target segmented of an industry, in the second a firm seeks a form of differentiate itself from the rivals in the target segment. Both are based on differences existent between the firm's target segment and other segments within an industry.

Firm's choice on the focus of which factors depends in which dimension is a product's attribute (including its price) valued by the customers. Firms should deduce the importance of each attribute to each costumer and identify if the market can be segmented on the basis of customer needs. If the costumers' preferences are roughly the same, a focus strategy is not viable. The success of a focus strategy can be based on the heterogeneity of customer preferences, even if this factor is not sufficient to determine whether or not the strategy is viable. The market should have negative or inexistent synergies between segments before a focus strategy is adopted (Murray, 1988).

The target segments must have customers with unusual needs or on the other hand the production and delivery services related to the segment must differ from the other industry segments. Most industries have a variety of segments and each one means different customer needs or preferences in which a focus strategy can be implemented (Porter, 1985).

A firm which implements focus strategy must take advantage of the underperforming of its rivals in some target of the industry, which is the case of broadly-target competitor, opening possibilities for differentiation focus. Broadly-target competitors may also be over performing, exceeding the needs of a segment, meaning they are probably also exceeding the necessary costs, which means that there may be a possibility for a firm's cost focus in which it fulfills de needs of a segment and no more than it.

2.3 The Value Chain

The value chain is one of the most important themes in this investigation, whereby it is essential to clarify its concept which will lead to a better frame the conclusions of this thesis.

The term 'value chain' was firstly introduced by Porter (1985) and it is frequently used in the field of strategy. It refers to a generic activity template which is used to analyze and improve an organization competitive position (Sheehan & Foss, 2009).

In order to help managers to understand and implement one of the proposed strategies, Porter (1985) introduced the value chain framework. This template decomposes the firm into its performed individual activities that are engaged to create value to the final-consumer. A first level activity analysis is based on comparing the activities segregation of the organization to the organizations' rivals.

This is done to understand if the activities performed by the competitors result in more value to the costumers or involve less costs and if the rivals are performing similar activities in the same way but more efficiently or if they are performing different activities or in different ways (Porter, 1991).

It can be said that the diagnosis of the competitive capabilities of an organization depends on its disaggregation into all of its activities and identification of the ones that create the most value or margin (Lopes da Costa, 2012).

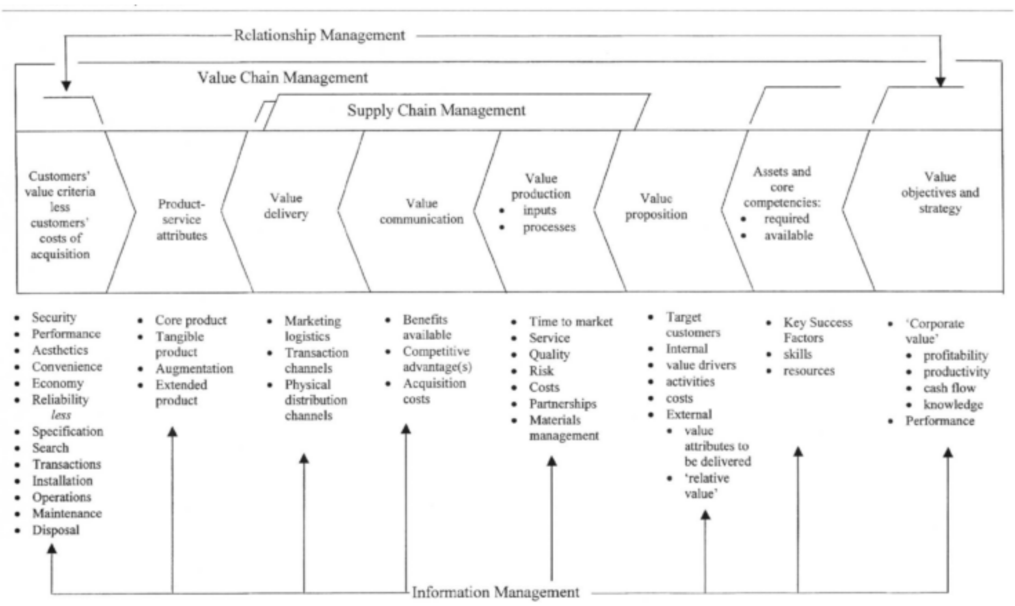


Figure 1: Porter's Value Chain Font: http://groundwork.mit.edu/cdvc/

Then the assignment is to identify the reasons why the organizations' activities involve lower costs and outcome higher differentiation. In this point starts the second level analysis which will allow understanding a fuller picture of an organization competitive position. Porter (1991) proposes that the answers to this are the activity drivers.

Activity drivers represent abstract or relative characteristics of activities in the context of the firm and business as well such as location or scales (of activities or markets) (Sheehan & Foss, 2007).

The relation between drivers and organizational performance is positioning. Drivers are factors that are somewhat under the control of the management and that influence the value resulting of an activity or its incurred costs. Drivers will allow to understand why a firm's value chain generates more or less costs and value than the competitors (Porter, 1985).

Also among the activities there is a separation between primary and secondary activities. The primary activities relate directly to the product's physical development or service execution while the secondary activities are the ones which support the primary with the material provision, technologies or human resources (Lopes da Costa, 2012).

Within an organization, value chain measures the added-value in the many stages of business which include both primary and secondary activities from purchasing raw-materials through producing, communicating, distributing, supplying and serving the final-consumer (Crain & Abraham, 2008).

From its introduction, the value chain has proven to be very useful in a variety of contexts, but mainly in three points which are cost analysis and reduction, organizational differentiation among rivals and product development (Crain & Abraham, 2008).

Brown (1997) considers that value chain is a tool used to separate a business into different activities that are identified as being strategically important. This separation process will allow the organization to identify the main sources of competitive advantage through developing these activities in cheaper or more efficiently ways than its rivals.

Slywotzky and Morrison (1997) developed a costumer-based approach of value chain in which the costumer is the main reason for every step taken by an organization. Hereupon, the top-management has the following tasks:

- Identify the customer's needs and wills.
- Discover the best channels which will supply those needs and wills.
- Focus in products and services that fit into those channels and fulfill customers' requirements.
- Find the inputs needed to develop those products and services.
- Identify the competences and processes needed to the inputs.

The value of any product or service is the achievement of meeting all the customers' priorities, which are the most important things to the customers. So much that they will pay to get it whatever the price is and even change supplier if they cannot get it (Slywotzky & Morrison, 1997).

Following this line of thoughts, it emerges the value opportunities topic, which are based in identifying those customers' priorities and developing, communicating and supplying the identified value. A strategy's perspective based on the value creation: creating value is the goal of strategy. By organizing its businesses with knowledge and relationships, firms desire to obtain competences to create value to its customers (Normann & Ramirez, 1993).

From this arises the conclusion that the value chain is an analytical and facilitating form in value strategy, which desires to position an organization in the right place on the value chain, conceiving the right business, products and market segments and choosing the right activities to add value (Normann & Ramirez, 1993).

Porter (1985) referred that value chain is essential to each organization, explaining that each action can only be taken if it is justified by creating more value to the customer than it creates additional costs and also because an organization's competitive position depends on the effectiveness of the value chain as an entity and not only its position as a connection to the value chain.

With globalization, the value chain becomes an even more pertinent tool in what concerns to identifying business opportunities. Walters and Lancaster (2000) consider that the value chain is a business system used to create value to the final-consumer and realizing the goals of member stakeholders. Also another concept is important in this subject: supply chain management. It concerns to the management of the relations between key stakeholders and organizational activities that happen in the process of value creation (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

Hence the value chain arises as a tool for establishing business' mission while the supply chain orientates the strategic direction (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

Also in contexts of expansion, the value chain comes up as an essential tool for the organizations. If an organization desires to expand itself, a change in its chain's structure may be necessary. If it desires the maximization of value creation, it is necessary to identify how this can be achieved within the value chain through changes in technology or improvement of processes and this depends on the understanding of all the processes present in the value chain (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

A typical structure of the value chain can be observed in the Figure 1. The value chains' structure differ from organization to organization. Its focus is value maximization and cost optimization and given that, it is necessary some criteria or method for deciding on the type of structure (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

There are different aspects that can influence this decision. It should be evaluated if economies of scale or scope can be implemented. Therefore, avoiding fixed-costs or transfer it to variable costs while achieving product or service differentiation and cost efficiency at the same time means greater attractiveness for the organization (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

In this case, transaction costs become important. These refer to analyzing the market (customers and suppliers), negotiating and implementing (delivering of customer value, new technology, product availability requirements, etc) on a contractual basis (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

More and more, it can be observed a replacement of activities integration in the value chain by coordination. This is happening as result of the new technologies impact on operations management such as more flexible manufacturing systems or lean manufacturing systems numerical control which facilitates the 'differentiation-making' at lower costs (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

Also, markets passed from segmentation to fragmentation and the organizations started specializing in core competences and outsourcing activities that internally were performed with higher costs or inefficiently. This allows the organization to focus only in the core activities of the value chain and specialize or improve even more, achieving cost optimization (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

The value chain requires a special attention to the value and costs views. Managers are usually needed to negotiate lower prices with the suppliers. Their achievement will be the main criteria of a successful performance. Negotiations that are directed to quality improvements with no costs increase represent added value to the costumer (Walters & Lancaster, 2000).

Porter (1998) later introduced the strategic framework in which the value chain settles "the activity-based view". This is a tool used to analyze the organizations competitive-level using exclusively its activities as basis. Porter (1985) argues that the firm's competitive position can only be measured by dividing the firm into activities such as manufacturing, storing, transporting, training and marketing.

From this point it will be possible to understand where is the customer value being created and indicate the firm's competitive advantages. Competitive advantage is the firm's ability to create and potentiate more value than its competitors, making its activities efficient in different ways (Sheehan & Foss, 2009).

Porter (1980, 1985) refers two generic strategies as keys to superior performance. One is producing at lower costs than rivals while having average quality and prices. The other is how to persuade consumers to pay any high price for a product they believe it is valuable and worth the price while at the same time not incurring in higher production costs.

The question that arises is how can organizations achieve superior competitive positions based on these strategies? Porter (1985, 1991) answer is based in the activity level. Michael Porter (1985) argues that an organization's competitive position cannot be understood by analyzing it as a whole but yes looking at the activities it performs.

According to Porter (1985) defining firm's strategy begins with finding forms to increase the willingness of the customers to pay for a product or to decrease the costs occurred from the firm's individual value chain activities. This will result in the definition of the firm's strategic position which means how it will do things different from its rivals.

Porter (1985) argues that there are crucial characteristics related to the activity-based view:

- The activities of a firm are the focus of the analysis. The firm should be divided into activities which have different costs or performances.
- Activities are grouped in two types: primary and support. The first ones are directly related to the customer, creating value for the same. The last ones emphasize the value created by the primary activities.
- Systemic view is required for the analysis. The value chain is used to optimize the business level of a firm rather than its individual functions.
- Cost and value drivers included. These are structural factors that justify why the costs and values created by one firm are different from its competitors. Manipulating

drivers will set the positioning of the company defining if its low cost or differentiation comparing to its rivals.

2.4 Shared Services Centers

Shared services center is a relatively new concept which has been gaining importance and being more and more a target of studies in the area of organizational design since the early 1990s with the intensification of phenomena like globalization, informatization, deregulation and transformation of complex organizations (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

There are various definitions of the term “SSC” that differ in important characteristics of the concept. Despite this fact and not being one unique definition, there are several characteristics which are common to the many existing definitions and that are referred frequently (Schulz & Brenner, 2010).

Schulz and Brenner (2010) found that the following characteristics are mentioned by at least fifty per cent of the relevant literature:

- Consolidated processes of an organization.
- Engaged in support activities.
- Reduction of costs is the main goal.
- It is client-oriented focused.
- Alignment with external competitors.
- Independent organization.
- Operated like a common business.

The concept of shared functions in the organizations is not new, however SSC (Shared Services Center) is. The first is based on the administrative structure of a firm and its transaction costs. It is engaged in making “make or buy” decisions (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

On the other hand, shared services are based on the value chain and resources theory perspective which sees the company as a storage of competences and resources used to achieve competitive advantage and also highlights process structure characterized by separating core or primary processes from non-core or supportive processes. Core processes are compiled in a basic structure which can be functional or divisional, while non-core are organized in derived forms of a structure based on expert teams and groups (Gospel & Sako, 2010).

SSCs are the centralization of administrative or back office support functions within a business unit for the benefit of achieving cost savings. Its implementation allied to a properly management and efficient conduction can result in savings of 25 to 50 percent or even more, due to the economies of scope, lower salaries and processes efficiency resulting from centralized flows and standardized procedures for all business units (Honey, 2016).

This model of organization is based on the concentration of resources, despising the functions. In SSCs, a business unit still maintains the decision-making power and uses economies of scope with shared business systems and consistent standards (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

The ambit of shared services can be narrow, focusing in only one process or broad, including a panoply of processes, activities and even departments. Some global companies are now implementing SSCs with departments from accounting and reporting, through Human Resources, Information Technologies into legal services and more. The possibilities are endless (Honey, 2016).

SSCs objectives are cost savings without sacrificing the quality of the services provided. In some cases, back-office functions can be consolidated to save costs. This model is more than an outsourcing as it allows the different units to remain the control of their own responsibilities' decisions while gaining with the cost reductions and standardization of all best practices and processes (Tomasino, Fedorowicz, Williams, Gentner, & Hughes, 2014)

By rule, SSCs are arrangements of one or more organizations in which all of them consolidate activities, supporting non-critical business operations of each the organizations-members in an isolated business unit that operate those activities as a core business (Tomasino and al., 2014).

The role of a shared services center is to coordinate its activities with sets of resources, services and information provided by partners. To understand its concept, it is necessary to understand that SSCs are similar to the concept of outsourcing. In the last, one company is the client of another company, which is called the service provider (supplier). The first company decides to outsource its activities in the value chain in which it is not competent for many reasons. It becomes the network core around which reunite many network members, suppliers, services and others that a company produced individually (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

The logic behind a shared services center is different from an outsourcing. In a SSC it is one service supplier that supplies services to the clients which are members of the network. The redesign of an internal organization leads many times to a SSC, due to the managers will to find a new way of growth. They internally redesign in a way according to the value chain and the theory of resources (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

Implementing a shared services center means that a company will externalize their activities and services and transfer them to that center, which is a supplier, a provider of services that together with the company forms a network (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

Creating an SSC and transferring business processes to its competence is a strategic decision of the company itself. There are two viable approaches about defining a shared services strategy: “top to bottom” or “bottom up”. Both relate business process assessment to its importance to the organization. In the first, matter of evaluation is the importance of functions that are common to all the business units of the organization. The second is used on the assessment of the non-core functions to identify possible benefits or risks of sharing them with others (Porter & Millar, 2007).

With the transfer of business processes to its responsibility, it is the SSCs duty to maintain the quality of the services provided to its clients but also, to develop and improve them. The center becomes also a coordinator and supervisor of its services and of the use of resources on the network level (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

To create an efficient SSC and guarantee this is a long-term choice for achieve steady competitive advantage, it is necessary that members redesign its internal organizations, rethinking its organizational patterns. Globalization of business demands new models of organizational structure (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

The interorganizational relations, more than the internal type of organization each company has individually, require that these relations are viewed as a system of communications and information dealing between the employees of the SSC and those working in organizational units spread all around the world, making together an international network of an organization (Janssen & Wagenaar, 2004). In this sense, implementing a shared services center demands a special effort to create relations and a culture based on trust, respect and standards follow along all the SSC structure (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

The way in which interorganizational relations are established has a big weight in the success of the firm. It is essential that organizations well-define the activities that are supposed to be performed within an individual organizational unit (shared services center) or should be performed as mutual activities. This is mandatory. As well as a SSC having its own management, legally defined activities and own operational budget (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

The success and efficiency of a center depends on the organizational design that should be defined in a way that the processes criteria's are combined with the users and set up in flexile ways in order to track information and use employees' expertise to fulfill the needs and requirements of the partners (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

2.4.1. Organizational design

Nowadays markets' environment are extremely complex due to its constant changes, the competition increase, the technological improvements, informatization and globalization (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

Organizational design has been gaining more and more importance in firm's survival, being now one of the most important tools for the managers that use it to upgrade the firms' operations making it more efficient and consequently improving the firms' competitive position (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

Survival is imperative and finding the best ways to do it is absolutely mandatory to succeed in this survival fight of the firms. Integration of organizations into groups (alliances, mergers, acquisitions, partnerships, clusters, etc.) becomes necessary. Firms are now open to collaboration as they are to competition, they have learnt to connect to each other and re-adjust to change successfully and to be more competitive (Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osborn, 2005).

Their main goals are to save resources and access information and knowledge and at the same time focusing on the reliability of the output. The conditions for achieving it are based on two strategic choices of firms' design: interorganizational relations and redesign of interior organizational (partnerships). The last step is to identify the processes that are meant to be re-allocated from the company's level to the partnership's level, or the processes which doesn't exist and need to be introduced now (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

Through this interaction of resources and competences, sharing knowledge and information, companies will use interorganizational processes to achieve a successful business management and improve competitiveness. In this way, integration emerges as an efficient way to succeed and compete on a global level (Lazarević & Petković, 2012).

3. Methodology

3.1. Investigation Model

For better understanding of the present study intention and framework of the guidelines followed throughout the same, an investigation simplified model is presented below.

3.1.1. Research Problem

As it can be read previously, the main purpose of this study is to deepen the strategy of Europcar and its implementation of a Shared Services Center in Portugal.

Nowadays the competitive environment in the different markets and industries is becoming more and more aggressive. As such, companies can't stop analyzing and thinking better moves and strategies to overcome obstacles and itself.

External pressures such as countries economic crisis which is responsible for the decrease of clients' purchase power, political and restrictions, competitors' innovative moves or internal pressures such as the employees requirements, technological failures, among other factors, is resulting that companies must adopt measures in order to survive.

Rent-a-cars market is no exception. This market is fragmented specially in Europe, in which five groups detain around 65% of the market share, with the remaining being distributed by independent, national or regional companies. With mobility coming as a very actual theme, driven by consumers behave changes, social changes, more and more people search for alternatives to owing a car, finding in car sharing, ride sharing or car rentals their solutions.

As such, Europcar being the rent-a-car leader in Europe and one of the biggest in the world, has to constantly search for answers and procedures to maintain or upgrade its performance in a sustainable and efficient way, as its competitors pressure it doing the same.

Therefore, companies have to search for solutions and find opportunities such as market gaps or innovation ideas through which upgrades and success can be achieved.

Considering the growth of Shared Services Center and its successful utility in other companies, Europcar seems to have find in it its opportunity to create value. Thus, it becomes worth of interest to understand deeper the company's strategy as well as Shared Services Center potentialities and added value.

Summarized, the main aim is to obtain information about Europcar's strategy and the way it makes the company sustainable and successful, particularly focusing on its Shared Services Center implementation as a way to understand this kind of organizational model, its goals and competitive advantages.

3.1.2 Research Objectives

This investigation focus on the way Europcar structured its strategy, implementing a Shared Services Center in Portugal in 2014, as a way to maintain or create a competitive advantages relatively to its competitors. More specifically, the research has the purpose to:

1. Understand the company's strategy
2. Study Europcar's value chain.
3. To know the concept of Shared Services Centers and perceive why Europcar chose to implement one.
4. Determine the reasons why Portugal was chosen.

Objectives	Research Questions	Bibliographical References	Questionaries/Interview Questions
1. Understand the company's strategy	RQ1. What are Europcar's values and mission? QP2. Which is its business strategy?	Porter, 1985; Mintzberg, 1978; Andrews, 1971.	1. In which values does Europcar settle? 2. Which is its mission? 3. Which is its business strategy?
2. Study Europcar's value chain	RQ3. What is the area of the value chain in which Europcar optimizes value and in which way?	Porter, 1985; Walters & Lancaster, 2000	4. In which part of the Porter's value chain does Europcar optimize value? 4.1. In which way?

3. Know the concept of Shared Services Centers and perceive the objectives Europcar pursued by implementing one.	RQ4. What is a Shared Services Center? QP5. In which Strategy does it fit? RQ6. Which are the reasons why Europcar chose to implement one? RQ7. Which advantages did Europcar acquired with it?	Lazarević & Petković, 2012; Schulz & Brenner, 2010;	5. Why the strategical decision of implementing a Shared Services Centers to Europcar? 5.1 Was it a right decision? 6. Which were the competitive advantages acquired by Europcar after this implementation? 7. In which business strategy should a SSC fit? 7.1. Why?
4. Determine the reasons why Portugal was chosen to the implementation.	RQ8. Which motives lead to the choice of Portugal as the right location?	Lazarević & Petković, 2012; Schulz & Brenner, 2010;	8. Which were the criteria used in the choice of Portugal to this implementation?

3.1.3 Research Questions

An investigation always has underlying objectives. To achieve it, it is necessary to define the study's research questions, around which the investigation is focused. These will provide a path necessary to clarify it, reaching consequently the purposed objectives.

The purposed subject of this thesis has as main research question:

"Which are the reasons and advantages acquired with the strategical decision of implementing a Shared Services Center for Europcar?"

The above mentioned question pursues the objectives presented in the previous point and arises the need to clarify key concepts attached to it such as strategy and Shared Services Center. These and other concepts also related directly or indirectly to the question presented are analyzed in the theoretical framework section.

While focusing in the core question, the present study will also explore the following sub questions:

- What are Europcar's values and mission?
- Which is Europcar's business strategy?
- In which part of the chain value does Europcar optimize value? (Through which activities?) How?
- What is a Shared Services Center?
- In which strategy does it fit?
- Which motives lead to the choice of Portugal as the right location.

3.2. Sample characterization

3.2.1. Population definition

The interest of this study is to understand strategy in a practical approach, in this case the strategy of the company Europcar. Questions such as: What is, in fact, strategy? What is Europcar's strategy? In which strategy is a Shared Services Center included? For which motives did Europcar adopted it? These questions are to be clarified through people directly connected to the company, more specifically senior leads and managers of the Europcar's Shared Services Center.

This group of individuals was chosen due to the belief that they hold in-depth knowledge about the company's strategy and more detailed aspects of the Shared Services Center, which can lead to clear conclusions and a deeper understanding about the strategy of implementation of the Shared Services Center by Europcar.

As such, the elements chosen for the study sample included two top management board directors (Financial Director of Europcar and Shared Services Center Operational Director) and ten department leads.

3.2.2. Data Sources

The present study is focused on Primary Data, which means that the data is collected by one or more individuals, being treated and analyzed by the same (Church, 2002). As the objective of this investigation is to obtain an insider perspective on the characteristics of the company, opinion and information about the Shared Services Center, there were two types of research methods applied to collect information from the respondents: questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The second ones were used in order to provide a more complete analysis of the topic in question and to clarify eventual points that could not be responded through the questionnaires. The fact that by contacting the top executives personally allows to obtain more precise information, both parts can require clarifications and even ask extra questions, weighed on the decision of choosing the method to apply. The same was decided based on the type of results desired.

Although not being mandatory, it is very common to complement questionnaires with a semi-structured interviewing. Thus, a combination of both is seen by Harris & Brown (2010) as an appropriate way of achieving confirmatory results.

A well-structured questionnaire allows to collect important data from the group of individuals selected to integrate the study's sample, later leading to certain results and conclusions which provide a closer vision of the strategy of implementation of Europcar's Shared Services Center. The interviews come as a complement of the questionnaires in a semi-structured form which means that although there was a script with pre-defined questions, there was also space to introduce other questions or requiring a more developed answer, when pertinent.

Both questionnaires and interviews assume the same questions, with the only difference being based on the fact that the questionnaire is characterized by having closed questions with answers being limited to the ones indicated in the same (even though there exist open questions, mostly are closed) and the interviews being made of open questions. Both can be found in Appendix A.

Both directors were firstly asked if the interviews could be recorded and conveniently informed that their answers were to be used in an academic study about the company. Both responded positively and so, interviews were conducted in the pre-defined script order. Directors were then introduced with the topic and motives of this investigation development.

All respondents, either in the questionnaire or interview forms, said feeling comfortable with the questions or pleased about giving their contribution to the study which they considered very interesting. The questionnaires and interviews were after transcribed and translated to English due to a facilitation of understanding and communication during the same.

It is believed that despite being recommended or even demanded more types of data analysis, it is the point of view and information given by the respondents which work in the company and occupy management positions and certainly hold valorous information about it that represents the most important added value to the present study.

4. Results Presentation

4.1. Researcher Position

Before starting the discussion itself, it is important to highlight that there does not exist a personal relationship between the researcher and the individuals who integrate this study. The connection existent is strictly professional.

4.2. General Considerations

Questionnaires and interviews took place from April 2017 beginning until the end of May. Contacts were made online through e-mail and social platforms due to communication facilitation motives. The interviewing appointments with the Directors were made in the Europcar Shared Services Center.

From a total of forty questionnaires sent to different department leads and managers, it was possible to recall fifteen answered which corresponds to a response rate of 37.5%. Fortunately all of the answered questionnaires detained valid responses which represents a 100% realization rate. This means that the response rate obtained represented well the Shared Services Center reality and individuals' opinions. Concerning the interviews, five invitations to interviews to the top management directors of Europcar and of the Shared Services Center were sent, being only possible to schedule two of them. The interviews depended not only on the replies to the invitations as on the availability of the directors who usually have a much occupied schedule.

It is important to emphasize that it was due to these seventeen individuals contribution that it was possible to achieve results and to conclude this dissertation.

4.3. Research Results

Before a deepening of the questionnaires and interviews being made, it is important to briefly introduce the respondents' profile.

Both research methods outputs will be presented in graphics and tables to summarize the information as well to get a better and easier picture of the answers and posteriorly analyzed in order to present the conclusions obtained.

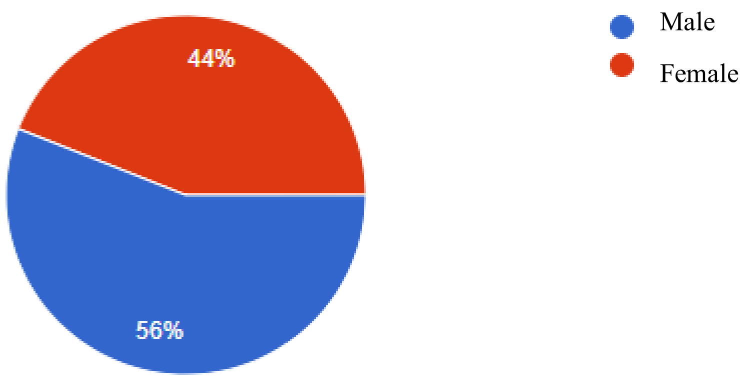
Even though the number of respondents is not very high, not always was possible to reach consensual answers in some points. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that although the effort put in the data analyzing, it is the diversity of answering that enriched this investigation through different perspectives about the same topics inside Europcar.

4.3.1. Respondents Profile

To have a better picture of the individuals profile, graphics and tables which reunite the proper information will be presented.

It should be noted that an additional effort was done in trying to reunite the most diversified type of respondents possible, not only being gender-balanced but also in what concerns to department, age and scholarity level, as it can be observed in the following illustrations.

i. Gender

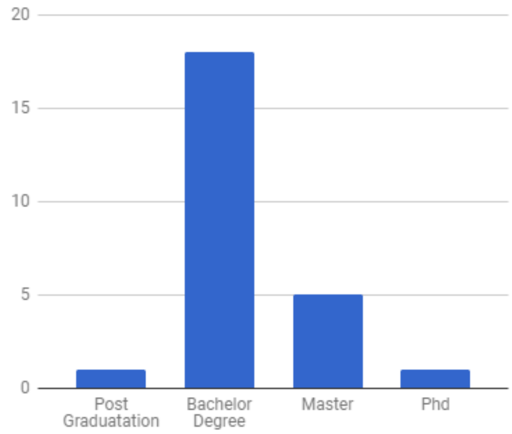


Ilustration 1: Respondent's gender
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

ii. Age

Ilustration 2: Respondent's age
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

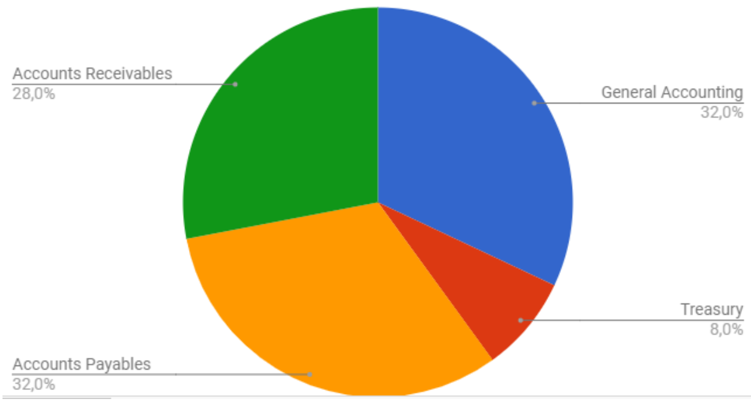
iii. Scholarity Level



Ilustration 3: Respondent's scholarity level
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

In Europcar's Shared Services Center, the employees' qualification level is high. The majority owes at least Bachelor Degree and this fact can be observed through the sample of 25 respondents chosen within 18 holds a Bachelor, 5 a Master, 1 is Post Graduated and 1 has a PhD.

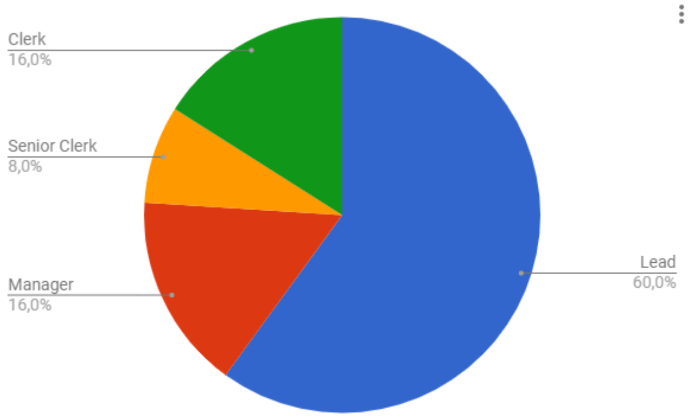
iv. Department



Ilustration 4: Respondent's working department
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

Concerning the participants' working departments, it can be observed in the graphic above there is at least one respondent of every main department existent in the Shared Services Center, which are four. It is important to state that each main department has its respective sub-divisions. Therefore, the participants working for instance in Accounts Payables may not all work in the same sub-department.

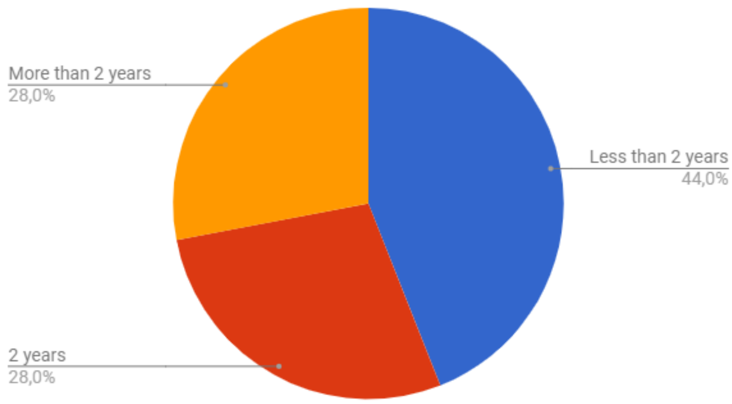
v. Role



Ilustration 5: Respondent's role in the company
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

Relatively to the roles, as it was stated before, it were chosen leadership positions, as it were most likely to provide more complete and pertinent information. Therefore, the majority of the respondents assume the Lead role, which in the Shared Services Center corresponds to the role immediately below Managers. The other 20% of the participants are Managers and only 8% Senior Clerks which is the role below Leads.

vi. Time at the company



Ilustration 6: Respondent's time at the company
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

The Shared Services Center started in January 2014, which means it has around three years and a half. The fact that nine respondents have spent two years or more at the company and some even being pioneers in the same, means that they could hold more knowledge and precise information about Europcar. The other six have spent less than two years.

4.3.2. Questionnaires' results

The questionnaire findings will be presented in the same order in which the correspondent questions were placed to the respondents.

a) Values of the company

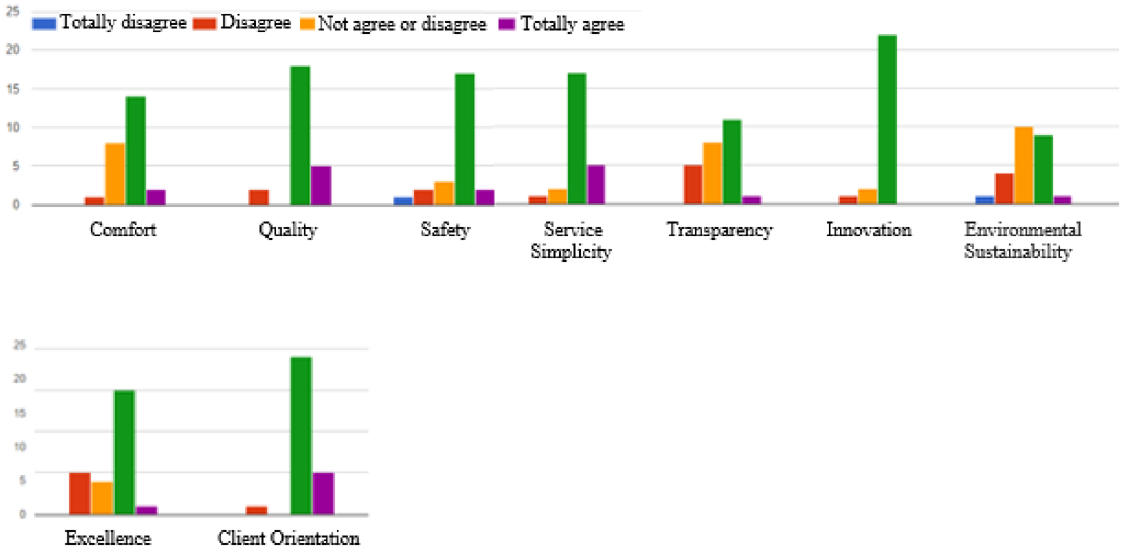
The questionnaire starts with introductory questions about the Europcar (Group) itself to better understand the company's basis and business concept.

It initiates with a question elaborated to perceive which the participants consider to be Europcar's values, corresponding these to what the company believes in and what it works for in daily matters.

This was a closed-ended question, with a group of nine values proposed to the respondents as possible answers.

As such, the five values that the majority of the individuals consider to be part of the company are **Innovation, Quality, Service Simplicity, Safety and Client orientation**. 88% of the respondents agree that Innovation is one of the company's fundamental values, 8% do not agree or disagree and only 4% disagree. Quality is agreed by 72% and totally agreed by 20% of the respondents as a value followed by the company and disagreed by 8%. Regarding Service Simplicity, there are 68% of the individuals which agree, 20% totally agree, 8% neither agree nor disagree and 4% disagree. About Safety, 72% agree and 20% totally agree, with only 8% disagreeing. Concerning the last one, it is even more consensual to the individuals that Europcar is client-oriented. 76% agree, 20% totally agree and only 4% disagree.

On the other hand, the values proposed that present a higher level of disagreement between the respondents are: **Transparency** – only 4% totally agree being a value of the company, 44% agree, 20% disagree and 32% have no opinion; **Environmental Sustainability** – 4% totally agree, 44% agree, 20% disagree and 32% have no formed opinion; **Comfort** – 56% agree and 8% totally agree, 32% do not agree or disagree and 4% disagree; finally "Excellence" – 64% agree, 16% have no opinion and 20% disagree.



Ilustration 7: Consideration on the company's values
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

b) Mission of the company

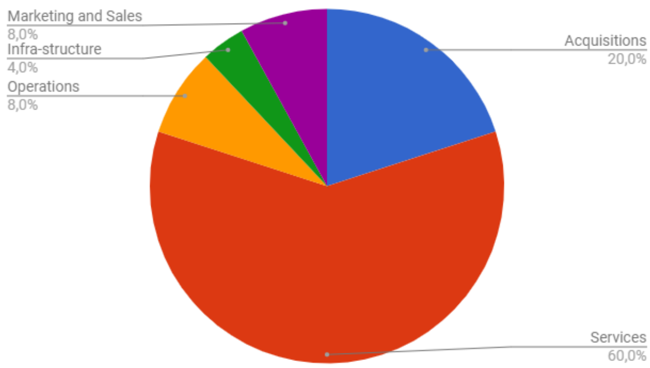
About the company's mission, **80%** of the individuals pointed the same answer: **"Providing a car rental service easily and conveniently, with continuous improvements focusing on customer satisfaction"**.

Only a minority of individual pointed both other possibilities as the correct answer. **12%** responded "Providing a car rental service based on an excellence and unique experience offered to the clients from the beginning to the end of the same" and **8%** considered "Providing a car rental service with focus on the efficiency maximization of the vehicles, always respecting the security parameters, allowing a cost minimization" as the company's mission.

c) Europcar's strategy

The present study unveil that 88% of the participants of the study consider that Europcar's strategy is Differentiation. On the other hand, only 12% of the individuals stated Cost Leadership as the right answer.

d) In which part of Porter's value chain does Europcar optimize value?



Ilustration 8: Areas which create more value
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

Through the questionnaires' results it can be observed a discrepancy between the participants' answers. Analyzing the graphic presented above, it can be verified that 60% of the respondents stated "Services" as the main area of the Porter's value chain in which Europcar mostly creates and optimizes value while other 20% of the individuals consider "Acquisitions" as being the main source of value creation. Also "Operations", "Marketing ans Sales" and "Infra-structures" were referred in the answers, even though by a smaller group or respondents (8%, 8% and 4% of the individuals, respectively).

This question had also a sub-question, related to pointing justifications for the area (which they have chosen on the first question) being the one that optimizes value in the company. Therefore, the ways stated for **"Acquisitions"** being the main area in which the company optimizes value are:

- Vehicle utilization ratios.
- Negotiating prices and quantities through the group's turnover with vehicle's constructers.
- Negotiating quantities and low loans' interest taxes.
- Partnerships with vehicles' brands and purchase of the same by lower market values.
- Contracts with vehicles' suppliers

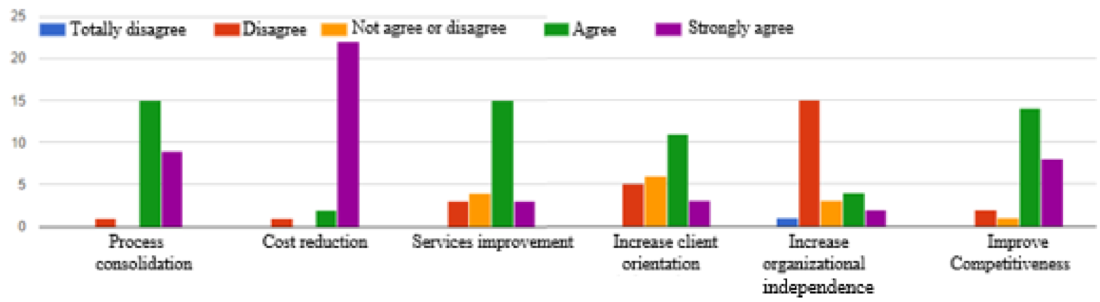
On the other hand, the answer which had a bigger number of votes, "Services", is seen as being the main area of value creation through:

- Betting on the continuing improvement of services' quality and diversity, always maintaining the focus on the clients' needs supply and on maintaining them and attracting new ones.

- Betting on innovating and differentiation.
- Focusing on a quality, client-orientated and simple service, with fast and easy check-in and out and with different important characteristics to the client such as the fact of the ability to deliver the vehicle in a different station from the one it was rented.
- Great stations' location, renting facility and panoply of options available
- Easy and effective service.
- Service organization and many available stations.

In the case of "Infra-structure" and "Operations", these areas are considered by a smaller part of the respondents as creating value through cost minimization and operational efficiency as it is essential to the customers' satisfaction and attraction and representing in Europcar's case the main source of value creation, respectively.

e) Why choosing to implement a Shared Services Center to Europcar?



Ilustration 9: Main reasons to implement the SSC

Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

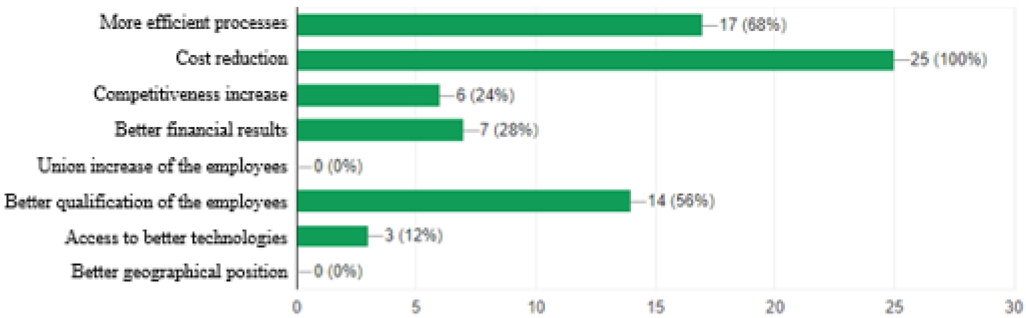
This was a closed-ended question. Its answers possibilities and results are illustrated above. As such, it can be observed in the graphic above that the objectives which lead to the company's implementation of a Shared Services Center in Portugal considered with greater unanimity by the participants from Europcar are: "Cost Reduction", "Processes Consolidation", "Services improvement" and "Improving Competitiveness". Among these, it was "Cost Reduction" the factor that reached the higher level of concordance (88% of the participants have answered agreeing strongly and 8% agreeing. Only 4% do not agree).

On the other hand, the reason less seen as plausible justification for this strategical decision taken by the company is “Increase Organizational Independence”, with 60% of the individuals disagreeing and 4% totally disagreeing with it. Concerning “Increase Client Orientation” it is the most opinion-divided between the respondents, being that it is agreed to be a potential reason by most of the individuals (56%) but 20% disagree and 24% has no opinion about it.

f) Opinion about the strategical decision

This was the question with most unanimous answer of all, with 96% of the respondents saying that the decision to implement a Shared Services Center for the company was a right decision and only 4% pointing it as irrelevant, which corresponds to one only respondent.

g) Competitive advantages acquired with the Shared Services Center



Ilustration 10: Competitive advantages of the SSC
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

Analyzing the answers concerning the competitive advantages which the individuals considered the Shared Services Center has granted to the company, it can be observed in the graphic above that all the respondents have a positive opinion on cost reduction being one of the biggest advantages acquired and also higher process efficiency is seen by a great part of the individuals (68%) as another of the competitive advantages that the Shared Services Center has brought to Europcar.

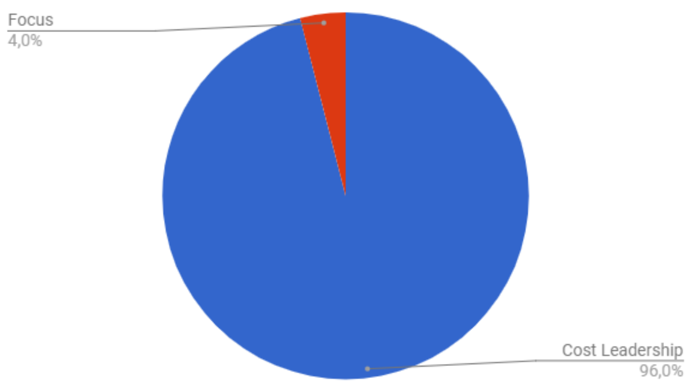
Another of the most pointed competitive advantages acquired is the processes/tasks efficiency increase (68% have a positive opinion about it) and also the the better qualification of the employees (56% of the individuals consider so), once most of the employees of the Shared Services Center did not work before in the company.

On the other hand, there were two hypotheses not seen by any of the individuals as valid, which are “Greater employee union” and “Better geographical position”.

The other three possibilities’ results have no considerable weight for the present study, with 24% of the individuals considering relevant the “Competitive increase”; 28% choosing “Better financial results” and 12% referring “Access to better technologies”.

There were no other spontaneous advantages pointed by the participants rather than the presented hypotheses on the questionnaire.

h) Business strategy of a Shared Services Center



Ilustration 11: Business strategy of a SSC
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

This was another of the most unanimous question in terms of answers. Analyzing the answers obtained by the collaborators it can be seen that 24 individuals have answered Cost Leadership as being the right strategy to place a Shared Services Center and only one has answered Focus as the right business strategy.

h1) Why?

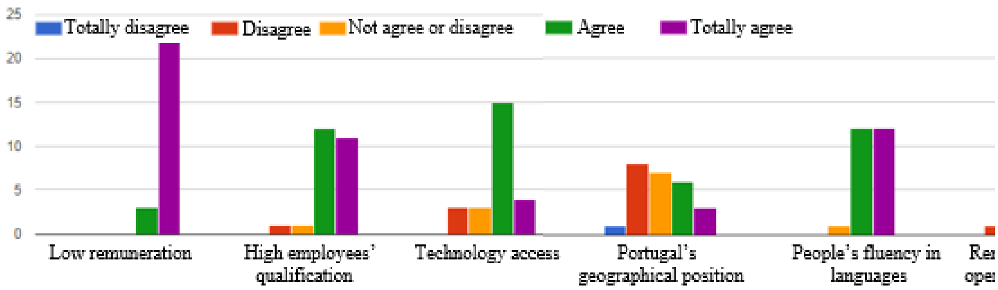
To justify the choice of the business strategy of a Shared Services Center, individuals had pointed different reasons, although most of all coincide. These are presented below:

- Processes and tasks optimization

- Taking advantage from scale economies
- Low salaries and compensations to the employees
- Cost reduction in general (operational, technologies etc)
- Absence of non-term contracts established with the employees (high rotation)
- Relocation of the financial services (centralization) reduces costs

On the other hand, the only respondent that pointed focus as the business strategy of the Shared Services Center justified the choice with the focus on the client by each country's team operating for the same. The effort of the teams operating for Italy, France, Spain and others is to fulfill the needs and ambitions of the top management board of the same (that are still operating in the country and not in the Shared Services Center of Europcar in Portugal).

i) Criteria to choose Portugal as the right place for the implementation



Ilustration 12: Main criterias to choose Portugal for the SSC
Font: Questionnaires to the collaborators of Europcar

In the figure above it is possible to understand the reasons why the participants of the study believe Portugal was chosen to the implementation of Europcar's Shared Services Center.

The main reasons pointed are "Low remuneration", criteria which reached the biggest level of consensus: 88% of the individuals totally agree and 12% agree; also "People's fluency in languages" is a criteria agreed by 96% of the individuals (among which, 48% totally agree) and disagreed by only 4%; 92% of the respondents see "High employee's qualifications" as a crucial factor for the choice of Portugal. Also "Rents costs and other operational costs"; and "Fluency in languages" were highly referred reasons to justify the choice of Portugal as the country of implementation.

The most controversial reasons are "Geographical position of the country" and "Technological access" with some of the respondents agreeing and others disagreeing with these being reasons to the country decision.

4.3.3. Interview's findings

Questions presented to the head deputy of Europcar's Shared Services Center were in the same order as the questionnaires, with the only difference being based on the open-ended questions, giving the respondent the possibility to answer to its own will.

a) Values of the company

The head deputy of the Shared Services Center mentioned that the values followed by Europcar are: Trust, Transparency and Efficiency.

b) Mission of the company

This question concerned Europcar's mission and the answer given was that the company mission is to provide the best service in the most efficient and easy way to the client.

c) Europcar's strategy

The business strategy referred by the head deputy of the Shared Services Center as being the strategy of the group is Differentiation.

The choice was justified by the best and unique service that Europcar provides in its stations around the world, differentiating itself from the many competitors existent. Asked also what does specifically differentiates Europcar from its rivals, the deputy responded that the level of the service provided to the clients is superior to the rivals, based once again on the company's values Transparency, Confidence and Efficiency.

d) In which part of Porter's value chain does Europcar optimize value?

This question answer ended up being answered in the previous one and therefore the answer was once more in the services area.

d1) In which way?

According to the head deputy of the SSC, services optimize value to the company due to the fact that people identify Europcar as being the rent-a-car where they can find the best service in the market, polite and pleasant attendance, easy and convenient procedures, the possibility to choose the best vehicle or the one that better suits to each occasion and always find brand new and clean vehicles.

e) Why choosing to implement a Shared Services Center to Europcar?

The financial area was too big before the existence of the Shared Services Center. There were around five hundred and ten people working for Europcar's financial services across the corporate countries (Portugal, Spain, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Italy and Belgium). It made no sense, so this fact was a considering weight for proceed to the implementation.

The idea of a Shared Services Center arise from the need to reduce employees, to the will of having one and only information system (ERP – Enterprise Resource Planning), in this case Oracle, those 510 people were all working with the same core business and so it made sense to centralize the back-office's operations in one only place and reduce the employees in the countries referred above.

d) Opinion about the strategical decision

This seems to be a consensual thought across the superior and management boards of the Shared Services Center. Its head deputy has no doubts it was clearly a right decision, considering the financial results and the success of the SSC until now.

e) SSC business strategy

The head deputy referred that the idea of building any SSC is always to have a cost leadership strategy. The mandatory objective of any Shared Services Center is to have lower costs than the ones the company used to had in the original country where the services were performed.

Although, for the head deputy, more important than the cost reduction is to make better than before. To perform the work better than it used to be performed. In the opinion of the same, it is already being done. Current Shared Services Center's employees have at least a bachelor degree, while in the countries it was not like this (on the other hand they had twenty-five years of experience in the company) and consequently the current employees add particularities that did not exist before. This means that the head deputy does agree with the obligation of always pursuing lower costs but at the same time the services have to be performed with more quality, which is not easy to achieve, she argues.

d1) why?

Fundamentally, Shared Services Center are a model of cost reduction for two reasons. The first is *"labour arbitrage"* which means that the cost of one person working for Europcar in any other country is much higher that it is on the Shared Services Center and second, processes harmonization which results in the possibility of reaching economies of scale because the services are centralized and people are able to perform the tasks in the same way in the same department across the operated countries in the centers. While in the original country there were ten people working, because today the services are centralized, it is possible to do the same work only with five people. So, there is less employees at the same time they have also lower costs than before.

f) Competitive advantages of the SSC

When it comes to competitive advantages acquired with the Shared Services Center implementation, the head deputy of the same argues that on her opinion, rather than cost reduction, knowledge centralization is much important. It is now on the Shared Services Center that the knowledge is retained. It has become a source of knowledge repository because it is there where people know about all the information system and specific company's programs. The advantage of exchanging ideas and upgrading processes achieving improvements is huge.

Without the Shared Services Center, it was unlikely that a worker from France spoke to another of the same department in Germany. And currently that is possible and very common, which allows the employees to exchange knowledges and know-how.

On the management point of view, the head Deputy has no doubts it is the cost reduction the biggest competitive advantage acquired. The expenditure with the financial area employees is much lower than it was before, influencing the group's financial results.

g) Portugal's choice

Concerning the motives why Portugal was chosen to implement the Shared Services Center, it was possible with the interviews to take notice of facts unknown before and impossible to know through leads and managers.

There was also Barcelona (Spain) and Leicester (United Kingdom) in the equation of places possibilities for the implementation.

In the end Lisbon was the choice made due to a set of reasons:

- The high unemployment rate among graduates (around 50% at the time) which meant it was possible to have qualified manpower.
- The great level of languages knowledge in Portugal, which was not a fact, for instance, in UK where the majority of people cannot speak other languages but English.
- Tax benefits conceded by the Portuguese Government to companies which hired recently graduated.
- Although not so directly connected, the buildings' rents cost in Portugal.

Relatively to Barcelona, it presented very attractive characteristics as well such as the number of German speakers in the city, the also not high cost rents of the buildings, among others. In the location definition, there was a set of criteria define and the different locations competed through ratings of those criteria. In the final, Lisbon results were one point higher than Barcelona.

Concerning Leicester, it was not a strong possibility, this location was on the equation justified by the existence of two headquarters in the United Kingdom and so if it was possible to take advantage from this fact, using one of the infrastructures to be the Shared Services Center it would result in a higher efficiency on the costs' point of view. Thus, this was the only reason.

5. Results Discussion

The results analysis will follow the same order as the questionnaire and interview as well as the results presentation.

a) Values of the company

According to Hitt (1990) the values of a company consist in a sort of 'soul' with high impacts in it.

The first question's responses in the questionnaires were considerable homogeneous. The five values proposed which clearly reached a higher level of agreement between the collaborators correspond to: "Quality", "Service Simplicity", "Innovation"; "Safety" and "Client Orientation".

Concerning the interview to the head deputy, the answers mentioned were "Trust", "Efficiency" and "Transparency". Taking into account that efficiency can be linked to service simplicity and trust is related to client orientation, it can be argued that the answers of the head deputy coincide with the questionnaires results, except for transparency which did not achieved agreement in the questionnaires.

Europcar claims on its official website that its values are based on Client Orientation, Service simplicity, Quality, Trust, Safety and Transparency. Therefore, collaborators seem to be well aware of what the company's value are and what it rules for, except once again for transparency is not seem by most of the employees as a company's value.

This is a very important fact because as it was approached before in the present study, values provide a common way to follow daily to all employees and members of a firm, consisting in the 'ground' of the organization which leads it to accomplish its mission and achieve goals (Posner & Schmidt, 1983). As such, Europcar's employees across hierarchies can work towards the same objectives and act according the firm's values.

b) Mission of the company

Analyzing the present study results, it can be concluded that the company's mission is well transmitted to its employees, namely the ones working at the Shared Services Center. 80% pointed the right answer (**"Providing a car rental service easily and conveniently, with continuous improvements focusing on customer satisfaction"**) which means this question is being well inculcated from the top management to the bottom line employees of the center.

Also in the interview the head deputy argued that Europcar's mission is to provide the best service in the most efficient and easy way to the client, which coincides with the questionnaire right answer but using other words.

As written before in this study, a firm's mission corresponds to a specific commitment to all the members and clarifies the firm's purpose, direction and values, influencing all the employee choices and behaviors (Hirota et al., 2010). Therefore, it is an important subject that Europcar's collaborators are informed of the company's mission so that they can work together for the same objectives and improve productivity towards the company's mission, focusing on what really matters inside it and not dispersing due to lack of knowledge.

c) Business strategy

This was a question with low level of discordance. From the results analyse, it can be concluded that the majority (88% of the individuals) have the same perception about the company's strategy: Differentiation. As seen on the literature review, this is one of the three generic business strategies, it consists in building a product or service with clear different characteristics from its competitors such as product design, brand new technology, brand image, packaging, sales service (Murray, 1988).

This question revealed an almost consensual opinion on what collaborators (in this case mostly leads and managers) consider being the company's strategy. The result allows to conclude that the employees are well aware of the company's core business and not only focused on the back office subjects, once it corresponds to where all the respondents work. Also in the interview, the head deputy was assertive in her answer: Differentiation, with no doubts.

Europcar states on its official website that the group's mission is focused on a three-point strategy: customer knowledge, revenue growth, digital strategy and innovation.

As such, it is right to argue that Europcar's chases a Differentiation strategy, once the group argues focusing on knowing its clients, developing customer relationship management tools and optimizing loyalty programs to retain them; optimizing distribution channels and growing international network through increasing the existing customer base by reorganizing its sales forces and promoting new commercial processes and productivity tools; making efforts to improve its IT system allowing new service offers and solutions, focusing on launching new online tools and making the online platforms easy and intuitive for the customers to use (Europcar, 2017).

Thus, it develops a strategy based on the differentiation of its final services client-oriented from the ones provided by rivals.

d) In which part of the value chain does Europcar optimizes value?

This question was placed in the aim of continuing to know Europcar at a group level, in this case to better understand where the company's main value creation is occurring from while at the same time putting into practice the literature review section about Michael Porter's value chain that can be found previously in the present investigation.

The respondent's answers are mostly "Services" (60%). Although, a considering part chose "Acquisitions" (20%). Also the head deputy of the Shared Services Center referred that the value creation arises from the services. As approached before in the literature review topic regarding Michael Porter's value chain, this result means that most of the individuals consider that the company's activities which involve lower costs or outcome higher differentiation are related to its services performance or in a smaller part case of individuals, its vehicles acquisition.

According to Porter it is easier to understand and analyze where the value creation arises from in a company, by disaggregating all of its activities and identifying the ones that create the most value or margin of profits (Lopes da Costa, 2012).

Therefore, after separating Europcar's activities and given them to choose to the respondents, there seems to be a consensus in considering Services as the main area creator of value in the firm. This is useful to link as well to the company's values, mission and business strategy which end up all leading to the same: Services. The service providing in Europcar is the most important for the company. The group is focused on working from the most basic aspects to the most crucial in order to provide a different service focused on the client satisfaction and quality/excellence recognition.

d1) In which way?

To be able of creating value, an area must have a way of working or any aspect that allows it to optimize costs or maximize profits.

As seen before in the present study and according to Sheehan & Foss (2009) the value chain is a generic activity template which is used to analyze and improve an organization competitive position. As such, after being presented the template, individuals argued why the activity they chose is the one they think it is capable of create the most value.

As such, justifications given to the "Acquisitions" choice is based in the vehicles' purchase (which is obviously the main service basis, the company needs vehicles to operate its business) and on the company's capability of making business and partnerships with the vehicles' suppliers, using its great dimension and turnover to acquire high quantities of the same by a lower market price or negotiating its loans' interest taxes.

Concerning cost leadership area, **process optimization** was one of the justifications. This is due to the belief that if the financial processes are optimized, the costs will be reduced and waste of time and resources eliminated. Another reason to choose cost leadership is taking advantage from the **economies of scale**, which means that in only one place (SSC) it is possible to produce more and consequently the costs decrease. Individuals shared the same perspective on justifying cost leadership with the **low salaries and compensations** payed to the employees and the operational costs reduction in general. With no need to establish non-term contracts, with simple and **consolidated processes**, the employee rotation is much higher than in a normal company and the salaries are lower, achieving cost leadership.

As seen before on the present study and according to Tomasino, Fedorowicz, Williams, Gentner, & Hughes (2014) cost reductions and standardization of all best practices and processes which are the main justifications presented are all usual in a Shared Services Center, so it is not peculiar that collaborators indicate them in the queries.

e) Why choosing to implement a Shared Services Center to Europcar?

This question allows to arrive both on the questionnaires as in the interview to the same conclusions, which are related to the concept of Shared Services Center.

As seen before in the theoretical chapter of this study, there are some aspects that characterize a Shared Services Center. Schulz and Brenner (2010) argue that for example consolidated processes, cost reduction or client-orientation (among others) are fundamental characteristics in a Shared Services Center.

Analyzing the results of the questionnaires and interview, it can be concluded that the individuals consider "Cost Reduction", "Processes Consolidation", "Services improvement" and "Improving Competitiveness" as the most important reasons for Europcar to implement a Shared Services Center.

The head deputy even deepened the subject in the interview, arguing that the financial area was too big before the existence of the Shared Services Center, with around five hundred and ten people working for Europcar's financial services, which had to be reduced considering its big cost impact.

Concluding, taking into consideration the present study results, Europcar implemented its Shared Services Center mainly to reduce costs at the same time it made a revolution on its processes in order to optimize it and make it better which is, at the end, the purpose of every Shared Services Center, as seen on the literature review chapter.

f) Opinion about the strategical decision

Total consensus is reached when analyzing the answers of the questionnaires and the head deputy of the center related to the opinion on Europcar's decision of implementing a Shared Services Center.

It was a successful choice made by Europcar. Although it is still a work in progress it allowed the company to achieve clear results and objectives proposed by the group.

According to Tomasino and al. (2014) SSCs objectives are cost savings without sacrificing the quality of the services and Honey (2016) argues that SSCs achieve 25 to 50% of cost savings. As such, and as a proven successful implemented center, it is normal that collaborators argue that the strategical decision was positive, allowing the company to reduce costs and even to improve its service's quality.

g) Competitive advantages of the SSC

Concerning the competitive advantages brought by the Shared Services Center to the company, there are consensual point of views between the individuals which participated in the questionnaires and the head deputy of the center.

As stated by Gospel & Sako (2010), Shared Services Centers have its basis on a storage of competences and resources used to achieve competitive advantages. This was, in fact, exactly what the head deputy argued in the interview, saying that for her, the most important of all is the centralization of knowledge and competences in the center, bringing efficiency to the tasks through the exchange of procedures and ideas between teams.

The most referred advantage acquired is cost reduction and also the head deputy agrees that is always the main goal of any model of a Shared Services Center. Although, in the questionnaires it was possible to conclude that 68% of the individuals agreed that the Shared Services Center brought efficiency to the processes and also more qualified employees to the company. Also the head deputy emphasized that the most important is making better than it was done before.

As such, it is important to be aware that Shared Services Centers are not only focused on cost reduction but also in knowledge centralization and tasks improvement, as seen on the theoretical chapter and verified in the questionnaires/interview.

h) In which business strategy

As seen through the literature review, cost reduction is the main focus of any Shared Services Center. The same is considered by the Europcar center's head deputy and by 96% of the individuals which participated in the questionnaire.

As the termination "cost leadership" indicates, this strategy is based on cost reduction. The head deputy argues that cost leadership strategy is always the objective of this organizational model. The Shared Services Centers should always perform the back office activities with lower costs than it were performed before in the original offices.

Also the great majority of the questionnaire's respondents considered cost leadership as the Shared Services Center business strategy.

According to Prajogo (2007), to achieve cost leadership the companies should focus on controlling costs to a point in which they reach cost advantage. This includes controlling and minimizing costs related to a variety of aspects which impact the financial results such as human resources, which has a great impact on the same.

The head deputy argued in the interview that the costs related to the human resources before the implementation of the Shared Services Center were huge and it was crucial to reduce them. Therefore, a strategy to proceed to the reduction of costs allied to a variety of other goals was set and the Shared Services Center arise.

To conclude, analyzing the theoretical main characteristics of a Shared Services Center's model quoted by many theme's specialists and through the results of the questionnaires and information provided by the head deputy it is logical to argue that the business strategy of the Shared Services Center is cost leadership.

i) Why?

In general, the majority of the justifications presented lead to the characteristics of Shared Services Centers models summarized in the theoretical chapter by Schulz and Brenner (2010).

As quoted by the head deputy, in a Shared Services Center each employee should cost less as it costed before (labor arbitrage) and the processes/tasks need to be optimized. These are also the main justifications of the questionnaire's participants which consider that costs reduction and processes optimization/economies of scale are crucial in a Shared Services Center.

The majority of the questionnaire's participants argue that the business strategy is cost leadership, which is probably influenced by the salaries and compensations received by the same at the company's Shared Services Center.

These centers reach economies of scale logically by producing more than before and reducing its costs. This is possible due to the efficiency increase quoted by the head deputy and the majority of the individuals in the questionnaire. With the tasks performed in the same way across the countries operated in the center, it is possible the exchange of knowledge and process optimization, according to the head deputy.

All this measures lead to cost reduction at the end, which is as said before, the main goal of any cost leadership strategy.

j) Reasons to choose Portugal as the right country

Portugal has been more and more in the limelight for a wide range of subjects in the recent times. Tourism is increasing exponentially, Portuguese people are becoming increasingly known for its accomplishments in sports, culinary, entrepreneurship, among other reasons. The world is putting the eyes on Portugal.

Companies are not an exception and are increasingly aware of the benefits that Portugal can bring them. Europcar was one of those companies.

In the questionnaire there were closed-answers proposed to the individuals, among which, the most chosen were "Low remunerations", "Fluency in languages" and "High employees' qualifications" which are also the main reasons pointed by the head deputy of the Shared Services Center.

People are one of the most important or even the most important resource of any firm as they are responsible for its production (product itself, back-office, service, etc.). It is important when a company manages to have workmanship high qualified and gifted while at the same time it is able to spend low amounts with the same. This is obviously a huge advantage to any company.

As seen in the literature review, cost savings (achieved by low remunerations, for example) and improve of quality services (can be achieved by high employees' qualifications or indirectly by fluency in languages) are two of the main objectives of SSCs (Honey, 2016).

Therefore, as Portugal reunites these conditions and other important ones deepened in the study, Europcar chose our country to implement its center.

In the interview the head deputy also referred that there were other possibilities considered (Leicester and Barcelona) and it was even a really competitive "fight" with Barcelona but at the end Lisbon ended up by being the preferred one, due to factors such as its high unemployment rate among young graduates.

6. Final Remarks

6.1. Conclusions

The present study's objective was to analyze the reality of Shared Services Centers in order to conclude its characteristics and main advantages, through the concrete case of Europcar, a rent-a-car multinational company which has implemented its Shared Service Center in Portugal in 2014. For that, a deep research through scientific articles and books was done in a first stage to better understand concepts related to the topic and after that, a qualitative study was developed through questionnaires done to company's employees and one interview to the head deputy of the center.

The questionnaires aim was to understand if despite the center being relatively new and the employees did not work before at the company, they are aware of its values, mission and strategy while at the same time discovering which they considered to be the main advantages brought to the company by the center, which reasons lead to the choice of this strategy and of Portugal for its implementation, whether or not they considered it to be a good strategy, among others.

Despite not being exactly like this because it is not an outsourcing case, Europcar is seen as a client of the center, by the employees working at the same. This is due to the fact that the highest leadership positions of the different departments remained at the countries (Italy, UK, Germany, France, Spain and Belgium). As such, it is important to first of all, understand if the employees working there are aware of the company's standards (values, mission, strategy, etc.).

To discover the different characteristics and advantages of the specific case of Europcar's Shared Services Center, there is no better way than approaching its employees.

Despite choosing a sample of individuals with different ages, positions and departments, it was possible to reunite unanimous considerations related to the proposed subjects. The sample is constituted by 15 team leaders, 4 managers, 2 senior clerks and 4 clerks. I started from the principle that the majority of the individuals occupying higher positions of the hierarchy would could provide answers based in more deepened knowledge about the company.

In the same order used on the questionnaires and interview, the conclusions of the present study will be presented.

As company values, the individuals mostly referred quality, service simplicity, innovation, safety and client orientation. This means that they are correct and well aware of the same, once Europcar claims its values are these four plus trust and transparency. The last is the only one which the individuals do not see as a part of the values of the company.

Concerning the company's mission, the majority of the individuals considered it to be "providing a car rental service easily and conveniently with continuous improvements focusing on customer satisfaction, proofing once more that they are not simply working for the company as also they are a part of the company.

Regarding the company's mission most of the individuals and also the head deputy referred it to be differentiation, as the company is able to provide its clients a different service from its rivals, based on quality and efficiency.

Relatively to the Shared Services Center itself, it was concluded in the present study that Europcar moved forward with this strategy based on the aims of achieving cost savings, increased process efficiency/consolidation, an improvement of the financial services along with an increase of its competitiveness in the market. With the proven achievement of the same objectives along these years, individuals considered without doubts to be a good decision from Europcar.

It permitted the company to acquire vantages that it did not possessed before such as low expenditure with employees/cost reduction, process efficiency through the exchange of knowledges and consolidation of tasks through operating countries and departments in the center, employees more qualified.

Due to the fact that the result that can be mostly seen after the center's implementation being cost savings, and as seen in the theoretical chapter the Shared Services Centers model being addressed to achieve cost savings, it was possible to identify the center's strategy: cost leadership.

This allows to understand that despite of the group's strategy being differentiation through its services installment to the clients, in the center the strategy is cost savings which may even allow to accentuate the differentiation of the services, once reducing costs on its back office the company is able to invest more on the services.

As seen in the literature review, Shared Services Centers use economies of scale to create value. These centers are able to produce more with lower costs than before, achieving cost leadership.

Despite the fact that more options were analyzed at the time of choosing the location for the center's implementation, such as Leicester and Barcelona as seen in the interview, Portugal ended up by being the country chosen, specifically Lisbon.

This was due to the average remuneration paid in Portugal being low compared to other locations, to the fluency in languages of the Portuguese people, the high employees qualification and the high rate of unemployment at the time (2013/2014).

After a rating done to a set of criteria pre-defined in the possible locations, the combination of these factors resulted in the choice of Portugal as the preferred location.

Concluding, even though the employees are working in a maximum of 3 years in the company, they are well aware of the company's standards and they are also conscientious that the center's objective is the cost reduction and process efficiency, as seen in the literature review through the research of the main characteristics of Shared Services Centers.

Concerning business management area this study can be useful in practice as it might be used by firms that intend to study the possibility of transferring its services to a Shared Services Center in a strategic move such as Europcar. It is also believed that the knowledge about Shared Services Centers can be improved through the reading of the present study not only with the theoretical approach that it contains as well as in practical terms such as the opinion of workers and managers of a SSC. Furthermore, the results of this investigation can possibly contribute to help business managers and entrepreneurs to better understand the reality of Shared Services Centers and make decisions.

6.2. Limitations of the study

The elaboration of the present study faced limitations that will be described below.

I believe that the main identifiable limitation I faced is related to the acquisition and analysis of data. The method consisted in questionnaires and interview as well. An interview to the Chief Financial Officer was requested several times with no success. Also the tax response of the questionnaires sent to Europcar employees was around 20%.

As the study was mostly based in questionnaires, sometimes it is hard to take conclusions as the answers are mostly closed-ended and that was why I put an effort on trying to increase the size of the sample. Also from the questionnaires I could not find any "special event" as it would had been possible through the elaboration of interviews instead.

When taking conclusions, it is crucial to assume a neutral position so that the results are not influenced and sometimes that was difficult due to the fact that I myself was an employee of the Shared Service Center and have a formed opinion on the various subjects approached.

6.3. Suggestions to Future Research

Shared Services Centers is a current topic with increasing importance on the business world. More and more big international companies are deciding to move forward with this strategy. Europcar, BNP Paribas, Siemens, Grunenthal, among others already moved great part of its financial services to Portugal.

Assured to impact the business activities and companies' results, a careful conduction of the change will originate change at all levels in a firm.

Shared Services Center are proven cases of success and should be a topic of continuing, stimulated and developed studies. The business world and organizations in general should be aware of its capability, its improved way of organizing people and activities, reducing costs and improving results.

I believe that for future research, the theme can be deepened in a more detailed sense and through the analysis of more real cases, different organizations that embraced the project of transferring its activities into a Shared Service Center. Despite its success and proofed results, this relatively new organizational model is not sufficiently known and developed.

The theme is interesting and fundamental to be widely known. Therefore, all possible variations of research about the same are important and even new ways to improve the model can be found with deeper studies. This is a new case of success which deserves due analysis and importance.

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APPENDIX A – Questionnaire

The questionnaire is presented in Portuguese, in the exact same way it was placed to the respondents.

Secção 1 - Caracterização Sociodemográfica

Género *
Feminino
Masculino

Idade (em anos) *
12

Nível de escolaridade *
Ensino Básico 3º ciclo (9º ano)
Ensino Secundário (12º ano)
Licenciatura ou Bacharelato
Mestrado
Doutoramento
Outra:

Qual a sua posição na Europcar? *
Clerk
Senior Clerk
Lead
Manager

Qual o seu departamento?
dd

Há quanto tempo trabalha na Europcar? *
Menos de 2 anos

2 anos
Mais de 2 anos
Outra:

Secção 2 - A empresa e a sua estratégia

1. Em que valores assenta a Europcar? *

	Discordo totalmene	Concordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo totalmente
Conforto	○	○	○	○	○
Segurança	○	○	○	○	○
Simplicidade no serviço	○	○	○	○	○
Transparência	○	○	○	○	○
Inovação	○	○	○	○	○
Sustentabilidade ambiental	○	○	○	○	○
Excelência	○	○	○	○	○
Orientação para o cliente	○	○	○	○	○
Orientação para o cliente	○	○	○	○	○

2. Qual é a missão da Europcar? *
(Razão de ser da empresa, ou seja, o porquê da empresa. Na missão, tem-se acentuado o que a empresa produz, objetivos futuros e como a empresa espera ser reconhecida por clientes e demais *stakeholders*.)
- Disponibilizar um serviço de aluguer de viaturas com vista à maximização da eficiência das mesmas, sempre dentro dos parâmetros de segurança e garantir assim uma minimização dos custos.
- Disponibilizar um serviço simples e conveniente de aluguer de viaturas a curto e longo prazo com foco num certo tipo de clientes.
Disponibilizar um serviço de aluguer de viaturas de forma fácil e conveniente, com melhorias contínuas com vista à satisfação dos clientes
- Disponibilizar um serviço de aluguer de viaturas baseado numa experiência oferecida aos clientes de excelência e unicidade desde o princípio ao fim da mesma
Outra:

3. Qual é a estratégia de negócio da Europcar? *
- Liderança de Custos (Empresa com mais baixos custos no seu sector de actividade)
- Diferenciação (Baseada em características únicas que se destaquem dos concorrentes)
- Foco (Num determinado segmento de mercado, localização geográfica, etc)
Outra:

4. Em que parte/atividade(s) da cadeia de valor consegue a Europcar optimizar o seu valor? (Escolha uma das actividades representadas na imagem) *

Cadeia de Valor de Porter

4.1. De que forma? *

____

Secção 3 - Centro de Serviços Partilhados da Europcar

5. Porquê a escolha de implementar um Shared Services Center para a Europcar? *

	Discordo totalmente	Discordo	Não discordo nem concordo	Concordo	Concordo totalmente
Consolidação de processos	○	○	○	○	○
Redução de custos	○	○	○	○	○
Melhoria dos serviços	○	○	○	○	○
Aumentar orientação para o cliente	○	○	○	○	○
Aumentar independência da organização	○	○	○	○	○
Melhorar a competitividade	○	○	○	○	○

5.1 Na sua opinião, a decisão de implementar um Shared Services Center para a Europcar foi... *

- Acertada
- Irrelevante
- Errada

6. Quais as vantagens competitivas adquiridas pela Europcar com a implementação do SSC? (Escolha no máximo 3) *

- Maior eficiência dos processos
- Redução de custos
- Aumento da competitividade
- Melhores resultados financeiros
- Maior união dos colaboradores
- Maior qualificação dos colaboradores
- Acesso a melhores tecnologias e mais modernas
-Melhor posição geográfica

Outra:

7. Em que estratégia de negócio se deve inserir um SSC?
- Liderança de Custos
- Diferenciação

- Foco

Outra:

8. Porquê?

9. Quais os critérios utilizados na escolha de Portugal para a sua implementação? *

	Discordo totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo totalmente
Baixas remunerações	○	○	○	○	○
Elevadas qualificações do pessoal	○	○	○	○	○
Acesso à tecnologia	○	○	○	○	○
Posição geográfica do país	○	○	○	○	○
Questão da fluência em línguas	○	○	○	○	○
Custo das rendas e outros custos operacionais	○	○	○	○	○

10. Se considerar que existem um ou mais critérios para além dos apresentados no ponto anterior, por favor indique quais.

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