

OVERVIEW OF THE OBSTACLES AND FACILITATORS OF LEARNING AND ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE IN STRATEGIC ALLIANCES – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we address the issue of knowledge transfer between organizations in partnerships as well as the role of the knowledge exchange in building successful cooperation. Given its many positive effects on the business performance, such as creativity, innovativeness and flexibility needed in modern business environment, it was of the utmost importance to investigate different factors that either contribute or constrain learning in alliances. After the theoretical background on the aforementioned topic was given, an empirical research and its main conclusions were described in the paper. A study of the alliances in Croatian context revealed that organizational characteristics exhibit the most pronounced influence on the knowledge transfer success which was especially highlighted in domestic alliances. The level of integration, the primary area of cooperation and the previous experience in forming alliances between partners did not change the extent to which different factors influenced knowledge transfer.

Keywords: *Contextual variables, Knowledge transfer, Strategic alliances*

1. INTRODUCTION

For the last few decades a number of various types of collaboration between independent firms have been growing steadily (Harbison & Pekar, 1998, Anand & Khanna, 2000), and many of these collaborations have been developed under the umbrella of strategic alliances. In

highly competitive global market, especially with the recession over last decade, strategic alliance has become an important way in achieving sustainable competitive advantage and strategic success (Parkhe, 1991). Strategic alliance can be analyzed as an organizational form in which independent organizations share the benefits of partnership in key strategic areas such as product design, production, marketing, distribution, technology (Arend & Amid 2005, Gulati 1998) and thus share the risk and costs of ongoing collaboration. Alternatively, strategic alliance is based on voluntary cooperative agreements of two or more firms to reach a common goal entailing the pooling of their resources and facilities (Parkhe, 1993).

Alliance can take different forms varying from simple agreement with no joint equity ownership such as contractual alliance to more complex agreement that involve joint equity ownership and managerial control. Regardless of the alliance type, it is assumed that alliances have advantages over conventional contracts because firm's capabilities are usually based on tacit knowledge which makes it difficult to draft simple contracts that determinate the scale of licensing such capabilities (Mowery *et al*, 1996). Consequently, cooperation in strategic alliance tends to be more associated with assistance and resource exchange among partners than is in other linkages like buyer-supplier ties (Scott-Kennel, 2007). The first alliances in the form of joint ventures primarily aimed to access to natural resources (Mowery *et. al.* 1996), but in the last few decades, there was a shift toward other important motives of alliance formation such as the knowledge transfer (Iyer, 2002). Among different resources, knowledge has been recognized as particularly important in achieving added value and strategic objectives. R&D alliance, for example, provides specialized knowledge that may be difficult if not impossible to bring into the firm (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2007). It is especially important if knowledge transfer creates the base for creativity, innovativeness and flexibility needed in modern business environment. Knowledge-based resources refer to skills, abilities and learning capacity that can be developed through experience, personal relations and strategic partners (DeNisi *et al*, 2000). Researchers increasingly stress that knowledge transfer does not influence organizational performance by itself but it has important mediating role between antecedents of knowledge transfer and performance outcomes of knowledge transfer (van Vijk *et al*, 2008; Martinkenaite, 2011). In order to make this process more effective it is of crucial importance to be aware of the different obstacles and facilitators of the knowledge exchange process between the partners, which is exactly what we attempt to achieve in this paper. Firstly, we make and an in-depth literature review on competition and cooperation research, as well as their role in organizational theory in general. Secondly, we give a theoretical background on the research undertaken in the area of knowledge transfer between partners in strategic alliances, i.e. different factors that can facilitate or prevent learning and knowledge exchange. We discuss the independent characteristics of strategic alliances undertaken in Croatia, after which we analyze factors that influence knowledge transfer in strategic alliances undertaken in Croatia. Finally, we draw conclusions from the previously analyzed cross-sectional examination and make suggestions for both researchers and strategic alliances managers.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cooperation refers to similar or complementary coordinated actions taken by firms in interdependent relationship to achieve mutual outcomes or singular outcomes with expected reciprocation (Anderson & Narus, 1990). Cooperation is usually associated with flexibility,

information exchange, shared problem solving and restraint in the use of power (Heide & Miner, 1992). Additionally, recent empirical research showed positive association between cooperation of alliance partners and the amount of knowledge transferred between partners (Christoffersen, 2013). Although cooperation is the central feature of strategic alliances, other factors influence the knowledge transfer in alliance partnership as well. The context showed here draws heavily on the well-developed literature of knowledge management, particularly on knowledge transfer. Inter-organizational learning refers to process of learning from the experience and the knowledge of other organizations. It is therefore associated with the knowledge transfer from entities outside organization. Inter-organizational knowledge transfer is defined as movement or flow of knowledge across organizational boundaries (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2008; van Vijk *et al*, 2008), knowledge sharing (Appleyard, 1996), diffusion of knowledge within the inter-organizational relationship network (Spencer, 2003).

The context for knowledge transfer presented here draws on a recent knowledge transfer framework developed by Easterby-Smith *et al* (2008). The framework shows how cooperation between alliance partners affects the knowledge flow considered. According to prior research, key factors that determinate the extent to which firms acquire and utilize knowledge of their alliance partners are: (1) knowledge attributes (2) organizational attributes and (3) inter-organizational dynamics (e.g. Kogut & Zander, 1992, Mowery *et al*, 1996, Tsang *et al*, 2004).

The first determinant in presented model is the nature of the knowledge transferred. Among these knowledge attributes researchers put: ambiguity (usually explained in terms of tacitness and knowledge complexity) and institutional embeddedness (e.g. Kogut & Zander, 1992; Nonaka, 1994; McEvil & Chakravarthy, 2002). High ambiguity and institutional specificity can act as barriers as they impede the speed and efficiency of knowledge transfer (Nonaka, 1994). This directly influences the transfer mechanisms that should be used in the knowledge exchange process. More specifically, the higher the degree of *tacitness*,¹ the more personalization strategy and person-based mechanism of knowledge transfer are used, such as training, seminars, visits, committees, meetings; and on the contrary, the lower the degree of tacitness the more codification strategy and information-based knowledge mechanism are used, such as reports, fax, e-mail, intranet, internet, database etc. (Vindsperger & Gorovaia, 2010). Another characteristic of knowledge is *knowledge complexity* and refers to the level of interdependence of subcomponents of a piece of knowledge (Simonin, 1999). High knowledge complexity may act as an additional barrier as it is not easy to learn distinct and multiple types of competencies that are combined and interact. But, if successfully transferred, tacit and complex knowledge may help achieving better performance of the firm. Finally, *institutional embeddedness* is additional knowledge attribute that refers to embeddedness of knowledge in institutional environment so organizational routines that are used and work in one country may not be readily transferred to another country (Szulansky *et al*, 2004). These difficulties are created due to differences in the technological infrastructure, economic development, culture, language etc. Next important determinants of knowledge transfer are the *characteristics of the sender* (source or the donor company) and the *receiver of the knowledge*. These organization attributes include: absorptive capacity,

¹ As for the specific types of alliances, researchers argue that equity-based joint ventures are more effective for transfer of tacit knowledge than other contract-based alliance types (e.g. Mowery *et al*, 1996).

motivation to learn and teach and knowledge capability (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2008). Sender uses his *capacity* to appreciate the potential value of knowledge that is intended to transfer and teach, while the recipient needs capacity to absorb the knowledge. Absorptive capacity can be defined as firm's ability to internalize, assimilate and replicate new knowledge obtained from external sources (alliance partner) in order to help their innovative activities (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Absorptive capacity may be determined by recipient's prior knowledge and experience, the adaptability of recipient, trust and compatibility among partners, diversity and characteristic of external knowledge source, external knowledge complementarity, quantity and quality of training provided by the source firm and social interactions (Lane & Lubatkin, 1998; Zahra & George, 2002). *The motivation of partners to teach and learn* can help partners in process of knowledge transfer (Martinkanaite, 2011). Sometimes the source (donor) may not be willing to share its competences, especially if its competitive advantage is based on these competences and that can inhibit knowledge transfer. Firms can be more protective over their knowledge when partner has similar resources and capabilities (Norman, 2002). In transition economies, the motivation of recipient firm to learn may be more important than the motivation of donor to share knowledge (Steensma *et al*, 2005). *Knowledge capability* is additional factor that facilitate knowledge transfer. Knowledge capability may depend on organizational structure and employed learning mechanisms (Martinkanaite, 2011). Appropriate organizational structure in terms of configuration of position, job duties and lines of authority can facilitate knowledge transfer (De Nisi *et al*, 2000). In favor may be modern organizations with organic structure like network organization, technology based organization, learning organization, virtual organization, team organization, hypertext and other types that facilitate learning. Finally, important determinant of knowledge transfer is also *the dynamics of donor-recipient relationships* that influence how effectively alliance partners cooperate to achieve common interests. Inter-partner dynamics is based on: power relations, trust and risk, commitment, social ties and structure of inter-organizational relationship (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2008). In the presented framework of knowledge transfer, some researchers (Lyles & Salk, 1996; Mowery *et al*, 1996; Hofstede *et al*, 2010) added an additional determinant that includes factors such as: *cultural compatibility* (level of cultural similarity and congruence between partners), *operational compatibility* (congruence in the partners' managerial skills, operative procedures and technical capabilities) and *flexible policies* (intellectual property, patent policies, and licencing agreements). Cultural and operational incompatibility can cause detrimental effects ranging from information flow to the knowledge transfer as they create difficulties for managers to work together and develop common values (Lyles & Salk, 1996, Mowery *et al*, 1996). In case of cultural incompatibility managers must spend more time to communicate, design compatible work routines and develop common managerial approaches (Olk, 1997, in Lakpetch & Lorsuwarannarat, 2012). This is particularly present in international strategic alliances. For the previously mentioned reasons we decided to explore the following contextual variables that inhibit or encourage knowledge transfer: initial knowledge bases of partners, operational style of conducting businesses, management styles, organizational structures, organizational cultures, national cultures, language, business ethics, conflicts among partners, motivation to learn/ teach and protection of knowledge.

3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON STRATEGIC ALLIANCES ACTIVITY IN CROATIA

In order to analyze the activity and the characteristics of strategic alliances undertaken by Croatian companies; an empirical research was conducted during the year 2013. In this part of the paper, we briefly describe the problems closely related to sampling procedure that we had encountered during the research, as well as the results generated by the primary data.

3.1. Research methods and sampling

The first step in designing our research was to define a sampling procedure. The fundamental problem that soon arose was closely connected to the one of the most prevailing problems in alliance research – the non-existence of the data base that would cover the strategic alliance modalities. The problem has in main part been overcome by making the secondary data analysis. Namely, through the extensive desk research we were able to make a data base that, logically, would not be the most comprehensive or exhaustive one, but it would represent the only data base of that kind in the Republic of Croatia. Following the example of Subramanian & Venkatraman (2001), a desk research and analysis of various information sources, such as business magazines, stock markets announcements or several government agencies' reports, the initial list of 159 strategic alliances was created in round 1. The criteria on which we based our search were threefold: (1) the beginning of strategic alliance design process (any time between 1995 and 2010), (2) the number of strategic alliance participants (bilateral strategic alliance or dyads were exclusive objects of interest), (3) the character of the companies involved (both parties profit-oriented).

The second round of desk research involved a closer examination of previously gathered items. After all 159 potential strategic alliances were double-checked, as many as 57 items were eliminated from the further analysis for some of the following reasons: (1) an alliance was undertaken in order to make an acquisition, (2) at least one of the companies involved in alliance was a non-profit organization, (3) at least one of the companies involved in alliance was an organization of a municipal character (so the most of these "strategic alliances" were public-private partnerships), (4) at least one of the companies involved in alliance was a higher-education institution (university, a graduate school, or a polytechnic), (5) at least one of the parties involved in alliance was a cluster, a group, or a consortia, (6) although stated that way, the relationship between the parties was not essentially a strategic alliance (e.g., the relationship was in its essence a classical market transaction or an outsourcing arrangement), (7) the strategic alliance was announced but it never performed as such. After eliminating all previously mentioned items, the final list of strategic alliances came down to 102 items.

After the sampling procedure was finished, the questionnaire was sent to all the potential respondents. Given the nature of the topic of interest, a relatively high percentage of response was expected (between 30 and 40%). However, given the number of items in the final database (N=102), a minimum of 30 responses was perceived as a prerequisite for a valid statistical analysis. The questionnaires consisted of several questions about strategic alliance characteristics which will later be discussed, as well as other sections that are not of interest in this paper. The questionnaires were sent by e-mail to top managers of the companies involved in strategic alliances, and where possible, to strategic alliance managers. The questionnaires were sent in May 2013, than a first reminder followed in June, and a second one in September. After the expectations on response rate were met (31.35%), the statistical

analysis was conducted with SPSS 18.0. The following figure depicts respondents' characteristics in terms of age and gender.

Table 1: Independent characteristics of respondents

Independent characteristic	Distribution of data
Gender	M – 53%, F – 47%
Age	Less than 36 – 28%, from 36 to 50 – 69%, more than 50 – 3%
Level of education	Secondary education – 3.13%, college degree – 3.13%, bachelor degree – 59.38%, Master of PhD degree – 33.38%
Position in the company	Top management – 43.75%, middle level – 37.50%, low level management – 12.50%, non-managerial position – 6.25%

As it can be seen from the Table 1, men and women participated in this research almost equally (53% and 47% respectively). As for the age structure, approximately one third of respondents were in the 41-45 age groups, while the majority of the respondents (69%) are in the range from 36 to 50 years of age. The next figure shows the level of education as well as respondents' position in company. As for the education level, approximately 60% of respondents had completed tertiary education level, and additional 34.5% of them had masters or even higher degree. We found this particular characteristic to be of the utmost importance since it can be presumed that higher education level would be associated with higher understanding of concepts analyzed in this research. We assumed that the position in company would probably be as equally important. Almost 44% of respondents held top management positions, while 37% additional respondents held middle management positions. In this research we were aiming specifically at top and middle management levels since the area of interest i.e. knowledge about strategic alliance activity, characteristics and design is presumably concentrated at the upper levels of management. In sum, the overall profiles of respondents were found satisfactory, so the analysis of the alliance characteristics followed, as shown and discussed in the next section.

The items in the sample were examined in several aspects: first, the primary area of cooperation was analyzed; secondly, different types of strategic alliances were examined (strategic alliances based on the level of integration as well as strategic alliances based on the origin of the partner); thirdly, analysis of previous experience in forming strategic alliance was given. The next figure shows the primary area of cooperation in the alliance.

Table 2: Independent characteristics of strategic alliances

Independent characteristic	Distribution of data
Primary area of cooperation	Business services – 43.75%, R&D – 6.23%, market development – 15.63%, production – 15.63%, marketing – 3.13%, other – 15.63%
Type of alliance by origin of the partners	Domestic – 53%, cross-border – 47%
Type of alliance by level of integration	Contractual – 56%, equity – 44%
Previous experience in forming alliances	No previous experience – 25%, one alliance previously formed – 31.30%, two or more alliances previously formed – 43.70%

Almost 44% of examined strategic alliances were formed for the purpose of business services development, while additional 15.63% were formed for the purpose of market development,

the same percentage for the purpose of production, as well as other areas of cooperation (e.g. inter-organizational learning, knowledge transfer etc.). A dominant percentage of strategic alliances undertaken in services might be the reflection of the post-industrial era we are living in. The focus that was once on physical objects and resources in production processes has shifted to more abstract ones. Apart from primary area of cooperation, two more types of alliances were examined. There are 53% of domestic strategic alliances, as opposed to 47% international alliances in the sample. The number of international partnerships intensified during the 1980s and 1990s when the globalization started to shape business decisions more than any other element of the organizational environment. From the standpoint of international company, partnership with a domestic company seems to be especially adequate possibility of entering into new markets when international organizations do not have enough funds for a standalone strategy of conquering the market (Elmuti & Kathawala, 2001). On the other hand, international partnerships are often formed when a company wants to enter a new market, and usually possesses capital funds, but lacks knowledge on local customs, clients and market in general, which a domestic partner can easily provide (Casson & Mol, 2006). The latter holds even more when it comes to markets that have been long out of reach for many Western companies. At the same time, the post-transitional economies could be interested in gaining new knowledge and skills from their international partners – in that way, if properly institutionalized, the knowledge transfer could serve as a primary motivation for Croatian companies to form alliances with international partners. With respect to level of integration, the research revealed that there were 56% of contractual alliances whilst 44% of them involved equity integration. One of our topics of interest was previous experience in forming strategic alliances. We find previous experience to serve as a learning mechanism that can be beneficial for future cooperation. Almost one third of all examined partner companies had at least one partnership formed before the one analyzed in this research. Additional 15.6% of them had accumulated experience from two strategic alliances while 28.1% of them had three or more strategic alliances formed before the one analyzed in our research. A quarter of all examined companies had no experience in forming partnerships with other organizations. The question of accumulated experience is a valuable one, and at the same time, the one that generated research with ambivalent outcomes and guidelines. On one hand, it can be also hypothesized that greater experience or learning by doing would increase the performance of future alliances (Kale & Singh, 2007).

3.2. Research results and discussion

The items in the sample were examined in several aspects: first, we asked the respondents to assess (by using Likert-type scale) the extent to which several contextual variables influenced the knowledge transfer between the partners, which is depicted in Table 1. After that, we attempt to find statistically significant differences in previously mentioned influence with regard to independent characteristics of the alliances.

Table following on the next page

Table 3: The influence of contextual variables on knowledge transfer between partners

Contextual variable	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.
Differences in knowledge bases	2.66	3.00	1.18
Operational style of conducting businesses	3.00	3.00	1.02
Management styles	3.16	3.00	1.11
Organizational cultures	3.09	3.00	1.09
Organizational structures	2.84	3.00	1.05
National cultures	1.66	1.00	0.79
Business ethics	2.13	2.00	0.79
Language	1.75	1.50	0.98
The knowledge was protected by the partner	2.16	2.00	1.05
Conflicts among partners	2.41	2.00	1.13
Our company had no intention to acquire knowledge from the partner	2.06	2.00	1.01
The partner had no intention to transfer knowledge to our company	2.09	2.00	1.00

As it can be seen from Table 3, variables that are more closely related to characteristics of the donor and the sender of the knowledge, i.e. organizational and managerial characteristics result in the greatest influence on knowledge transfer between partners. According to respondents assessment, operational styles of conducting businesses ($\bar{x} = 3,00$, $\sigma = 1,02$), management styles of both partners ($\bar{x} = 3,16$, $\sigma = 1,11$) as well as organizational cultures of respective companies ($\bar{x} = 3,09$, $\sigma = 1,09$) were found to influence knowledge transfer the most out of observed variables (all other variables were assessed as not having a lot of influence in the process). Interestingly, the research revealed that motivation to teach and learn did not influence the process as much, which can also be interpreted as a scenario in which there was no knowledge hiding and where partners' intentions were straightforward and honest. In a way, inter-partner dynamics seems to be of crucial importance in harvesting results from learning and knowledge exchange in partnerships. Overall, as recent research has shown, *cultural compatibility* and *operational compatibility* do the most pronounced impact on knowledge flows in strategic alliances. Shared values such as trust, commitment, adaptability and communication have been found to be increasingly important (Cullen, 2000; Dolan & Garcia, 2002) to prevent cultural conflicts. Cultural values and norms of the two partners like attitudes towards quality, ability to accept differences, goal horizons, strategic direction, open communication, involvement of senior management and others (Meirovich, 2010) will surely support the success of the cooperation. Differences in the level of centralization, formalization and participation in decision making impede communication and might create problems between partners (Meirovich, 2010). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the importance of cultural differences varies depending upon the activity around which the cooperation activity was designed (Schultz, 1998:109 after Lajara, Lillo & Sempere, 2003)

Since the data in Table 3 showed some variability (standard deviations greater than 1) we aimed at analyzing potential differences with regard to independent characteristics of the alliances. Non-parametric tests were performed for all four independent characteristics for which the summary is given in the table below.

Table 4: The influence of contextual variables on knowledge transfer between partners

Independent characteristic	Differences	Test
Primary area of cooperation (1-business services, 2-other)	<i>No differences found</i>	Mann-Whitney
Type of alliance by origin of the partners (1-domestic, 2-cross-border)	Organizational culture, organizational structure, national culture, language	Mann-Whitney
Type of alliance by level of integration (1-contractual, 2-equity)	<i>No differences found</i>	Mann-Whitney
Previous experience in forming alliances (1-no experience, 2-one alliance, 3-two or more alliances)	<i>No differences found</i>	Kruskal-Wallis

There were no statistically significant differences in the extent to which these factor influence knowledge transfers in strategic alliances when it comes to primary area of cooperation, type of alliance by level of integration or previous experience in forming alliances. Statistically significant differences were found organizational culture ($p=0,05$) and organizational structure ($p=0,005$) where managers in domestic strategic alliances reported more influence in the process of knowledge transfer. Similarly, national culture ($p=0,02$) and language ($p=0,004$) were found to statistically significantly influence knowledge transfer in international alliances more than in domestic alliances. National culture has already been recognized as a determinant for the success of the cooperation (Dong & Glaister, 2007), where culture management programs can be implemented to increase the trust between partners and the success of cooperation (Dong & Glaister, 2007).

4. CONCLUSION

Business practice shows constant growth in the collaboration between independent organizations, many of these being in the form of strategic alliance. Although such inter-organizational practices can occur for several reasons, in the last few decades knowledge transfer has been recognized as an important motive of alliance formation.

The focus of our research was to examine several contextual variables that influence the knowledge transfer between partners in strategic alliances. Existing research recognizes knowledge attributes organizational attributes and inter-organizational dynamics as key factors impacting knowledge transfer. Our research results show that knowledge transfer between partners was most influenced by operational styles of conducting businesses, management styles of both partners as well as organizational cultures of respective companies. These findings support and complement previous empirical research that emphasized operational styles of conducting business and corporate culture as important determinants in knowledge exchange.

Additional non-parametric tests were used to assess potential differences in knowledge transfer between partners with regard to independent characteristics of the alliances (primary area of cooperation, type of alliance by origin of the partners, type of alliance by the level of integration or previous experience in forming alliances). We show that the only

variable were some statistically significant differences were found is type of alliance by the origin of partners. Based on the statistically significant differences found, we can argue that organizational culture and organizational structure have stronger influence in the process of knowledge transfer in domestic strategic alliances. Similarly, in international alliances managers assigned higher impact to national culture and language. Based on this finding, we can confirm the importance of corporate culture in any interfirm alliance, to be more precise, national culture in cross-border alliances and organizational culture in domestic alliances.

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