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International experience and perceived success factors in international collaborative relationships. An empirical study of Polish firms cooperating with Chinese and German partners

The aim of the paper is the analysis of the relationship between the perception of the success factors in international collaborative relationships and firm's international experience. The results of an empirical study on the sample of 278 Polish exporters and importers cooperating with partners from China and Germany are presented and both the differences in success factor perception depending on foreign partners' home country, and the correlation of the perception of the success factors with the international experience of the firms are discussed. The study revealed that the firms working with partners in China have somewhat more international experience. The importance of the majority of the success factors in relationships with German partners did not differ significantly from those in collaboration with Chinese firms. However, some consequential differences were observed. Internationalization experience is not strongly related with the perception of international cooperation success factors.

Międzynarodowe doświadczenie a postrzeganie czynników sukcesu w międzynarodowych relacjach kooperacyjnych. Badanie empiryczne polskich przedsiębiorstw współpracujących z partnerami z Chin i Niemiec

Celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie relacji między międzynarodowym doświadczeniem przedsiębiorstw a postrzeganymi przez nie czynnikami sukcesu w relacjach międzynarodowych. Zaprezentowano w nim wyniki badania empirycznego na próbie 278 polskich eksporterów i importerów współpracujących z partnerami z Niemiec i Chin. Przedyskutowane zostały zarówno różnice w postrzeganiu czynników sukcesu w zależności od kraju pochodzenia partnera, jak i korelacja percepcji czynników sukcesu z międzynarodowym doświadczeniem badanych przedsiębiorstw. Analiza wykazała, że przedsiębiorstwa współpracujące z partnerami z Chin mają nieco większe doświadczenie międzynarodowe. Znaczenie większości czynników sukcesu nie różniło się istotnie w przypadku współpracy z partnerami z Chin i z Niemiec (zaobserwowano jednak kilka istotnych różnic). Międzynarodowe doświadczenie badanych przedsiębiorstw nie było silnie powiązane z percepcją czynników sukcesu we współpracy międzynarodowej.

Keywords: international cooperation, success factors, Polish exporters, Polish importers

JEL classification: D85, F23

Introduction

Definitions of inter-organizational cooperative relationships (IOCR) usually include their following features: the partners remain legally independent, they form long-lasting organizational and socio-psychological relationships for mutual benefits, share managerial control over the performance of assigned tasks, and make contributions in areas covered by the relationship [e.g. Flexner, 1993, p. 446; Smith et al., 1995; see also Stępień, 2011].

Various theoretical concepts and empirical studies prove that IOCR contribute to the firm's competitive advantage and improved performance. These benefits result from relationship-specific assets, combining complementary resources, joint learning, and knowledge transfers, as well as lower transaction costs [e.g. Dyer, Singh, 1998; Donaldson, O'Toole, 2007].

Numerous studies focused on the identification of the success factors (SF) in IOCR (see Table 1). Research on IOCR (incl. international cooperation) has been conducted in Poland [see Stępień 2011; Fonfara, 2012 for literature review]. However, studies on relationships' SF in international business are less advanced [e.g. Danik, Gołębiowski, 2012].

This paper's objective is to advance this area of research by analysing the relationship between the perception of SF in international IOCR and firm's international experience.

1. Theoretical background and research questions

A success in IOCR can be measured by the level of attaining the defined objectives by the partners. However, the studies on SF encounter methodological problems. Success measurement is difficult due to the lack of quantitative assessment tools for many phenomena or facts that could be recognized as symptoms of relationship's success, and because of the subjective character of expected benefits, especially those related to organizational learning. The subjectivity in the assessment of each party's benefits is caused i.a. by the different significance each of them have in the entire set of defined objectives of IOCR. Even if the objectives cannot be reached, a relationship may be called successful, if there are personal feelings of satisfaction with the results among partners [Marxt, Link, 2002]. Even if the SF are identified not by the respondents but by the researchers observing the firms' relationships, their studies can involve delusions referring e.g. to correlation and causality, lasting success, single explanations, or studying only the successful cases [Olk, Rosenzweig, 2010].

Research on the SF in IOCR covers both their economic and behavioural aspects. The former include such SF as: specific investments into the relationship, compatibility of technologies and information systems, resource and capabilities fit, and economic efficiency (see Table 1). The focus in this paper will be on the behavioural perspective on IOCR, which discusses the social aspects of exchange and accompanying cooperative relationships [Leonidou et al. 2006]. It is to note that behavioural norms and other factors differ in international context, which creates challenges in IOCR in international business.

An overview of selected studies on IOCR enablers and SF is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Success factors in inter-organizational collaborative relationships

Reference	Success factors in inter-organizational cooperative relationships
Johanson, Mattson [1987]	mutual orientation, interdependence, adaptation processes, information exchange, specific investment
Moss-Kanter [1994]	commitment of the partners, value added by the partners, partners' interdependence, specific investment into the relationship, communication/shared knowledge, institutionalization of the relationship, strong interpersonal relationships
Morgan, Hunt [1994]	relationship commitment, relationship benefits, trust, shared values, communication
Spekman et al. [1998]	appropriate determining of relationship's suitability, commitment of the partners, mutual trust, providing material infrastructure, integrating partners' processes
Corbet et al. [1999]	commitment of the partners, mutual trust, providing leadership, providing physical infrastructure, enhancing partnering capabilities
McIvor, McHugh [2000]	creating commitment, mutual trust, integrating relationship processes, providing leadership, managing asymmetries in the relationship, developing partnering skills, managing conflicts
Marxt, Link [2002]	partners' strategic fit, management commitment, mutual benefits and interdependence, trust, openness and information sharing, experience in collaboration, readiness for risk sharing, conflict solving mechanisms, good interpersonal links, appropriate formalization of the relationship, bridging cultural differences
Maheshwari et al. [2006]	determining partnership suitability and feasibility, building mutual trust, creating partners' commitment to relationship, creating physical infrastructure, integrating partners' processes, providing leadership, managing asymmetries, managing conflicts, managing performance, building and enhancing partnering skills
Fawcett et al. [2008]	information sharing, frequent communication, common goals, partners' management interactions, sharing risks and rewards, trust building, clear relationship management guidelines, common operating procedures, inter-team collaboration and training, use of cost analysis
Heroux, Hammoutene [2012]	mutual understanding and trust, commitment to the relationship, partners' interdependence, communication/information sharing, conflict solving, mutual adaptability, satisfaction from the relationship

Source: Own elaboration.

Management commitment is widely recognized as a key component of successful relationships (Table 1). It is often referred to as an attitude of attachment and an intention or desire to continue a valued relationship [Bloemer et al., 2013]. It reflects the level of management support in implementing cooperation. It can enhance legitimacy or neutralize possible conflicts.

IOCR imply long-term management perspective and clear common goals to link up the partners. This is especially important when the relationship covers areas or projects of strategic significance for the partners. Long-term agreements help partners work together toward achieving strategic objectives [Drucker, 1996] and reduce risk in their relationship.

Trust, as a key element and one of the SF, is a part of most IOCR models (Table 1), including those of IOCR within an international supply chain [e.g. Child, 2001; Heroux, Hammoutene, 2012]. Trust can be defined as a belief that the partner will act in a predictable manner, keep his/her word, and not behave in a way that negatively affects the other [Hollensen, 2003, p. 212]. It plays a key role in creating and exploring the advantages of cooperation, and has a positive influence on performance [e.g. Zaheer et al., 1998; Nielsen, 2007; Costa e Silva et al., 2012]. Trust influences the reduction of transaction costs and of partner's opportunistic behaviour [Chiles, McMackin, 1996], thus building up stable conditions for IOCR. A high level of trust reduces the risk of conflicts and causes higher partner satisfaction. Developing trust across cultural/national borders can be difficult, as different trusting norms in partners' countries can lead to misunderstandings and lower cooperation potential [Bachmann, Zaheer, 2008] – e.g. lack of trust results in firm's reluctance to share unique knowledge. Lack of trust is viewed by Polish firms as a barrier to both domestic and international cooperation [Danik, Żukowska, 2011; Danik, Lewandowska, 2013].

IOCR involve partners' interdependence and are often complex in character. Effective communication is necessary to keep the partners together, build up mutual trust, encourage participative decision-making, and facilitate the coordination of partners' activities [Leonidou et al., 2006]. Effective communication must be based on both partners' readiness to share information and to develop a proper communication system. Inter-organizational information sharing, especially knowledge sharing, is an effective way of organizational learning, essential to the building of competitive advantage. High level of information sharing is associated with successful buyer-supplier relationships [e.g. Bowersox et al., 2003; Ramesh et al., 2010].

Effective communication is critically important in international IOCR, as cross-cultural differences and linguistic differences may cause confusion, thus negatively affecting inter-firm relational learning [Liu, 2012]. Similarities in partners' national cultures positively affect IOCR. National culture influences com-

munication, negotiation styles, buyer–seller relationship styles, and the understanding of ethics [Doole, Lowe, 2008]. Cultural and language differences are viewed to be international cooperation barriers [Arteaga-Ortiz, Fernández-Ortiz, 2010; Leick, 2011]. Cultural sensitivity, i.e. the willingness to learn and respect partner’s national culture, is thus recognized as a factor that builds successful inter-organizational and inter-personal links. Foreign language competency evidently facilitates communication; the knowledge of foreign partners’ language proves an appreciation of their national culture [Williams, Chaston, 2004; Bloemer et al., 2013].

Similarities in partners’ organizational cultures reduce learning costs and time [Parkhe, 1998]. In general, similarities in organizational cultures and similarities in organizational solutions influence partners’ ability and willingness to cooperate. They also enhance the positive relationship between trust and performance [Costa e Silva et al., 2012].

Though trust-based ties act as an informal governance mechanism between firms [Mu et al., 2008], management commitment, and ongoing care about the relationships reflected i.a. in an ongoing monitoring, operational coordination of partners’ activities, common operating procedures, and proper conflict solving mechanisms are also among other SF regarded to play an important role in IOCR [e.g. Maheshwari et al., 2006; Fawcett et al., 2008].

Other cooperation SF included in our analysis are: sense of balance of partners’ power [Danik, Gołębiowski, 2012], partners’ flexibility [Stępień, 2011, p. 229], and institutional support (see Table 3).

2. Research on Polish exporters and importers

The paper presents selected results of a study on dependencies between IOCR and cultural differences (a statutory research of the Collegium of World Economy, Warsaw School of Economics). The study was carried out on Polish importers and exporters cooperating with partners in Germany and/or China (PRC). These countries were selected due to their important position as Poland’s trade partners [GUS, 2012] and because they represent different business environments. Germany and China differ i.a. in terms of their geographical distance to Poland, level of economic development, law, politics, lifestyles, consumer preferences, language, and education, as well as in several cultural dimensions [Gesteland, 2000; House et al., 2004; Hofstede et al., 2011].

Therefore, the perception of the importance of particular SF should vary within IOCR with partners from these countries. It cannot be excluded that Polish business culture will influence Polish firms’ perception of the cooperation SF so

strongly that they will not take their partner's culture into account while assessing their importance.

It can be expected that the perception of SF in IOCR changes over time. It can be caused by various factors related to the changes both in relationship's external environment and partners' attitude toward their relationship. In this paper, it is assumed that the changes in the perception of SF in IOCR can be connected to the partners' prior experience with cooperative relationships.

This brings us to the following research questions:

RQ. 1. Are there any differences in the perception of SF in IOCR with partners in Germany and China?

RQ. 2. Is the perception of SF in international IOCR correlated with firms' international experience?

2.1. Research method

The study was conducted in 2013 in firms from manufacturing sectors. The CATI method was applied to collect the data. Net sample covered 278 micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland and collaborating with partners in China and/or Germany (see Table 2).

The respondents were managers responsible for their firm's cooperation with foreign partners. The numbers of exporters and importers and the numbers of firms cooperating with Chinese and German partners are similar in the sample (the smallest cluster is made up of exporters to China – 64 firms – and the biggest one of importers from China – 84 firms). Some of the firms under study cooperated with partners from both countries and/or were both exporters and importers. In most cases the scope of IOCR with foreign partners was limited to export–import transactions and services connected with manufacturing and distribution.

Table 2. Sample characteristics

Firm size		Share of exports in total sales over the past 3 years		Share of imports in total purchases over the past 3 years	
employment	indications	share (in %)	indications	share (in %)	indications
1–9	24	> 30	84	> 30	120
10–49	107	30–49	33	30–49	23
50–249	147	50–79	96	50–79	51
Total	278	< 80	46	< 80	28
		Total	259*	Total	222*

* Some respondents refused or were unable to provide answers, hence $n < 278$.

Source: Own elaboration.

The international cooperation experience was measured by the following dimensions:

- the scope of cooperation with foreign partners (export–import transactions, services related to manufacturing, distribution, R&D, financial and accounting services, promotion services, market research services, IT services, purchasing, licensing, franchising, and joint investments);
- the duration of cooperation with foreign firms (in years);
- the number of countries the firm has been cooperating with within the last 3 years;
- the number of partners in China/Germany the firm cooperates with;
- the export share in total sales in the last 3 years;
- the import share in total supply in the last 3 years.

In order to assess the perceived importance of each one of the potential SF, the respondents were asked if the success in IOCR with their partners in China/Germany depends on a given factor. A Likert type scale was used from 1 (definitely does not depend) to 5 (definitely depends).

A t-test for independent samples was used to identify the differences in the firms' international experience and their perception of the cooperation SF. Next, the correlation between international experience and perception of the cooperation SF was measured with the Pearson correlation coefficient (r).

2.2. Results

The analysis revealed that firms cooperating with Chinese partners have more experience in IOCR measured by longer duration of international cooperation and bigger number of countries their foreign partners come from.

The study did not reveal statistically significant differences (between cooperation with German and Chinese partners) in perceived importance of the majority of the SF.

The analysis showed that firms cooperating with Chinese partners assess keeping technical and organizational secrets of their own firm, knowledge of partner's language, and knowledge of partner's country culture as more significant SF as compared with firms that cooperate with German partners. In contrast, firms working with German partners put more stress on the following SF: care about relations and cultural similarity. In both clusters good information flow received the highest rank (see Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and the results of the t-test for independent samples

		China		Germany		Difference	
		M	SD	M	SD	T	P
International experience	International cooperation scope	2.58	0.05	2.57	0.06	0.416	0.678
	Number of years of international cooperation	2.66	0.61	2.36	0.71	3.662	0.000
	Number of partners' home countries	1.52	0.52	1.26	0.75	3.209	0.001
	Numbers of partners in China/Germany	3.57	2.84	3.96	3.61	1.002	0.317
	Export share in total sales	48.78	26.77	49.45	26.77	0.195	0.846
	Import share in total supplies	35.04	27.05	37.33	26.41	0.608	0.544
Success factors*	Top management commitment	1.30	0.45	1.33	0.39	-0.560	0.576
	Long-term perspective	1.39	0.34	1.43	0.29	-0.939	0.349
	Clear common objectives	1.42	0.29	1.42	0.31	-0.048	0.962
	Ongoing care about relations	1.42	0.33	1.50	0.24	-2.393	0.017
	Mutual trust	1.47	0.27	1.50	0.21	-1.059	0.291
	Proper conflict solving mechanism	1.27	0.45	1.25	0.43	0.321	0.749
	Stable cooperation conditions	1.44	0.30	1.48	0.20	-1.266	0.206
	Good information flow	1.51	0.27	1.51	0.22	0.056	0.955
	Knowledge sharing	1.31	0.36	1.29	0.42	0.485	0.628
	Keeping technical and organizational secrets of one's own firm	1.31	0.45	1.16	0.51	2.638	0.009
	Cultural similarity	0.74	0.53	0.89	0.53	-2.383	0.018
	Cultural sensitivity and knowledge of partner's national culture	1.16	0.49	1.04	0.52	2.027	0.044
	Knowledge of partner's language	0.94	0.62	1.30	0.43	-5.472	0.000
	Similarity of organisational solutions	0.91	0.55	0.96	0.52	-0.782	0.435
	Ongoing operational coordination of activities	1.24	0.44	1.22	0.43	0.281	0.779
	Prior international cooperation experience	1.36	0.40	1.32	0.40	0.767	0.444
	(Sense of) balance of partners' power	1.00	0.49	0.94	0.53	0.854	0.394
Partners' flexibility	1.43	0.30	1.43	0.27	0.006	0.995	
Institutional support	0.79	0.58	0.76	0.59	0.329	0.742	

M – mean; SD – standard deviation; T – t-value; P – probability

*Because the distribution was significantly different to a normal distribution, the logarithmic data (the natural logarithm) was applied.

Source: Own elaboration.

It was stated that the cooperation scope is positively related to stable cooperation conditions viewed as one of the important SF (Table 4). Moreover, the longer the firms maintained IOCR with foreign partners, the bigger the perceived significance of the care about relations, mutual trust, and long-term perspective was. We also stated that the number of partners' home countries is positively related to the perceived importance of the knowledge of partner's country culture and to clearness of cooperation objectives. The number of partners in China was not correlated with the perception of SF in cooperation. The growing number of German partners matches with increasing importance of such SF as knowledge of partner's language and proper conflict-solving mechanisms. The export share in total sales was correlated with mutual trust, management commitment, long-term perspective, operational coordination of activities, prior international cooperation experience, and knowledge of partner's language. The import share was not correlated with the perception of SF (see Table 4).

Table 4. Pearson correlation coefficient (r)

	Cooperation success factor	International coop. scope	Relationship duration	No. of countries	No. of Chinese partners	No. of German partners	Export share	Import share
1	Top management commitment	-0.024	0.089	0.000	-0.021	0.087	0.198**	-0.058
2	Long-term perspective	0.055	0.130*	0.097	0.059	0.100	0.127*	0.007
3	Clear common objectives	0.003	0.040	0.134*	0.046	0.166	0.11	0.041
4	Ongoing care about relationship	0.033	0.139*	0.057	0.039	0.107	0.12	0
5	Mutual trust	0.089	0.131*	0.074	-0.031	-0.016	0.181**	-0.016
6	Proper conflict solving mechanism	-0.027	0.000	0.021	-0.041	0.173*	0.012	0.018
7	Stable cooperation conditions	0.130*	0.094	0.019	0.03	0.093	0.115	0.08
8	Good information flow	-0.020	-0.025	0.016	0.012	0.149	0.058	-0.038
9	Knowledge sharing	0.065	0.021	0.005	0.086	0.106	0.102	0.025
10	Keeping the technical and organizational secrets of one's own firm	-0.001	0.026	0.024	-0.071	-0.053	0	0.046
11	Cultural similarity	-0.007	-0.061	-0.016	-0.036	0.163	0.053	-0.001
12	Cultural sensitivity and knowledge of partner's country culture	-0.018	0.037	0.136*	0.031	0.042	-0.002	0.073
13	Knowledge of partner's language	0.033	0.081	-0.017	0.014	0.168*	0.170**	-0.06

	Cooperation success factor	International coop. scope	Relationship duration	No. of countries	No. of Chinese partners	No. of German partners	Export share	Import share
14	Similarity of organisational solutions	-0.042	-0.035	-0.044	-0.026	0.035	0.081	0.013
15	Ongoing operational coordination of activities	-0.009	0.087	-0.001	0.102	0.09	0.122*	-0.03
16	Prior international cooperation experience	0.006	0.055	0.022	-0.055	-0.045	0.151*	0.056
17	(Sense of) balance of partners' power	0.022	0.044	0.022	-0.053	-0.022	-0.063	-0.037
18	Partners' flexibility	0.061	0.080	0.045	0.051	0.133	0.079	0.072
19	Institutional support	-0.115	0.055	-0.106	-0.065	-0.073	0.082	-0.104

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusions

Those of the firms under study which are cooperating with partners in China have more experience in the international IOCR measured by the relationship's duration and the number of home partners' countries – which stays in line with the Uppsala model of internationalization [Johanson, Vahlne, 1977].

As to the importance ascribed to particular SF in IOCR, the opinions about most of the SF in cooperation with Chinese firms did not differ significantly from those in cooperation with German partners. Firms cooperating with German partners put greater importance on the care about relations and cultural similarity, whereas firms working with Chinese partners appreciated keeping technical and organizational secrets of one's own firm higher than those working with German firms (which can be explained by the fear of having the know-how stolen); they also assessed the importance of knowledge of partner's country culture and language higher. The latter can be an indicator of the awareness of the cultural differences between Poland and China and/or a signal of culture's perceived influence on the cooperation.

The internationalization experience is not strongly related with the perception of international cooperation SF. Only individual international experience dimensions are correlated with the perception of some of the SF.

Although our study contributes to the international business theory, following limitations have to be stressed:

1. The interrelations between the perceived SF were not analysed.

2. The cooperation of most firms under study was limited to product exchange.
3. Only Polish firms were studied (their partners' opinions should also be analysed in order to receive a more objective view; the study is thus not representative for other countries).

These limitations should be a starting point for future research.

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