
THE ROLE OF TRUST BETWEEN PARTNERS IN THE PROCESS OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION WITHIN INTERNATIONAL JOINT VENTURES

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Abstract:

In front of the environment disturbances in which firms exercise, and in order to ensure their continuity and competitiveness, managers must reorient their interest towards organizational learning through the accumulation of knowledge. Through the study of the process of knowledge acquisition within International Joint Ventures from partners, we try, through an exploratory approach, to discern the determinants that may influence this process. We focus, in particular, on trust between partners that may have a significant effect on the process of knowledge acquisition and the above determinants. This research produces a set of propositions likely to be verified in future explanatory research.

Keywords: Organizational learning; Knowledge acquisition; International Joint Venture; Trust between partners; exploratory research.

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1. Introduction :

The complexity of the environment, the strengthening of the competition and the rapid technological advances are forcing managers to reconsider the methods that ensure the sustainability of their organization. Indeed, faced with this disturbance, the need for rapid and efficient capitalization of strategic skills and competencies has naturally heightened. This need explains the growing interest in organizational learning, which will enable companies to manage, somehow, the new realities of their environment.

Moreover, the organizational learning is considered as the phenomenon that explains why some firms outperform their competitors. This importance comes from the fact that organizational learning is the basis for the acquisition of a sustainable competitive advantage and the improvement organizational performance. Companies that are able to learn are generally more flexible and quicker than their rivals to respond to new challenges. This will enable them to maintain their competitive advantage in the long term (Jiménez-Jiménez D. and Sanz-Valle , 2011, Page 409).

The organizational learning phenomenon finds its importance when examined within the alliances, which are two or more companies that are committed together to achieve common goals without giving up their autonomy. This importance is justified by the fact that the most widespread reason cited when creating this type of partnership is the transfer of skills between the allies. Therefore, in our study, the choice of this type of firms is due to the fact that organizational learning is the justification of its establishment.

1.1. Research problem:

However, and because many types of alliances exists, we have to choose one of them, and the International Joint Venture (IJV) happens to be the type of alliance chosen for this study. The IJV is a type of alliance between two or more companies that one is from one country while the other is from another country. Thus, the general question of our research is as follows: **“within international alliances, what are the factors influencing the organizational learning process?”**

1.2. Objectives of the research:

Thus, the objective of this study is to explore the phenomenon of knowledge acquisition within International Joint ventures across:

- The detection of the key factors that can influence this phenomenon and the determination of the potential links between them.
- The determination of the influence that trust can have on the organizational learning and on these key factors.
- The presentation of a set of propositions about these links.

1.3. Methodology of the research:

To attain our objectives and because we have chosen to opt for an exploratory research, we will base our methodology on the review of the most important articles and books which have treated the theme of organizational learning within International Joint-ventures and the important role which can trust play within this process. This methodology will allow us to expose a set of propositions, which have to be tested in future explanatory researchs based on a set of IJV's.

1.4. Research plan:

Thus, this article will include several sections. Firstly, the theme of organizational learning in general and the process of knowledge acquisition within IJV in particular will be discussed (section II). The presentation of the different factors that may influence this process will be studied in the next section (Section III). The last section will discuss the importance of trust between.

partners and the role that it can play in determining the degree of knowledge acquisition within IJV (Section IV). Note that these last two sections will present different propositions about factors influencing knowledge acquisition within IJV, but we must attract the reader's attention that another explanatory research has to be conducted to examine their validity.

2. The process of organizational learning:

The learning concept which referred, for a long time, to the acquisition of skills by individuals has been implemented to the organizational level. Following this implementation, a controversy arose. Between opposing and approving, no consensus has been reached among researchers and practitioners on the organizational learning phenomenon, and it is not the diversity of definitions that will reduce this confusion (Sense, 2011, Page 987).

2.1. Definition of organizational learning:

Despite the diversity of definitions provided by researchers, organizational learning is often conceptualized as: "a process by which organizations develop rules, procedures, and routines for solving recurring problems" (Koskinen, 2012, Page 308). It is a changing process influenced by an experience from the past, focused on the development or on the procedure modification and supported by the organizational memory (Valaski, 2012, Page 7556). Thereby, organizational learning is: "a process whereby the organization enhances its capacity to act. The capacity to act, in turn presupposes knowledge which when growing presents new options. Organizational learning, therefore, is a dynamic process creating knowledge and transferring it where it is needed and used" (Lyles, 2014, Page 133).

Several authors distinguish three perspectives of organizational learning (Sense, 2011, Page 987):

- The cognitive perspective: This perspective is concerned with knowledge, understanding and insights even if that knowledge is not converted into actions.
- The behavioural perspective: This perspective has an outcome focus by wanting to see a change in organizational actions or behaviours as a result of learning. This can be either an actual change or a potential behavioural change consisting of the lessons learnt that would have an impact on the organization's future behaviour.
- The sociological perspective: In this perspective, meaning, actions and learning are a result of the conversations and interactions of individuals within their socio-cultural settings, or, in simpler words, their collective and interpretive social practice.

2.2. From individual learning to organizational learning:

If we derive models that link individual, group and organizational levels, we can understand how learning is translated and why some information get formulated into new knowledge, while other is discarded.

2.2.1. Subjects of organizational learning: The various actors of organizational learning are:

- **Individuals:** The individual learning, which is placed in the center of the process of organizational learning, is acquired through experiences (Valaski, 2012, Page 7556).
- **Groups:** The members of a group create new perspectives through dialogues and debates. These dialogues may involve considerable conflicts and divergences, but it is this conflict that prompts the people to question the existing premises and to understand their experiences through a new manner. This type of dynamic interaction facilitates the transformation of personal knowledge into organizational knowledge (Valaski, 2012, Page 7556).
- **Organization:** At the organizational level, ideas and shared mental models among group members must be registered in procedures and routines to give them an organizational dimension (Szylar, 2006, 43).

2.2.2. Transition from individual knowledge to organizational knowledge:

The real bridge allowing the transition from individual to organizational learning is the social context created within the organization and known as (Fillol, 2009, Page 49): the interaction of individuals. Learning processes are intrinsically social and collective phenomena. Thus, a culture of learning in which people work together enables organizations to establish themselves by fostering and maintaining a system of knowledge creation (Bolivar-Ramos, 2012, Page 333). In addition to this interaction, knowledge must be encoded within the organization so that the individual learning becomes organizational (Szylar, 2006, Page 43).

Thus said, individuals, their interaction and the encoded knowledge are the cornerstone of organizational learning process, and it is the interaction and coding knowledge that transform the individual learning into organizational learning which, in turn, feeds the individual learning (Valaski, 2012, Page 7556).

2.3. Organizational learning processes:

Recent research defines organizational learning as a process that comprises four main stages (Santos-Vijande, 2012, Page 1080-1081):

- **Information acquisition:** In this stage, information may originate from both internal and external sources. The sources of internally developed information are congenital learning that comes from the company's founders and previous experience. The most important external source is the grafting by acquiring other organizations, creating joint ventures, or incorporating new organizational members from other entities.
- **Knowledge dissemination:** This stage concerns the distribution of knowledge throughout the organization. This process takes place through formal and informal interactions among individuals.
- **Shared interpretation:** This stage aims to analyze the information from a global viewpoint. For this reason, achieving consensus regarding the meaning of the information and its implications for the firm is a priority. In this regard, firms develop shared mental models and conduct their operations through the use of various communication tools likely to favor this interpretation.
- **Organizational memory:** This construct represents all the knowledge that a firm gathers. This knowledge requires proper storage and availability to all the individuals to facilitate its retrieval as necessary.

However, what we should keep in mind is that organisation's knowledge can be generated either internally or externally. For our part, we will focus our attention on organizational learning from an external source through the grafting, by focusing on the knowledge acquisition within IJV.

3. The knowledge acquisition within International Joint Ventures:

To face the competitive realities, a new consideration of the collaboration is more than necessary, because only few companies can claim to have all the necessary skills to achieve their goals. Thus, international alliances appear as the most experienced strategic option for providing companies with significant advantages (Ati and M'Hiri, 2013, Page 39-40). International alliances are grouped into two blocks (Benavides-Espinosa and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014, Page 648-649):

- Structured agreements resulting in the creation of a new entity, also known as joint ventures
- Contractual agreements that do not result in the creation of a new entity, namely combined production agreements, R&D agreements, marketing agreements and technical support contracts, which may have a common organizational unit.

3.1. Definition of International Joint Ventures:

A joint venture is an agreement through which two or more independent firms decide to create a new legal entity in its own right with its own social capital. This firm is assigned the necessary resources in order to operate effectively and, in return, receives the results generated by its activity, while being subject to the competitive strategies of the parent companies. A joint venture is considered to be international when at least one of the partners has its central office outside of the country where the joint business is set up, or where a significant amount of activity is carried out in more than one country ((Benavides-Espinosa and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014, Page 649).

3.2. Motives for forming international joint ventures:

The reasons for creating IJVs are:

- Acquiring knowledge: International joint ventures create opportunities for knowledge transfer between partners. Consequently, they are considered as an essential source of learning and resource sharing (Masrurul, 2012, Page 5).
- Risk sharing: International joint ventures are seen as a way for sharing the risks of any activity.
- Realization of synergies: International joint ventures allow the realization of several synergies:
 - ✓ Market synergies: Partners serve different regions by the distribution of their products.
 - ✓ Product synergies: Partners commercialize separate but complementary products.
 - ✓ Resources synergies: Partners compensate their strengths and weaknesses.
- Achieving greater efficiency: International joint ventures allow cost reduction as enabling partners to achieve scale by making benefit from economies of scale.
- Conserving autonomy: This may be a response to the needs of firms looking to expand their business without alienating their power and identity (Ati and M'Hiri, 2013, Page 45).
- Overcoming the barriers to entry: The entry restriction and slow-cycle market position motivates firms to develop international joint ventures to enter in new markets (Belal Uddin and Akhter, 2011, Page 47).

3.3. Knowledge acquisition process within International Joint Ventures:

IJV knowledge acquisition from parents is defined as: "a process by which an IJV obtains new knowledge from its parent" (ThucAnh and al., 2006, Page 465). Acquired knowledge does not have to be newly created, only new to the organization. Knowledge acquired can be tacit, explicit or a combination of both.

Knowledge acquisition results from individual participation and interactions with tasks, technologies, resources, and people within a particular context. Individuals acquire knowledge, but organizations create a context for individuals to acquire that knowledge. In that case, the IJV and its relationship with parents is the context in which knowledge is acquired by the IJV's individual members.

Some authors recognize that the following processes are likely to be important in IJV contexts with their need to learn strategies, practices and technologies from other organizations (Park and Harris, 2014; Page 493):

- Vicarious learning, which involves imitating or copying practices, can be from competitors or can be from partner firms.
- Grafting is a way of acquiring knowledge from external organizations (including partners) by bringing in individuals who hold new knowledge. This is frequently quicker than acquiring the knowledge experientially, and the knowledge can be acquired more comprehensively than through vicarious learning.
- Searching and noticing knowledge, internally or externally, takes place in the everyday process of management.

4. The determinants of knowledge acquisition within International Joint ventures:

Although we recognize that knowledge transfer between organizations is always difficult, IJV can acquire and adapt the partners' skills and capacities – which may give them a competitive advantage - by considering the following factors which may influence this process.

4.1. The interaction between partners:

The interaction between partners refers to the process of exchange that occurs during the transfer of knowledge. It involves efforts, investment and expectation of both parties that this will be forthcoming which implies an investment by each partner of time and other resources (Toon and al., 2012, Page 187).

Without any interaction between partners, transfer does not take place, and the manner in which partners collaborate affects the desired outcome. Therefore, a deep understanding of management routines that enhance interaction quality and in turn increase knowledge transfer success is paramount (Leischnig and al., 2014, Page 1050). This is what allows us to present the following proposition:

❖ **Proposition 1:** The higher the interaction between partners, the greater will be the level of knowledge acquisition within IJV.

4.2. The partners' commitment:

Partner commitment means taking the necessary measures to maintain the joint venture by contributing the required staff, time and resources. This means that the firms that take these necessary steps can be sufficiently assured that their partners will provide the time and resources required to maintain their commitment (Benavides-Espinosa and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014, Page 649).

If each partner demonstrates commitment, both parties will be able to work together more productively to achieve the IJV's goals (Farrel and al., 2011, Page 480). Moreover, organizational learning theory advocates that commitment has a profound impact on the learning within IJVs. The essence of partner's commitment is to develop articulated organizational learning goals and policies, to provide the resources needed to achieve the

goals and to evaluate the learning performance (Evangelista and Hau, 2009, Page 65). Therefore, we are entitled to forward the following proposition:

❖ **Proposition 2:** The higher the partners' commitment, the greater will be the level of knowledge acquisition within IJV.

4.3. The intent to learn:

Learning intent is a core competency and value-creating discipline for international joint ventures which may acquire competitive skills and advantages via this intent. How to embed a learning intent within joint venture's employees is very important for the alliance success as allowing the accumulation of knowledge and providing a basis for organizations to absorb and transfer knowledge (Chen and al., 2009, Page 1290).

Thus, learning intent can establish long-term advantages within IJVs by facilitating their development. Moreover, several scholars identify learning intent as the most decisive influence on the acquisition of specific competencies within IJVs. Consequently, we are able to introduce the following proposition:

❖ **Proposition 3:** The higher the IJV's intent to learn, the greater will be the level of knowledge acquisition within IJV.

4.4. The capacity to learn:

In our context, the capacity to learn may be defined as: "the IJV's dynamic ability to acquire, evaluate, assimilate and exploit the new knowledge" (Estrada and al., 2010, Page 1188). Studies have identified a number of elements that can contribute to learning capacity within international joint ventures like: the compatibility of knowledge being acquired, the relatedness of business and the manager's prior knowledge base. Thus, the greater the absorptive capacity of the IJV, the more knowledge it can acquire from partners (Park and Harris, 2014, Page 492-493). So, our next proposition is as follows:

❖ **Proposition 4:** The higher the IJV's capacity to learn, the greater will be the level of knowledge acquisition within IJV.

4.5. Partner protectiveness:

Joint ventures raise an interesting dilemma since partners risk losing their own core proprietary capabilities to their partners. Knowledge protectiveness refers to: "the degree of protectiveness employed by the partner vis-à-vis its knowledge base and is often seen as an appropriate safeguard against opportunistic behaviour in alliances" (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2009, Page 1035).

But, each partner must keep in mind that employing protective policies and procedures is not only likely to have a negative impact on the perception of honest and open collaboration but it also reduces the amount of

information exchanged within IJV. Consequently, it would be logical to expect that, for learning to take place in IJVs, the level of partner protectiveness should be low. Suchlike, our next proposition will be the following:

❖ **Proposition 5:** The higher the partner protectiveness, the lesser will be the level of knowledge acquisition within IJV.

5. Trust between partners within International Joint Ventures:

Trust between partners plays an essential role in cooperation agreements. From an organizational perspective, it is considered as an expression of assurance between the different parties. Even if trust has remained an elusive and difficult concept to define, and in order to explore its effect on IJV's learning, there is a need for some conceptualisation of trust (Tsamenyi and al., 2013, Page 183).

5.1. Definition and forms of trust between partners:

We define trust as the psychological state of accepting vulnerability in situations where there are positive expectations concerning others' behaviour. Therefore, trust between partners exists when each partner has a confidence in its exchange partner's reliability and integrity (Cäker and Siverbo, 2011, Page 333).

If each partner responds to cooperation expectations, the level of trust will gradually increase. In contrast, negative perceptions, surrounding the negative or non-cooperative behaviour of the partners, can destroy this trust. The lack of trust can lead partners to act defensively and can even result in the termination of potential alliances (Benavides-Espinosa and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014, Page 649).

We can distinguish between four forms of trust between partners within an IJV (Cäker and Siverbo, 2011, Page 333):

- **Competence trust:** It relates to the partners' competence in performing activities within IJV. One partner trusts the other because the latter has shown the ability to perform.
- **Goodwill trust:** It relates to one partner's positive expectation that its partner will not intentionally harm its interests and that it will do more than it is required by their contract. One partner trusts the other because the latter has shown its intent to act in the partner's interest.
- **Institutional trust:** One partner trusts its ally because the latter has an incentive to follow society's rules and to protect its reputation of good partner.
- **Calculative trust:** It refers to the idea that it is too costly for partners to act opportunistically or to leave the partnership. One partner trusts the other because the latter has an incentive not to act opportunistically.

The complexity of trust as a construct is such that different forms of trust develop at different stages of a relationship where the development of trust at one stage facilitating the development of trust at another stage. In fact, one form of trust may actually develop into another form of trust suggesting the dynamic nature of trust. If

we take this notion of trust development being dynamic then we can question whether trust is necessarily reciprocal as suggested in the literature (Tsamenyi and al., 2013, Page 184).

5.2. The relation between trust and knowledge acquisition in IJV:

Trust between partners is an important determinant of IJV learning because it increases the IJV's access to external knowledge and strengthens its ability to create new innovative and efficient ways of combining existing knowledge-related capabilities and resources in order to extract superior rents (Nielsen, 2007, Page 344).

Trust in IJVs provides an environment which ensures that knowledge exchanged between partners and the IJV is precise, suitable and complete. The IJV may also be more receptive to the technical and managerial knowledge offered by the partners (Lyles, 2000, Page 12). This acquisition can happen because an atmosphere of trust should contribute to the free exchange of information between partners since they do not feel that they have to protect themselves from the others' opportunistic behaviour (Inkpen, 1998a, Page 225).

Some authors have argued that trust between partners can have a direct positive influence on knowledge acquisition within IJV. When partners continuously cultivate mutual trust in each other, IJV's acquisition of valuable knowledge and information from allies will be maximised (Lane and al., 2001, Page 1141).

For example, Lane et al. who examined learning mechanisms, by looking at the process of knowledge acquisition in the Hungarian IJVs, claim that trust between parents is the main catalyst that speeds up knowledge transfer from one firm to another. Therefore, we are entitled to forward the following proposition:

❖ **Proposition 6:** The higher the trust between partners, the greater will be the level of knowledge acquisition within IJV.

5.3. The relation between trust and the interaction between partners:

Trust between partners facilitates close one-to-one interaction between individuals from different organizations. Strong relation between partners usually engenders close interaction between them. It can thus facilitate exchange and transfer of information and knowhow across the alliance interface (Kale and al., 2000, Page 221).

Expressly, trust serves as a coordinating mechanism that ensures repeated intense interaction conducive to knowledge transfer. Thus, in the presence of trust within an IJV, open communication and shared understanding are guaranteed, which will lead to a better cooperation between partners (Nielsen and Nielsen, 2009, Page 343-344).

Since trust between partners is likely to influence the interaction process by making it easier or, conversely, by handicapping it, we are able to introduce the following proposition:

❖ **Proposition 7:** The higher the trust between partners, the greater will be the level of interaction between them within IJV.

5.4. The relation between trust and partners' commitment:

Evidence suggests an interaction between trust and commitment. Some researchers propose that trust contributes to commitment and, through commitment, it contributes to joint actions. This may occur because relationships characterized by high trust are so highly valued that parties will desire to commit themselves to such relationships. Indeed, because commitment entails vulnerability, parties may only collaborate with trustworthy partners (Hausman and Johnson, 2010, Page 521).

In other words, the resource commitments of each partner in the form of inputs, such as human or financial capital, are a function of trust between partners at any given time. This can happen by encouraging behaviours such as open communication and willingness to share information (Khamesh and Jolly, 2008, Page 44).

When partners create a joint venture and the initial conditions enable continuing cooperation, trust between partners develops. Therefore, past actions generate trust and this trust provides information depending on the level of commitment between the partners (Benavides-Espinosa and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014, Page 649). In consequence, we will present the following proposition:

❖ **Proposition 8:** The higher the trust between partners, the greater will be the level of their commitment within IJV.

5.5. The relation between trust and partner protectiveness:

Trust curtails uncertainty in partner behaviour and eliminates the disadvantages of joint ventures. By developing a set of confident behaviours, trust can reduce this risk of opportunism (Benavides-Espinosa and Ribeiro-Soriano, 2014, Page 649).

In IJVs, the absence of any basis for judging the partner's trustworthiness will make the partner to be more protective of its knowledge particularly if the partners have no prior collaborations. However, if deeper ties between the partners develop, they may decrease their efforts to protect knowledge (Inkpen, 1998b, Page 74).

In the presence of trust, safeguards that need to be put in place to protect competencies from opportunism are removed or at least reduced (Park and al., 2008, Page 8). Thus, increasing trust between partners may mitigate partner protectiveness.

Moreover, without trust, partners would establish explicit and implicit safeguards against loss of their knowledge. This is due to the following reasons (Park and Son, 2008, Page 5):

- Trust alleviates possibilities of opportunistic behaviours.
- It reduces potential conflict between the firms.

- It allows the partners to actively participate in sharing and exchanging information by voluntarily removing various safeguards placed to protect the mselves.

Based on what has preceded, we are entitled to advance the last proposition:

❖ **Proposition 9:** The higher the trust between partners, the lesser will be the level of partner protectiveness.

6. Conclusion:

The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of organizational learning within International Joint Ventures and to present a set of hypotheses on the various factors which may affect this phenomenon. In addition to detecting these factors, the study of the role played by trust between partners was a key focus of this research.

Through this study, the most important factors that can affect organisational learning within International joint ventures are:

- ✓ The interaction between partners: the quality of the interaction between partners affects the level of organisational learning within IJV. As a result, particular attention is expected to be given to this determinant.
- ✓ The partners' commitment: Mutual engagement between partners would facilitate the acquisition of knowledge through the sharing of the same goals and routines, as well as the establishment of the necessary means to achieve the learning objective within the IJV.
- ✓ The intent and the capacity to learn: The learning intention and learning capacity of the IJV staff will enable it to acquire the knowledge which will determine its success in achieving this objective.
- ✓ Partner protectiveness: If the above-mentioned determinants are supposed to facilitate the organisational learning process within IJVs, the suspicious actions of the partners can undermine the organisational learning objective of IJVs through the use of segregation of tasks which can be seen as the behaviour that characterizes the protection of knowledge by the partners.
- ✓ Trust between partners: The literature review has revealed that trust between partners can play a key role within IJVs which can facilitate knowledge acquisition. As a result, trust between partners can increase organizational learning, interaction and contact between partners and partner engagement. This trust can block the phenomenon of knowledge protection.

Finally, we need to remember that the propositions that we have presented in this study must be tested on a sample of International Joint Ventures, either in Algeria or around the world, so we can corroborate their validity or, simply, reject them because of their failure in explaining the reality of the IJVs in general, and the process of knowledge acquisition in particular.

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