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Top critical success factors for enterprises to benefit a prosperous learning through strategic alliances in developing countries

Razieh Tavallaiea*, Mujtaba Hosseinalipourb, Amirhossein Mohebifar

aMaster in Project Management and Construction, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran1988913154, Iran
bPh.D in Project Management and Construction, Associate Professor in Shahid Beheshti University, and Vice Chairman Of IPMA board, Tehran1983963113, Iran
cPh.D. candidate for Project Management and Construction, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran 1511815314, Iran

Abstract

How can an enterprise be innovative? Is it not that innovation happens based on learning and an innovative organization is a successful organization which wants to learn? To enhance such innovative enterprises, cooperation should occur between organizations to share their knowledge. Strategic Alliance is a form of cooperation which can brings opportunities for the partners to achieve their common strategic goals and simultaneously learn mutually from each other. In developing countries, like developed countries, enterprises can form strategic alliances with other successful enterprises to share their knowledge and learn from each other to become innovative organizations and gain competitive advantages. However, to have a successful learning process through strategic alliances, the factors that influence this process should be recognized. And the aim of this paper is to develop a list of these critical success factors (CSFs), by reviewing the previous studies done by experts in this field. The outcome of this study shows that the most important factors which make the process of learning and knowledge transfer through strategic alliances successful in developing countries, are the existence of a systematic and well-designed organizational structure for this process, a powerful learning intention, the organizational absorptive capacity and transferring people between partners.

Keywords: strategic alliance, learning, critical success factors, developing country.

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* Corresponding author. Tel: +98-21-22439254; fax: +98-21-22439184.
E-mail address: r.tavallaie@mail.sbu.ac.ir
1. Introduction

Knowledge is an important part of every organization’s core resources which brings competitive advantages for the organization. And all enterprises seeking for sustainable competitive advantages, want to learn and gain new skills and knowledge. Many scientific studies have shown that collaboration brings opportunities for partners to learn from each other (Inkpen A., 1996) (Iyer, 2002) and internalize this knowledge which “will help them to be creative” (Gary D. Holt, Peter E.D. Love, Heng Li, 2000) and flexible in the dynamic situation (Simonin B., 1997).

Strategic alliance is a form of collaboration which in, two or more partners share their resources to gain common objectives (Takac, Paul F. and Singh, C.P., 1992) and enhance the effectiveness of the firms’ competitive strategies (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006). These alliances may be the way by which enterprises can gain new skills, especially those which are tacit, collective and embedded (Doz, Y.L., & Hamel, G., 1998). Organizations may not pursue to learn in their business activities but alliance formation is pursued to learn. It is because the process of acquiring knowledge is naturally a dynamic interplay between partners and is a self-transcending process which cannot occur without others (Ikujiro Nonaka, David J. Teece, 2001). So in a strategic alliance which brings an environment for partners to interact with each other, the process of knowledge creation and transfer more often occurs than in a single organization. Also internalizing the knowledge gained from alliances help all the partners to “improve their situation both within and without alliance” (Hamel, 1991).

In a developing country, forming such alliances is a new way through which enterprises can take and make advantages from by learning and gaining knew knowledge. However the question is: “Why some enterprises are more successful than the others in transferring and/or utilizing this knowledge?” to answer this question in this paper, based on a literature review, the alliances' theoretical basis, the process of learning through alliances and the concept of critical success factors (CSFs) will be explained and then a list of critical factors which help enterprises to have a successful learning process in the alliance in developing countries will be developed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical basis

The old perspective of competitive advantage which was product-based advantage in terms of cost and differentiation (Porter, 1985) provided little insight into the knowledge acquisition and skill creation (Hamel, 1991). But after a while globalization stimulated a shift to collaboration strategies (Ghemawat, P; Porter, M.E.; Rawlinson, R.A.; 1986) (Hergert, M; Morris, M., 1988) (Ohmae, 1989) (Perlmutter & Heenan, 1986) however still there was not enough attention paid to the skills and knowledge which can be achieved through strategic alliances and bring competitiveness in the globalization situation (Hamel, 1991). Until 1988 when the variation in skills was known as the alliance motivator (Contractor & Lorange, 1988) (Root, 1988) and Organizations were encouraged to form alliances to gain new skills and resources from each other. Also organizations became more interested in forming such alliances when they understood the fact that internalizing the skills through collaborations is better than acquiring a total company, because for possessing a company you should pay for some unwated assets and confront with “larger organization integration problem” (Hamel, 1991). In addition, alliances “create an opportunity for firms to access their partners’ new knowledge—new knowledge that, in most cases, would not have been available without the alliance” (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006).

So it can be said that forming alliances is a new way motivated by globalization to cooperate instead of competing in order to gain new skills and resources and have a dynamic capability which makes an organization innovative and helps it to protect its position in the market place.

2.2. Learning through alliances

Learning is “the acquisition of useful knowledge” (Rodan, 2005) and knowledge is “a dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the ‘truth’.” (Nonaka, Konno, & Toyama, 2001). Knowledge can be divided into two main categories: tacit and explicit (M. Polanyi, 1996) (Nonaka I., 1991) (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006). Explicit knowledge refers to the part of knowledge which is formal and systematic and can be shared easily while tacit
knowledge refers to the part of knowledge which has deep roots in people commitments and activities in a special context such as their mental beliefs and is hard to be formalized and transferred. The process of organizational knowledge creation is a dynamic and continues process between tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka, Konno, & Toyama, 2001). Tacit knowledge is embedded behind people and becomes explicit knowledge in the organizational level by the rules which people make connections with (B.kogut, and U.zender, 1992). As strategic alliance is a context for connecting the people, it can be a way for transferring the knowledge. Knowledge transfer has been described as “individuals within one organization communicating on specific problems and procedures with individuals from another organization” (Darr & Kurtzberg, 2000). There are different mechanisms for transferring knowledge between partners such as people transfer, training programs, interpersonal relationships and face-to-face interaction, such as teaching, visits, and on-the job experience (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006). This prior knowledge which is being transferred between enterprises in developing countries includes basic skills and general knowledge in compare with industrial countries where this prior knowledge refers to the most recent scientific and technological advances (Kim, 2001). When this knowledge is being transferred through alliances and put to use in organizations, can gain a higher value and the networks of people who use it expands (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006).

Also this learning process meditates the impact of alliance function on alliance success (Singh & Kale, 2000). In other words learning helps the partners to achieve their goals and gain competitive advantages. In developing countries, learning especially affects the performance of man-hours, machines and materials in alliances (Swierczekl & Dhaka, 2004) but the question remains that which factors influence this knowledge transfer process and make it successful?

2.3. Critical success factors concept

(Bullen & Rockart, 1981) Defines Critical Success Factors (CSFs) as “limited number of areas in which satisfactory results will ensure successful competitive performance for the individual, department or organization. CSFs are the few key areas where "things must go right" for the business to flourish and for the manager's goals to be attained.” So we can say that there are few factors (characteristics, conditions, or variables) (Leidecker & Bruno, 1984) which influence the performance of an organization and make the organization successful in achieving its goals and gain a superior position in compare with its competitor in the market. Also the process of finding CSFs makes the areas which managers should pay attention to, explicit (Bullen & Rockart, 1981). There are three levels of CSFs’ concept: macro, industry and firm. In this regard, macro level's CSFs identify the opportunities and treats which are brought by environment especially economic environment (Leidecker & Bruno, 1984). So if a developing country is considered as the basic environmental situation with the growing economy efforts for catching up with developed countries, this paper is seeking for macro level CSFs which affect partners’ learning process through alliances in the context of developing countries.

3. Methodology

For identifying the CSFs which influence the learning process in strategic alliances in developing countries, a set of studies which their titles indicated that their aim of research was describing and recognizing the learning process through alliances were selected by searching in Google Scholar. Then after quick reviewing of this set of studies, 11 of them done by some experts in this field were selected. (Table 1) These experts had pointed to the factors and activities which facilitate or hamper learning process according to the case studies or interviews which formed the main core of their qualitative or quantitative researches. So these factors and activities were extracted and those mentioned as the crucial ones for the partners’ learning through alliances in developing countries, were highlighted. Finally a table of critical factors which bring the opportunities for organizations to learn in the alliances was developed and these CSFs were ranked according firstly to the fact that whether they were observed in developing countries or not, and secondly by the number of occurrence of this factors in this set of studies. (Table 1)
4. Learning through alliance critical success factors (CSFs)

As described in the methodology, to illustrate the CSFs which make learning process successful in the alliances in the context of a developing country, a set of studies done by some expert were reviewed and the CSFs were derived from these studies and sorted as the order defined in methodology section. Table 1 shows the findings.

Table 1. Critical Success Factors that affect the learning process through alliances derived from 11 references

| References                  | Critical Success Factors                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (Hamel, 1991)               | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Doz, 1996)                | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006) | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Simonin B., 1999)         | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Lin, 2007)                | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Tsang, 2002)              | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Kim, 2001)                | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Swierczekl & Dhaka, 2004) | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Lima, 2008)               | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Hyder, 1999)              | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |
| (Child & Markoczy, 1993)   | Structured learning process, Receptivity and absorptivity, Learning intention, People transfer and having interaction, Quality of staffs, International cooperation, Complexity of knowledge, Clear, realistic and flexible expectations, Mutual trust, Intensity of effort, Financial investment on learning, Number of partners, Number of evolved people in collaboration, Alliance stability & longevity, Partners with different levels, Information transparency, Number of partners in collaboration, Programmed connection & interface, Number of partners in collaboration, Restrictive agreement and deterministic strategies, Partnering experience, Seeking for skill gaps rather than skill failure |

The No. of Repetition in References: 7 6 6 4 4 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 1 1 1 1 4 4 2 2 2 1 1 1

Table legend:
(+): factors with positive impact on learning process
(-): factors with negative impact on learning process
(0): factors which have not seen as an evidence of succession
Factors written in red are those which have been observed in developing countries context
Authors written in red are those whose studies context was developing countries
As it can be seen in the last row of Table 1 which indicates the number of repetition of the factors in previous studies, it can be said that the most affecting factor on learning process through alliances in developing countries is the existence of a systematic approach which develops a guideline for the knowledge transfer and learning process which proves that “Learning happens by design not by default” (Hamel, 1991). For this structured process, a special unit can be set up (Lin, 2007) which can do different tasks to manage and scrutinizes the learning process, such as holding up training programs (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006). In addition, absorptivity capacity which refers to the partners’ willingness and preparation to access the new knowledge beside the learning intention and having attitude like a student (Hamel, 1991), are the next factors affecting learning process through alliances in developing countries. So to reach such factors at first there should be “efficient organizational infrastructure, including information and communication technology that facilitates the diffusion of knowledge within the organization” (Lima, 2008). In this structure, transferring people and having face-to-face interactions influence a lot on learning as (Kim, 2001) indicates that “Individual scientists and engineers migrating from one organization to another are an important source of tacit knowledge”. Moreover the quality of staffs which refers to their technological and communicational skills is another important factor, because people should have skills to make formal and informal relationships with each other, based on mutual trust, and also have ability to learn from each other in their interactions such as in the meetings, training programs and so on.

For developing countries’ enterprises, forming international alliances can be a way to cross the borders and join to the global value chain to gain and internalize new skills and knowledge; but in these cases complexity of foreign companies’ knowledge may make the process of knowledge transfer difficult. In this case hiring people from the partner company may be a solution for local companies to face this problem (Kim, 2001). In addition, there is a need to have clear, flexible and realistic expectations from the alliance and from each other based on mutual trust which prevent partners from tension and protectiveness in sharing their knowledge. Having such relationships needs an intensity of effort provided by partners to handle all of the asymmetries that may exist in alliances. Also there should be a governmental support for preparing the infrastructure basis such as creating good political relationships with other nations in order to cooperate with foreign companies and even there is a need for financial investment on these kinds of international alliances from the government's side to support the local partners. Beside the government’s investment and involvement, in the developing countries, organizations’ managers direct engagement in the learning process in the alliances, especially young alliances, is critical; this is in contrast with the developed countries which have experienced managers whose supervision is sufficient and seems to be enough for the learning process (Tsang, 2002). It means that in the developing countries, managers need to learn and gain experience and need to engage in long live alliances to achieve learning management skill, while in developed countries with more experienced managers it seems that longevity of an alliance is not evidence of success (Hamel, 1991) and there may be a danger for partners to lose their core knowledge and competencies by engaging in a long live unilateral learning process. In developing countries this direct involvement of managers in the learning process will be costly for enterprises and needs more investment on learning process. These managers should have open insights and have capacity for reforming home organizational context to make room for new ways of thinking, new expectations and new knowledge; in other words there should be a culture in every part of the organization that says “Here is not better than there” (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006). Moreover the size of the firm is an important factor for participating in international strategic alliance, because it has been said that small firms suffer from managerial personnel (Tsang, 2002). All of these occur in a peaceful environment where there is no tension and stress; tension which is result of high risk projects (Doz, 1996) or loss of the mutual trust (Child & Markoczy, 1993). This mutual trust may sometimes be interrupted because of different cultures; however, informal relationship between partners can be helpful for managing these cultural differences (Hyder, 1999).

Sometimes it is the foreign company's demand to transfer the new knowledge into the local partner; in this case having a system which links rewards to desired outcomes (Child & Markoczy, 1993) is a way for achieving the goals. Also the number of participants in an alliance can bring the opportunity to access a wider scope of knowledge, but succession in these alliances needs a well-designed management structure with experienced managers in different levels of organization.

Also there are some other important factors mentioned by experts as critical factors that affect learning process and knowledge transfer between partners in alliances but their context of research was not developing countries,
however these factors may affect learning process in alliances in developing countries. These set of studies describe asymmetries between partners as a negative point which can hamper the learning process. This asymmetry can be seen in the competitive position of partners outside the alliance in the market place (Hamel, 1991), information asymmetry between partners (Doz, 1996) or differentiations in the organizational standards (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006) and organizational process (Simonin B., 1999). These variations may lead to confusion between partners, block the mutual trust and prevent from mutual learning in alliances. Another important factor is information transparency which refers to the possibility to access the partners' information in an alliance. Some information is inherently transparent but some other information needs the partners' permission to access and actually is influenced by organizational interface, joint task and protectiveness of individuals (Hamel, 1991). Moreover partners should have programmed connections and flexible strategies to handle contingencies that may occur during the partnership and prevent from learning process failure. Also, it has mentioned that increasing the number of people involved in the alliance with different skills and experiences will help problem solving and “leaving no leeway for learning” (Simonin B., 1999). Finally it should be noticed that in all alliances and partnerships a very important strategic criterion is to have flexible expectations and not to have a restricted agreement. It means that always there should be a space for answering to new opportunities or treats that may come up and actually in this dynamic situation, bilateral learning will happen.

5. Conclusion

As the authors' contribution in this paper, it can be declared that the most important critical factor which affects knowledge transfer, especially in the developing countries, is the existence of a designed systematic learning process beside the learning intention. To achieve success in this purpose, enterprises should have absorptive capacity and ability to reform their home organizational process and routines to be able to gain new knowledge and learn from their partners. In a developing country, an effective way to gain new knowledge is to form international alliances which provide good opportunities for the local country's enterprise to learn. In addition, since alliances in developing countries need strong systematic learning process, the managers should get involved in this process directly which could be very expensive and needs more investment on learning, but this investment is valuable and temporary because it seems that after gaining sufficient managerial experience the managers' supervision (not direct engagement) and programmed connections is sufficient to ensure that the learning process works well and the knowledge is transferred smoothly and bilaterally. And finally, it should be mentioned that in all cases, realistically defined and flexible expectations should exist in the organizations’ strategy in alliances which would enable these enterprises to adjust themselves to the dynamic situation and consequently prevent from termination of the mutual learning process.

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